

Open Letter:
Assume Corporate Responsibility – End Legal Intimidation

Dear Dr Otto,
Dear Members of the Supervisory Board of the Otto Group,

We view with great concern the legal steps and legal threats that your company has taken against the Clean Clothes Campaign Germany (CCC Germany) and the International Office of the Clean Clothes Campaign (CCC International) in connection with the case of the 209 dismissed workers of the Royal Knitting factory in Thailand.

With this open letter we appeal to you as a German company with a long tradition and with the image of being a pioneer in sustainability and responsibility: abandon the misguided path of legal intimidation and instead seek an open and solution-oriented dialogue.

The legal measures taken by your company concern a serious case: in 2020, 209 workers of the Royal Knitting factory in Thailand were summarily dismissed. For years they had produced garments for OTTO brands. Although a Thai court had already ordered Royal Knitting in 2021 to pay outstanding wages and severance in the amount of the equivalent of around one million euros, almost five years after the closure of the factory the affected workers are still waiting for justice. At the core of the campaign lies the question of the extent to which OTTO bears responsibility for contributing to ensuring that the workers receive the payments due to them.

Even if OTTO is of the view that it no longer had a supply relationship with Royal Knitting since 2017, corporate shareholdings, documents found in the factory and sworn statements by workers suggest that until the closure in April 2020 garments for OTTO brands were still being produced there.

Since 2021 CCC Germany and CCC International have repeatedly and with well-founded arguments approached OTTO to represent the concerns of the workers. Nevertheless, OTTO showed no substantial willingness to seriously consider supporting the workers in enforcing their claims against the factory or covering the outstanding wages and severance. Therefore, in May 2024, the affected workers together with CCC Germany and CCC International saw no other possibility than to draw attention to their precarious situation through a public campaign.

Hardly had the public campaign begun when OTTO reacted with legal threats. CCC Germany was thus forced to seek costly legal assistance. Through a law firm OTTO demanded that CCC Germany sign a cease-and-desist declaration on account of alleged false statements, reputational damage and economic harm. In order to avoid an expensive court case, which would have posed an existential threat for the non-governmental organisation, CCC Germany finally saw no other way than to give parts of the requested cease-and-desist declaration.

This declaration, however, related only to secondary aspects, specific formulations and grammatical details. The decisive point is this: CCC Germany and CCC International – supported by existing evidence – maintained their position in the main, namely that OTTO bears responsibility for the dismissed workers and the outstanding payments, and that it is not living up to this responsibility. Without justification OTTO has created in the media the misleading impression that CCC Germany had made false and unfounded allegations against the company with regard to this central issue and admitted as much through the signing of the declaration. This does not correspond to the truth.

CCC Germany as well as CCC International are committed to the protection of labour and human rights in the global garment industry – an engagement that is indispensable for democracy and for public debate on corporate responsibility. Central to this is making the voices of workers from the production countries heard in the consumer countries.

On 11 June 2025 the German NoSLAPP contact point, after thorough examination, determined that the actions of your company were to be classified as a strategic misuse of legal instruments (SLAPP – Strategic Lawsuit Against Public Participation). According to the NoSLAPP contact point, the threat of legal steps primarily served the purpose of suppressing or altering critical reporting – an attempt at intimidation that significantly harms democratic debate in general and the human rights work of the CCC in particular.

Moreover, the actions also had an intimidating effect on the 209 affected workers. Instead of addressing their demands, the legal steps taken against the CCC were perceived by the workers – many of them particularly vulnerable migrant workers from Myanmar – as targeted intimidation.

CCC International, too, was confronted in February 2025 with legal threats from OTTO – although its actions, as with those of CCC Germany, are expressly protected by the EU Anti-SLAPP Directive (2024/1069, Article 11). The Directive makes clear that human rights defenders “must be able to participate actively in public life and demand accountability without having to fear intimidation.”

In this sense we emphatically call upon you to

- refrain in future from attempts at legal intimidation against CCC Germany and CCC International;
- as a company committed to responsibility, enter into serious negotiations with the affected workers and their representatives – in good faith, on equal footing and with the aim of resolving the case as quickly as possible.

You emphasise: “We assume responsibility for our actions along the entire value chain.” We see the current practice of your company, however, as being in clear contradiction to this. Credible corporate responsibility begins where criticism is not fought through legal means but made the starting point for change.

With determination and in the hope of constructive conduct,

Clean Clothes Campaign International Office

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INKOTA-netzwerk e.V.

Romero Initiative (CIR) e.V.

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LabourNet Germany

Global Policy Forum Europe e.V.

Tierra - Eine Welt e.V.

Regionalgruppe Stuttgart Kampagne für Saubere Kleidung

Initiative “Auf der Suche nach einem tragbaren Lebensstil” (Hannover)

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