



Climate justice Spotlight on wages, heat and garment workers

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Clean Clothes Campaign



In this brief paper, we explain how heat stress faced by garment workers is a labour and wage issue - not just a technical health and safety issue.

Garment workers get sick during heat waves and low wages makes things worse. Not only that, workers lose pay, have more expenses and can even lose their jobs when it is too hot to work. This creates cycles of debt, migration and poor health. Garment workers cannot afford housing and services to help them cope with the dramatic consequences of heat stress in their daily lives.

Workers should not be paying for climate change.

This is our message to brands, suppliers and governments about why heat is a wage issue and what needs to be done in addition to putting health and safety measures in place.

**Uphold workers' rights to a living wage and social protection,
regardless of temperatures**

1. Pay workers a living wage, give them a secure contract and allow them to organise freely without fear.

Why:

- Upholding these rights - regardless of employment status or citizenship, and regardless of temperature - gives workers the resources to take action to better protect their health and livelihoods in a heating climate.
- Piece-rate and other pay systems that incentivise long hours without breaks compel workers to work and live in unsafe conditions. These systems should be replaced by a living wage.
- Safe and cool housing is unaffordable for many workers on the current poverty wages, limiting the opportunities for essential rest and recovery from the heat after a day's work.
- Housing that garment workers can afford on low wages often has poor sanitation, which becomes an even greater health risk in hot weather.

2. Make sure workers are covered for sick pay and severance pay, as well as medical care.

Why:

- Sickness, injury and severance pay create a safety net for workers in case they get sick, injured or lose their jobs. The protection must extend to all workers including those on non-standard forms of employment (informal) and precarious workers.
- No social protection means going to work even when workers are sick or injured because of heat - or getting into debt.
- Workers are often (illegally) not registered for social protection by their employers.



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Protect incomes and give financial support when it's too hot to work

3. Protect workers' incomes when it's too hot to work

Why?

- When heat makes production unsafe, workers' health and safety must be protected at the same time as maintaining the income of all workers, regardless of gender, citizenship, migration status or contract type. Wages should be at living wage levels or higher creating scope for collective bargaining to secure better terms, and accompanied by effective public social protection policies.
- Safety measures - such as breaks, reduced hours, adjustments to production or time in cooled rest areas - must never reduce wages, bonuses, benefits or employment security, or force workers into unpaid leave or overtime.
- Workers must be able to exercise their right to refuse or leave dangerously hot work without retaliation or loss of income.
- Without these protections, workers lose wages during hot weather when shifts change, hours are reduced, overtime is restricted, workplaces close or rest breaks increase. They can be forced into unpaid leave, made to work unpaid overtime to fulfil orders, lose attendance bonuses for missed work days or miss out on productivity incentives which cannot be met because of the heat.

4. Give workers financial support during heat waves - don't make workers pay to cope with heat

Why?

- Financial support for workers during periods of hot temperatures will help subsidise the increased expenses workers face. What financial support is put in place should be co-determined by workers, but could include help with commuting and child care.
- High temperatures increase the - usually feminised and unpaid - labour to keep housing cool and to care for vulnerable family and community members.
- Hot weather increases expenses. Workers have to increase their expenditure on health care, electricity and cooler commuting options, to cope with heat. Electricity to run cooling appliances like fans can be expensive or unavailable to people on the lowest incomes - meaning a good night's sleep can be impossible. Workers spend more money on food (to stop it spoiling) and clean drinking water.
- Workers may be compelled to stop working in the garment industry during high temperatures and to take employment in lower paid, but cooler work places .

Plan for more frequent and intense temperatures

5. Plan the exit from the take-make-waste business model - and be part of creating a just fashion system that protects and creates dignified, climate-resilient jobs on a healthy planet.

Why?

- Without planning, heat will continue to disproportionately affect the most precarious and least protected workers and their communities - including women, migrants, homeworkers and other marginalised workers - who are also least likely to benefit equitably from training and education opportunities as the garment industry changes.



