

30 March 2022, Brussels

Fair and Sustainable Textiles coalition react to Textile Strategy

Textile strategy contains green ambition but forgets workers from the equation

The European Commission has today, 30 March 2022, set out plans to bring more sustainability to the textile industry - a sector which remains largely under-regulated. But civil society groups are alarmed that the much-anticipated text misses out key human rights aspects from its focus. With environmental and social sustainability being two sides of the same coin, it is a huge missed opportunity that a chapter of the EU Strategy for Sustainable and Circular Textiles seems to have been lost.

More textile products are being sold at a faster rate than ever before, putting untold pressure on our climate, environment, and people. Europe's overconsumption of clothes, shoes and household textiles uses up 675 million tonnes of raw materials every year, and poor working conditions and human rights' violations are rife across the global textile industry. Brands and retailers wield significant power over their business partners resulting in late payments, unilateral contract amendments and prices under the cost of production.

Civil society groups - who have [long been calling](#) for a strategy that takes a comprehensive approach by tackling the sector's environmental and social problems together - issue their first reaction to the Textile Strategy.

Valeria Botta, Environmental Coalition on Standards: *"The textile sector has largely been untouched by EU sustainability policies. Today's decision to include textiles under the Sustainable Products Initiative is a real milestone. We need clothes that are designed to be used, mended and loved for a long time, toxic-free, and produced in a fair and sustainable way. The initiatives presented today can give the right impulse to transform the market, beyond European borders. If the final bill shows bold ambition, we have hopes that Europe will truly hold the textile industry to account for its huge environmental impacts."*

Delphine Williot, Fashion Revolution: *"The EU textile strategy released today has failed to capture the beating heart of the textile industry - the people who make our clothes. While efforts to address key issues such as overproduction and overconsumption are a welcome start to address the industry's severe environmental impact, in categorising the labour of garment workers as 'unskilled', this strategy fails to recognise the value of the industry's labour. The EU's textile value chains will not be truly sustainable in the absence of efforts to guarantee freedom of association and collective bargaining, which ultimately lead to fair wages for the people who make our clothes."*

Sergi Corbalán, Executive Director, Fair Trade Advocacy Office:

"Neither environmental aspects of garment production and human rights of textile workers or cotton farmers will be improved if the root causes of the biggest problems in the industry aren't addressed: the purchasing practices of brands. Brands use the unequal power balance between them and their

suppliers to unilaterally force purchasing practices in their favour, such as setting buying prices lower than the production costs, short lead times or last-minute design changes. These purchasing practices squeeze the margins of a factory, leaving them little to no room to invest in sustainable production or labour conditions, such as a safe working environment or living wages. By not addressing the issue of unfair trading practices, buying prices or living wages and living incomes the “EU Strategy for Sustainable and Circular Textiles” misses a huge piece of the puzzle in making the textile sector circular, fair and sustainable.”

Muriel Treibich, Clean Clothes Campaign International Office: “As the European Commission recently adopted a proposal on corporate sustainability due diligence (CSDD) to ensure companies respect human rights and the environment throughout their value chain, the EU Textile Strategy could have been the place for increased ambition for the textile and apparel sector. Unfortunately, we are disappointed to see that instead of proposing a way forward for tackling the challenges and specificities of the industry - prominence of SMEs, the importance of living wage and living income- the EU Textile Strategy merely refers to ongoing policy initiatives. Million of workers, the backbone of this global textile and apparel industry, needed more from the European Commission”

Ben Vanpeperstraete, Traidcraft Exchange:

“The garment sector is notoriously opaque, and more transparency is crucially needed. Several companies, big and small, are already tracing their value chain, and publicly disclosing names, addresses of direct and indirect manufacturers, spinning mills and even cotton fields. Now it's time for regulators to step in and roll out an ambitious obligation for supply chain mapping and disclosure. Such granular transparency can and should go hand in hand with the digital product passport and should be the basis for meaningful data on wages, water usage, payment terms, etc.”

Tamar Hoek, Solidaridad: “The EU strategy for sustainable textiles offers the opportunity for the European Commission to develop a holistic approach to tackle environmental, social and commercial practices in the textiles supply chain. Design and buying practices have an impact on working conditions, circular business models do not solve exploitation of workers and farmers, or lead to living wages and incomes. In the strategy as presented now the only way to improve social sustainability is through the CSDDD. To make the textile industry truly sustainable a holistic approach is needed that looks at design, buying, production, consumption and recycling from a social, environmental and commercial perspective.”

Emily Macintosh, European Environmental Bureau: “We welcome that the Textile Strategy contains clear plans for binding rules on product design, targets to reuse more textile products and for more of the end of life costs of textile waste to be borne by producers. But you can't green fast fashion. Today the European Commission has named overproduction as the problem by calling out the number of collections brands put out every year. Now we need to ensure the actions set out in this strategy are translated into real industry accountability for all companies regardless of size, and that there are no get-out-clauses when it comes to the destruction of goods and ensuring fairness for workers.”

Mathieu Rama, RREUSE: “Even though containing encouraging initiatives such as devising ecodesign minimum requirements to extend the life-time of textiles products and safeguarding a share of the proposed harmonised Extended Producer Responsibility fee for waste prevention and preparing for re-use of textiles, the Commission fails to commit to a more protective environment for social enterprises active in the collection, sorting, re-use and resale of textiles. Guidance and encouragements for Member States will not be enough in that regard”.

Judith Kirton-Darling, IndustriAll Europe: *"For trade unions, EU sustainable textiles strategy needs to protect people and the planet. Although there are many welcome environmental measures in the Commission's sustainable textiles communication, the social element is missing yet again! Workers are at the heart of a sustainable and circular textiles sector, and concrete action is needed to ensure that the green transition of the sector is a just transition which means leaving no worker or region behind. We will continue to work with EU policy makers to ensure that workers benefit from the green transition of the textiles sector, and we look forward to playing a key role in the textiles eco-system Transition Pathway which should put European workers at its centre."*

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