

# Tower Hamlets Ethical School Uniform Campaign

## Has our school got an ethical uniform policy?

Local anti-poverty campaigns are asking Tower Hamlets schools to check the working conditions of the people who make their uniforms. Most schools have uniform items printed with their logo, like sweat shirts or PE polo shirts. Head teachers and governors can influence how these are made, regardless of whether schools sell them direct to parents or via a specialist local shop. Most are made in Asia where working conditions often break basic legal rights. That's why the National Union of Students makes sure that university shops only sell clothing from companies with effective ethical policies, usually verified independently. (See accreditation scheme details overleaf).



### Indian cotton 'workers' as young as 9

Channel 4's documentary, *Our Big Fairtrade Adventure*, follows three English students as they visit India to buy ethically sourced school shirts. In the cotton fields they meet girls as young as nine missing school to work twelve hours a day for just 60p. (Century Films sells the dvd. 020 7378 6106).

### What can teachers, unions, governors, and students do?

Teachers can hold assemblies and raise the issue with leadership teams or unions. Governors can put uniform policy on meeting agendas. Students can raise it through school councils. Head teachers can approve a thorough ethical uniform policy.

### Asia's clothing industry: child labour, 70 hour working weeks, and poverty pay

[www.labourbehindthelabel.org/resources/item/762-we-shop-who-pays?](http://www.labourbehindthelabel.org/resources/item/762-we-shop-who-pays?)

Videos from *Labour Behind the Label* reveal how high street clothing retailers' codes of conduct are contradicted by ruthless demands for their suppliers to minimise costs in countries like India, Bangladesh, and Cambodia. Minimum wage laws are often broken.

School uniform companies may promote higher standards but room for improvement is likely. Checking all stages of complicated supply chains is not easy. Schools need to take responsibility and support suppliers' efforts by: adopting clear guidelines; allowing uniforms to cost more if necessary; or encouraging suppliers to use best practice examples from organisations like the Ethical Trading Initiative. ([www.ethicaltrade.org](http://www.ethicaltrade.org)). The first step to an effective policy is obtaining information, from UK clothing companies responsible for sourcing and importing uniforms rather than local retailers.

### Questions to ask uniform companies

Page 2 has a link to a model policy and a guide on some of the facts schools need to know – answers to questions like:

- \* Which factory/country are our uniform items manufactured in?
- \* Where is the cotton grown?
- \* What are the working conditions in our uniform's supply chain - from cotton farmers to spinning mills to the factory?
- \* Do you have a code of conduct? How do you verify that it is complied with? What action is taken if it isn't?
- \* What minimum wages are paid? Are they enough to support families? Is this checked by consulting workers? How?
- \* Is child labour used? How many hours do staff work per week?
- \* How can we help to promote the best ethical standards?

# How to develop an ethical school uniform policy

Schools can adopt a general **socially responsible procurement policy** with specific standards for: uniforms; ICT hardware; furniture; sports balls; and fairly traded catering products. Tower Hamlets Fairtrade Network can send a model policy based on council policies. (Contact [powerglen@gmail.com](mailto:powerglen@gmail.com)). A briefing covers the whole clothing supply chain, from cotton farmers to clothing factories, including: ethical issues by sourcing country; standards of certification schemes and factory auditing, local legal minimum wages etc. Some key points:

- \* **School Wear Association** members, (uniform retailers & wholesalers), agree to follow a code of conduct, to ensure that their manufacturing suppliers comply with employment laws. Independent accreditation is recommended.
- \* The **Fairtrade Labelling Organisation (FLO)** independently verifies that cotton farmers are paid fair, stable, published prices, and that communities also receive 'social premium' payments to fund development schemes.
- \* Although FLO can't check conditions in the later stages of long supply chains, companies using Fairtrade cotton can ensure ethical standards in their factory suppliers too. It is up to schools to ask companies for details.
- \* The **Fair Wear Foundation** and **Worldwide Responsible Accredited Production** schemes independently visit factories to certify that working conditions meet international conventions on minimum wages, working hours etc.
- \* Products not covered by accreditation schemes may be ethically sourced. It is always advisable to ask for evidence. No accreditation covers the whole supply chain. Schemes' standards and implementation both vary.
- \* **Factory 'audits'** are more reliable if workers or unions are consulted independently.
- \* Ethically sourced clothing can be surprisingly competitive. As garment workers only get a tiny 1-3% share of UK sale prices, their standard of living can be radically improved with little or no increase in cost to parents.

## Anti-sweatshop campaigns & teaching resources

Read War on Want's shocking report into illegal exploitation in Bangladesh's clothing industry, at: [www.waronwant.org/overseas-work/sweatshops-and-plantations/hidden/inform/17318-stitched-up](http://www.waronwant.org/overseas-work/sweatshops-and-plantations/hidden/inform/17318-stitched-up) (Includes suppliers of UK retailers). Bangladesh's National Garment Workers' Federation campaigns to improve working conditions. See 'Take Action' at: <http://www.waronwant.org/campaigns/love-fashion-hate-sweatshops>



Schools can also inform parents about general uniform items that they buy in high street shops, as well as fashion clothing. *Ethical Consumer* ranks major UK retailers ethically, based on working conditions in their supply chains. <http://www.ethicalconsumer.org/buyersguides/clothing/schooluniforms.aspx>

## Tower Hamlets Ethical School Uniform Campaign is supported by...



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## The East London Teachers' Association (NUT)



### Tower Hamlets Fairtrade Network

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Martin Young, school governor, E14  
Alan Duffell, Tower Hamlets Green Party  
Tower Hamlets Co-operative Party

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