

Reflection on decent work in global supply chains on the agenda of the 105th session of the International Labour Conference

For the first time in its almost 100 year history, the ILO addressed the issue of decent work in global supply chains during its annual conference in Geneva. Although it is an achievement for the ILO to put the issue of global supply chains on the agenda in the face of huge business opposition, Clean Clothes Campaign (CCC) is disappointed about the outcome of the Committee on Decent Work in Global Supply Chains. The conclusions could and should have much more forcefully defended workers' rights in global supply chains. Adverse impacts on working conditions in the areas of occupational health and safety, wages and working time (§3) cannot be addressed adequately by cross-border social dialogue (§23c) only. Strong mechanisms that enable the right to collective bargaining at international level are necessary. CCC still believes that a global instrument is needed that is binding upon all parties. The fact that the conclusions provide an opening to have a standard-setting procedure in the future justifies some optimism.

Decent work in global supply chains on the agenda

It took a tragedy of the magnitude of the Rana Plaza collapse in 2013 to put the issue of decent work in global supply chains on the agenda of the International Labour Conference - the annual meeting of the ILO. The Rana Plaza collapse was the 'smoking gun', demonstrating to the world that multinationals are not only outsourcing jobs, but also responsibility. It also proved that voluntary commercial auditing has failed in preventing such disasters. A Clean Clothes Campaign delegation attended the ILO Conference in Geneva to participate in the discussion about decent work in global supply chains.

The importance of having decent work in Global Supply Chains (GSC) as a topic on the agenda was emphasized by Guy Rider, director-general of the ILO: *"The decision three years ago to put an item on GSC on the agenda was taken not only in the wake of tragic events but also in a deliberate effort to be a driver of change in the reality of work. The subject of GSC is chosen not because it is easy – it's not - but because it is important and will be even more so in the future."* And Luc Cortebeek, chairperson of the workers' group, expressed the intention to work towards an ILO convention on decent work in global supply chains.

Positions of employers and governments

On their side of the room, the employers' group voiced their own positions on global supply chains. The employers denied the existence of a governance gap on an international level, caused by the globalization of international business beyond the reach of

national legislation. From the beginning they emphasized that the most important step to regulate global supply chains should be taken on the national level. They referred to the foremost responsibility of governments to ratify and implement ILO conventions and recommendations and insisted on the implementation and enforcement of national regulation. Possible governance gaps, they repeatedly said, could only exist on the national level and should be dealt with by capacity strengthening. They stressed that enterprises should above all comply with national laws. In case of violations, brands could as a last resort stop doing business with a supplier or a certain country.

Several governments, on the other hand, insisted on the need for an international framework. The Netherlands, currently holding the Presidency of the Council of the European Union, clearly expressed the EU position that, in a globalizing world, national policy measures are not sufficient to ensure decent work in global supply chains. The EU emphasized the importance of transparency and due diligence. Governments should clearly express their expectations towards companies and, if needed, develop binding regulations. The need for binding international regulation was also emphasized by governments from the African continent, underlining the fact that global supply chains put enormous pressure on these countries and put them in fierce competition against each other.

Assessment of the conclusions

Although the discussions within the committee on decent work in global supply chains were constructive, its conclusions are rather weak. Nevertheless, some of CCC's demands are taken up in the conclusions – although often in a weaker formulation. With regards to transparency, the conclusions underline that governments should *“stimulate transparency and encourage, and, where appropriate, require, by various means, that enterprises report on due diligence within their supply chains to communicate how they address their human rights impacts”* (§16.f).

Enforceable brand agreements, such as the Freedom of Association Protocol in Indonesia and the Bangladesh Accord on Fire and Building Safety are mentioned twice. It is CCC's firm belief that only legally binding agreements, combined with strong transparency provisions and board level union and NGO involvement can deliver on the promises of providing decent work in global supply chains.

CCC also welcomes the conclusion that the ILO is mandated *“to develop a programme of action to address decent work in global supply chains through a comprehensive and coordinated framework”* (§22). And CCC affirms the important role of the ILO in standard setting as formulated in the final paragraph (§26): *“There is concern that current ILO standards may not be fit for purpose to achieve decent work in global supply chains.*

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Therefore, the ILO should review this issue and convene, as soon as appropriate, by decision of the Governing Body, a technical tripartite meeting or a meeting of experts to: (a) Assess the failures which lead to decent work deficits in global supply chains. (b) Identify the salient challenges of governance to achieving decent work in global supply chains. (c) Consider what guidance, programmes, measures, initiatives or standards are needed to promote decent work and/or facilitate reducing decent work deficits in global supply chains.”

Next steps for CCC

The discussion about decent work in global supply chains was only the first step in a process, in which CCC is dedicated to participate in the next few years:

- CCC will contribute to the reflection about the strengths and weaknesses of cross-border social dialogue, based on the experiences of our partners: International Framework Agreements, the Freedom of Association Protocol, the Accord, etc. Research on this topic is meant to be published soon. CCC will keep pressurizing brands to sign enforceable agreements with trade unions.
- A new CCC strategy on transparency is being developed, making it clear from the beginning that transparency is not a goal in itself but it should enable workers and consumers to defend labour rights.
- CCC will follow-up on the review of the Tripartite Declaration of Principles concerning Multinational Enterprises and Social Policy (ILO MNE declaration) to increase its efficiency in holding companies to account.

Improving working conditions in the global garment industry 

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