

exCHAINS



*Solidarity along the supply chain:
From production to retail, workers unite!*

Good life, health and work here and along the value chain – also in times of Corona 27.04.2020



The Corona crisis lasts already various weeks. In some countries public life restarts slowly. In Germany, shops in the apparel retail sector are opening and industrial production is slowly picking up again. First garment factories in Sri Lanka resume production soon. For unions struggles about occupational health and safety at the workplace come to the fore. However, it is also true: struggles beyond Corona are still important, as our brothers and sisters from the NGWF show.

Germany: since last week retail shops can open again. The requirements are that workers and customers are protected from infection. They must wear at least mouth and nose protection and the number of customers in the store is limited. It is important to struggle for occupational health and safety also in times for crisis. The risk to

workers must be eliminated wherever possible, for example, barriers between customers and workers are better than mere protection by a mask.

Unfortunately, the practice looks different. At H&M, in some branches, the protection consists only of cling film. Also, passageways are too narrow, so that the required minimum distance cannot be maintained. Here too, a picture is worth a thousand words.

On the Internet, H&M is already being ridiculed for this. The company had not previously conducted any negotiations with works councils on health and safety. Many works council members are not willing to accept this. In court, they are trying to ensure that no workers are obliged to work without special health and safety measures. The first court decisions have been in

favour of the works councils. Now they are planning to fight for risk assessments in order to enforce protective measures before the first customers enter a store.

Our brothers and sisters from FTZ&GSEU in **Sri Lanka** are facing such disputes, too. There too, the government announced last week that factories in the free trade zones would be allowed to reopen. Some garment factories produce masks and protective equipment for UNICEF. Most of the factories that have reopened, however, produce clothing for export.

Our brothers and sisters report that in many workplaces workers over 50 years of age were simply dismissed because they belong to the so-called risk group. Currently, factory management is trying to keep production go-

ing with 30% of the workforce. Occupational health and safety is a double issue here: firstly, infection prevention measures must be observed. But then the brothers and sisters also fight for the smaller workforces not to get more pressure and not to produce more.

In addition to the disputes at factory level, our colleagues must also defend themselves against attacks from politicians and employers' associations. The employers' association wants to use the crisis to change the labour law. So far



there is a dismissal protection law in Sri Lanka. Companies cannot simply give notice or restructure. But the employers' association wants a free hand here. These attacks on workers' protection rights are being sold by the employers as a strengthening of social dialogue and social justice.

Together with women's organisations, the FTZ&GSEU has been working nationwide to support groups of affected workers, whether they themselves are sick, unemployed or have their rights challenged. In these groups the workers receive legal advice and direct support.

In many places, the Corona crisis has brought occupational health and safety to the fore. Our brothers and sisters from the NGWF in **Bangladesh** also remind us of the biggest industrial accident in recent history: Rana Plaza. We remember: on 24.4.2013 a factory building collapsed in Sabhar, not far from the capital Dhaka, and buried thousands of garment workers. According to official figures, 1,135 people were killed and 2,438 injured. Remembering the factory accident is still important: injured workers continue to fight for the payment of treatment costs, and the NGWF demands that the agreement to improve building and fire protection is not called into question during the crisis.

At the same time, our brothers and sisters take the opportunity to draw attention to the consequences of the Corona crisis: full wages for March and April must be paid. Companies are still producing even though the government has ordered a production stop. This has to stop. Production should only be resumed when the health situation has improved and public transport is available again. Our brothers and sisters are also making demands to buyers: they should not simply cancel orders and should also not enforce discounts in price negotiations with suppliers.

