

*International
Bodies*

International Labor Organization



CHAIR: To Be Announced

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Letter From Chair

To be released!

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Introduction to Committee

Welcome to the International Labor Organization (ILO) Committee for GWCI A XXIX. As part of the ILO committee you will be discussing with other delegates on issues related to labor and production, as this UN committee works with governments, labor unions and corporations to ensure fair and proper working conditions. This year, we will be tackling the growing problem of fast fashion, or rapid clothing manufacturing that is being done unsustainably and unethically. You will be discussing various ways to deal with this issue, from ensuring fair compensation to improving health and safety conditions for the workers that make these clothes. As you do, please remember that while we encourage delegates to be creative and have fun with their approach, this is a very real issue that impacts real people, so be considerate. As you prepare to research and present various solutions to these issues, consider the textile industry of your country and how they're working to solve the same problems.

As this is a General Assembly (GA) style committee, we will be following the basic parliamentary procedure outlined here. Every committee will begin with a roll call, and then the chair will open it up to a general speaker's list. Then the committee as a whole will decide on which of the two topics to focus on, and the floor will be open to a series of moderated and unmoderated caucuses, which delegates can motion for. Moderated means a series of speeches that are called by the chair while an unmoderated caucus is time for delegates to move around and talk freely to each other. In the first half of the conference, delegates will form blocs, or groups, together to produce working papers with their solutions. These papers then will eventually be merged into a few resolutions that the committee will present, debate and vote on. Remember that multiple

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resolutions can pass, and that it's up to the chair to decide what changes to make to procedure as necessary. If you have any questions, please contact me at (chair email) or look at All-American Model UN's [website](#).

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Historical Background

The International Labor Organization, founded in 1919, is an agency under the United Nations that brings together workers, organizations and governments to uphold quality standards for labor worldwide. They are committed to ensuring that workers are not only compensated properly for their work, but also are able to work in decent and safe conditions. Every year, delegates from 187 member states of the ILO meet at the International Labor Conference to set international labor standards and discuss key labor issues, which this committee will be doing. While it has a limited ability to enforce labor standards in every country, it has an important role in defining labor standards and guiding countries towards better labor practices.

While the advent of fast fashion is a relatively recent trend, issues concerning labor in the textile industry have existed for centuries. After the invention of the sewing machine, production of clothing quickly moved from homes and small workshops to large factories, which led to new challenges in labor rights. For example, the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire of 1911 was an incident that claimed the lives of 146 garment workers, prompting many labor reforms around safety measures in factories. Around this time, textile labor unions around the world began to grow rapidly, allowing workers more negotiating power with their employers for better working conditions and pay. In the second half of the 19th century, these shifts in reform prompted many Western countries to move a lot of their clothing manufacturing to Asia and East Europe, where there are less labor restrictions and cheaper wages for workers.

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Although this is a committee surrounding the discussion of labor standards and practices, it is important to understand the unique problem that overconsumption brings to fast fashion. While it has always been difficult to maintain proper conditions for garment workers, the trend of fast fashion has shifted consumers from thinking of clothing as something to cherish to a consumable product that can be worn and thrown away quickly. Not only does this lead to a significant environmental cost, but it also means that clothing companies have to keep up with an immense demand for new trends and cheap clothing, sacrificing quality and ethical labor in return.

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Topic 1: Improving Compensation For Workers in Fast Fashion

One of the primary ways fast fashion companies like H&M and Zara have managed to keep their prices low is unfortunately, by cutting the pay of their garment workers. Taking it even further, new companies like Temu and SHEIN have taken fast fashion even further by selling hundreds of new styles every day at incredibly cheap prices, with many being less than \$5 a piece. As garment production continues to be outsourced to countries with cheaper labor, the governments of these countries are incentivized to keep their legal minimum wage low in order to keep their market competitive. As a result, many of these minimum wages are not actually “living wages” (income that can support a household), forcing many workers to clock in extra hours. Not only that, but this state of poverty leaves them less able to take medical leaves and refuse work in unsafe conditions. For example, a 2021 report by Public Eye found that SHEIN, worth tens of billions, were paying their workers in China about 2400 yuan (~90 USD) a month without overtime pay, forcing them to work 75 hours a week to make a living wage, which is around 6,500 yuan.

