

Hundreds of workers infected and four dead from COVID-19 at Los Angeles sweatshop

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After months of reports and formal complaints filed by workers and advocacy groups in light of neglect for safety measures to prevent the spread of COVID-19, the Los Angeles County Department of Public Health (DPH) ordered on July 10 the continued closure of the downtown Los Angeles garment manufacturer Los Angeles Apparel. Four deaths and more than 300 infections have been confirmed among the 400-strong total workforce. This marks the largest single outbreak in Los Angeles County to date.

With evidence of what the DPH called “flagrant violations” of public health infection control orders and the refusal of the company to cooperate in the investigation, the authorities had already ordered the closure of the company’s South Los Angeles facility on June 27, after an inspection of the factory found multiple violations of distancing requirements and infection control protocols, such as the use of cardboard as a barrier between the workers.

Dr. Barbara Ferrer, Director of the Los Angeles County Department of Public Health, stated: “The death of four dedicated garment workers is heartbreaking and tragic. Business owners and operators have a corporate, moral and social responsibility to their employees and their families to provide a safe work environment that adheres to all of the health officer directives—this responsibility is important, now more than ever, as we continue to fight this deadly virus.”

These empty words come after months of ignored calls for safety measures and the implementation of a criminal return-to-work policy that is now producing a social disaster throughout the state and the US as a whole. The Democratic Party is fully responsible for the catastrophic situation in California, where voluntary “recommendations” have replaced regulations.

In this context, it is no surprise that Los Angeles Apparel has been able to defend itself from legitimate claims of alleged negligence. Its owner, Dov Charney, founder and former chairman of American Apparel, complained about “a maze of conflicting directions.” He stated, “It’s morally irresponsible for the Health Department to speak on the infection rates at our factory without also addressing its

connection to the issue at large: that the Latino community in Los Angeles is left vulnerable to COVID-19 in a healthcare system that provides no support with testing and no support or assistance for those that test positive.”

Paradoxically, Charney shifted production at the factory from T-shirts to nonmedical masks recommended by the Centers for Disease Control in March.

The truth is that corporations in the United States have been allowed and, in fact, encouraged to operate with complete impunity and disregard for adequate safety measures, removing any obstacle to the maximization of profits.

Los Angeles County Supervisor Hilda L. Solis was at odds with the policies of the state and county: “It is unacceptable that many garment workers are making face masks and other protective gear for pennies on the hour while being forced to work in cramped areas that undermine physical distancing, and that lack protocols to regularly sanitize their workstations.” Statements from officials like Solis evince the hypocrisy of local, state and federal governments and represent a gross underestimation of the real situation.

A more accurate picture of the real situation emerges from workers’ direct claims and reports. For months, the Garment Workers Center (GWC), a worker advocacy group, has received reports from Los Angeles Apparel workers about “employees who suddenly stopped coming to work,” and “described that management did not announce whether absences were COVID-19-related, nor make changes in sanitizing practices.”

The group reported the case of Francisco, a worker becoming ill shortly after he started to work there in May. “He received his positive COVID-19 test result on May 20, and was hospitalized for almost three weeks. The next day, May 21, a second GWC member tested positive and has not been able to return to work. Management has not reached out to either employee, and they are unclear whether paid leave will be offered to them.”

Los Angeles has become a central hub for the garment industry in recent years, exploiting more than 45,000

workers and representing a major component—approximately 10 percent—of manufacturing operations in the area. A vast majority of workers are female immigrants, many are single mothers, most of them from Latin America.

A 2015 report by the Garment Worker Center, Research Action Design and the UCLA Labor Center titled “Hanging by a Thread!” exposed a disastrous situation at the time, with long working hours—10-12 hour days, 6-7 days a week—misery wages, a lack of affordable child care and fear of retaliation, especially with regard to immigration status.

An intensified economic crisis triggered by the pandemic and the spread of the virus itself have greatly exacerbated already dire conditions for tens of thousands of families.

The CUNY School of Labor and Urban Studies recently interviewed Yani Dewi, an immigrant worker from Indonesia, who denounced the exploitive conditions in Los Angeles. When she arrived in 2007, she worked thirty 18-hour days a month for \$200 monthly. This is no aberration, but the way the garment industry operates, especially by exploiting immigrants who speak little or no English and often holding their passports.

A typical daily pay is around \$20-25, based on the infamous “piece rate” payment system according to which workers earn as low as \$.03 per assembly operation (trimming a blouse, setting a seam etc.), a method that increases unsafe working conditions, as workers make great efforts to maximize production output.

Unsurprisingly, a 2019 report released by an advocacy group called Labour Behind the Labels associated with the University of Sheffield, UK, found that, out of 32 companies surveyed, no major brand pays garment workers a living wage. On every continent, from Asia to Africa to the Americas to Eastern Europe, garment manufacturers are paying poverty wages. Almost all brands received an E score.

Journalist Dana Thomas has recently written a book, *Fashionopolis: The Price of Fast Fashion and the Future of Clothes*, which exposes some of the crimes committed by multinational corporations at the expense of garment workers worldwide. From the Ranaa Plaza fire that killed 1,100 garment workers in Bangladesh seven years ago, to the Karachi, Pakistan fire that killed 260 workers in 2012, to Los Angeles’ own Bendix Building, cheap labor and poor working conditions are the rule of life for millions of workers the world over.

“I went and visited them in downtown LA in the Bendix Building. Down the hall from cool art galleries there are people, undocumented workers, sewing clothes for a dollar or two an hour,” Thomas told news site Cheddar last year. “So, [a label] says 'Made in the USA' you think, 'Oh, that's great.' It's not necessarily great. It's really hard to know.”

The pandemic has lifted the lid and the reality of brutal exploitation is vividly visible across the globe. The recent case of Leicester’s garment industry is another example of governments’ malign neglect and the acceptance of outright corporate criminality. Workers were forced to go to work even while sick or lose their jobs, while factories continued to operate at full speed.

In a recent Euronews interview, textile workers in Leicester revealed that the factories are not COVID safe: “it was as normal as before [the pandemic]. No gloves, no masks, no social distance, nothing at all,” said Nick Sakhizadah.

In Bangladesh, where nearly 200,000 have been confirmed COVID-19 positive, the impact of low wages and harsh working conditions are evident in a recent health examination of female garment workers. There, 8 in 10 female workers suffer from anemia. Anemia is a relatively common condition which increases the chances of maternal and perinatal mortality, claiming one million lives per year globally. The test revealed that poverty and poor diet increases the incidence of anemia. These conditions created by the drive for profits have made this section of workers extremely vulnerable to COVID-19.

On top of bestial working conditions and ultra-low wages, the economic impact of the pandemic has caused production to shrink considerably and hundreds of thousands of jobs have been eliminated. Such conditions are throwing this section of workers into struggle.

From Cambodia to Bangladesh, from Bangalore to downtown Los Angeles, workers must form rank-and-file safety committees in their factories to coordinate their struggles against the corporations and demand the implementation of measures to protect them from the virus. Workers must be organized to assert their right to refuse to work in unsafe conditions, control the pace of work and raise their living standards. Fundamentally, this fight will require that workers unite in a struggle for international socialism against their common enemies: capitalism and the state that defends it.



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