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No Place to Hide? The Significance of the ‘Urgent Appeal’ for Industrial Relations in the International Garment Sector.

Abstract

This paper in progress is set against the dynamics of the global value chain in garment production, and examines the role of an international non-governmental organisation’s Urgent Appeal (UA) System. The organisation in question is the Clean Clothes Campaign (CCC) which is an international civil society network that campaigns for labour rights in the garment sector. In this paper, the CCC UA system is evaluated for its contribution to labour rights in a sector where public and private regulation is consistently flouted by employers, mostly with seeming impunity.

The mass manufacture of garments is infamous for its poor working conditions and abysmal safety record in a range of locations all over the world. Freedom of association comes under concerted attack in a range of settings, health and safety is poor, and systems of monitoring and auditing of public and private regulation is deeply flawed, in the context of powerful local business lobbies, weak states and weak collective organisation. The CCC UA system allows workers’ organisations to make an appeal to the CCC network for urgent assistance in cases which can range from low levels of intimidation of union activists to workplace violations that lead to death or maiming of workers. If taken up, an appeal will occasion the mobilisation of the CCC network around the issue. In this activity, the CCC will often work alongside (and interact closely with) other industrial relations actors such as national unions, global unions, the European Union (EU) and the International Labour Organisation (ILO). Yet the CCC has a very distinct, separate identity and ethos as a civil society network. In particular, the CCC UA system differs from similar appeal systems operating under the auspices of multi-stakeholder initiatives, where employer interests also have to be taken into account. By virtue of its unpredictability and essential independence, the CCC UA system has the potential to act as a powerful irritant in publicising employer transgressions in the global garment sector.

This paper will examine the types of cases taken up by the UA system and consider the UA system as an element of workers’ repertoire of action in securing the enforcement of private and public regulation. The question of the CCC UA’s potential for longer term impact will be considered and the issue of whether the random and unpredictable nature of such action can have broader significance beyond the outcome of an individual case, will be discussed.

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