Another way that garment workers are being exploited for their labor comes from withholding or reducing pay for workers in order to keep quarterly profits up. On average, a very small percent of profits from fast fashion products go to the workers: around 0.6%, which would be 60 cents for a \$10 shirt. Since the pandemic and other supply chain issues, a report by the Clean Clothes Campaign also found that upwards of \$11.85 billion of income and severance pay were being withheld from garment workers globally, pushing them into a wage gap far below the country’s average monthly wage.

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With fast fashion culture, these companies are pressured into cutting costs like this as consumers are used to buying clothes every season for very cheap.

The issue of fair compensation in the fashion industry is one that concerns workers, clothing companies and governments alike, and thus an organization like the ILO that works with all three groups is uniquely positioned to help solve this issue. Delegates should discuss what constitutes fair pay for these workers, while keeping in mind the companies' goals to unhold profits as well as governments' plans to increase export revenue. If a balance is unable to be reached, it runs a massive risk of these workers falling into poverty and their unions calling for labor strikes, which companies and governments do not want. There are a variety of solutions to explore, such as better legal measures for compensation, informing the public to promote sustainable consumption of fashion, and holding companies accountable for exploiting cheap labor.

Topic 2: Improving The Working Conditions of Fashion Factories

Tracing back to the industrial revolution, the working conditions of factories that produce garments has also been a prevalent issue, as clothes-making is a labor intensive and sometimes dangerous process. It is important to consider that all clothing, even now with developments in technology, is made with human hands, as the individual panels of cotton have to be guided into a sewing machine by human workers. With the pressure to produce more than ever at cheap prices, some companies have cut costs by reducing safety measures and forcing workers to work longer hours. Reports from organizations like Public Eye have noted various risks to safety, such as fire hazards from smoking not being banned inside the factories and overcrowding in small factory

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spaces. Longer working times also can lead to risks of fatigue, which can lead to higher risk of injury when operating machinery like sewing machines.

Another major issue concerning working conditions is the presence of child labor, which despite being illegal in most countries, still continues to exist in many fast fashion factories. The same report noted that children were present in some of the factories, helping out with simple tasks. The ILO estimates that up to 170 million children are still used as child labor, with the fast fashion industry being one of the worst perpetrators. As many of these companies outsource their labor overseas, it is difficult for them to oversee and maintain ethical standards, leading to child labor persisting. Not only does this practice put young children at risk of injury, but it also deprives them of their childhood and ability to get a proper education.

On this issue, delegates could explore ways to regulate and oversee labor conditions in the factories that produce fast fashion, keeping in mind all these problems. Some possible things to discuss are the creation of a third party regulatory committee, how governments can uphold labor standards and what punishments should companies who use unethical labor be held accountable with. In addition, it's also important to help consumers understand who is responsible for producing their clothing, as better awareness can lead to less overconsumption and a call for better safety practices.

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Bloc Positions

With the fast fashion industry being so large, economic ties are a very important thing to consider when looking at your country's position and ties, as countries who trade closely with each other (the EU, for example) are likely to agree upon how to approach this issue. It is also important to consider where the majority of consumers of fast fashion come from, as these countries have an important role in driving and potentially shifting the demand for fast fashion that has led to these labor issues. In a similar way, countries that the fast industry primarily outsources have an economic incentive to still keep their production costs low and demand high. Delegates should try to figure out how to negotiate better labor conditions and compensation while still upholding the economic interests of their own countries.

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Guiding Questions

Topic One:

- How can fast fashion companies work towards paying their workers a living wage?
- How can governments improve legal frameworks to ensure fair compensation for garment workers?
- How can the public be more informed about the choices they make when purchasing from fast fashion brands?

Topic Two:

- What can countries do to uphold better labor standards for textile factories and hold their companies accountable?
- How can information on where and how fast fashion is produced be more transparent?
- How can countries deal with the presence of child labor in clothing factories?

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