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- Localised, worker-focused, climate adaptation plans created through engagement with trade unions and labour rights groups can anticipate and respond to risks of climate change. Housing conditions, long-term job prospects in the garment industry, reskilling and upskilling of the workforce and nature restoration can all be addressed.

6. Act to rapidly cut fashion's impact on climate and the environment while protecting workers' and human rights.

Why?

- Continuing to pump out millions of fashion products every year whilst the world burns puts lives at risk and pushes workers further into poverty. Fashion is a major emitter of global greenhouse gas emissions and contributes to water scarcity, pollution, deforestation and other environmental harms - all of which worsen heat risks. Without urgent action, millions of lives and livelihoods are at stake.
- Governments, suppliers and brands are falling short of climate and environmental obligations. Companies and governments - particularly those in countries that have contributed most to the crisis - have a responsibility to support those who have contributed least but face the harshest consequences, including through financial contributions. Climate and environmental action must be combined with decent work, workers' rights and fair distribution of economic value - and leave no one behind: a Just Transition.

How?

Technical solutions that only address health and safety and rely on voluntary initiative by brands and suppliers to self-regulate themselves will never be sufficient to address the inter-connected issues of heat on wages, social protection and health and safety.

Meaningful change involves trade unions and democratically elected worker representatives having decision-making power in the workplace, and being party to negotiating laws, regulations and legally binding mechanisms to hold brands and suppliers accountable. Suppliers must be held accountable to provide safe workplaces, pay a living wage and maintain pay when it is too hot to work. Brands must be held accountable to change purchasing practices including prices, deadlines and production targets, as well as provide finance, so suppliers can meet their obligations at all times and to make sure costs are not transferred to workers - including during periods of high temperatures. When suppliers or governments fail to meet their responsibilities for pay, brands must take on these responsibilities. In addition, governments must create and enforce regulation on health and safety, wage and universal social protection - and regulate and inspect workplaces.

For more details on all of these mechanisms, see the detailed proposals put forward by Clean Clothes Campaign and its members for action on wages, climate and heat in the following documents.

From the Clean Clothes Campaign global network

- Heat And Garment Workers' Rights - Fashioning A Just Transition
<https://cleanclothes.org/news/2025/brands-called-on-to-stop-deadly-heat-in-fashion-workplaces>



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- Fashioning a Just Transition Manifesto
<https://cleanclothes.org/campaigns/manifesto>
- Living Wage Roadmap: Expectations for companies and policy makers
<https://cleanclothes.org/news/2025/ccc-publishes-a-living-wage-roadmap>
- Pay Your Workers Agreement <https://www.payyourworkers.org/forbrands>
 - Guidance for brands: <https://cleanclothes.org/file-repository/responsible-exit-mass-dismissal-and-factory-closure-how-to-ensure-workers-get-paid-v2.pdf>
 - Guidance for governments: <https://www.payyourworkers.org/governments>

From our members

- Business & Human Rights Resource Centre - The missing thread: Workers absent from fashion companies' climate plans.
https://media.business-humanrights.org/media/documents/BHRRC_The_Missing_thread_report_June_2025.pdf
- FAIR - Geen Industry, Grey realitiesBetween LEED's factories and Just Transition: pathways for the RMG sector in Bangladesh
https://cleanclothes.org/file-repository/fair_greenindustrygreyrealities_report2026.pdf@@display-file/file
- Public Eye - One-Earth: Transformation targets for a just fashion system within planetary boundaries <https://www.publiceye.ch/en/topics/fashion/new-report-one-earth-fashion>
- WIEGO - Working in the Heat: Home-Based Workers and Climate Justice in Delhi
<https://www.wiego.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/06/Working-in-the-Heat-Home-Based-Workers-and-Climate-Justice-in-Delhi-WIEGO-Policy-Brief-35.pdf>

