

WHAT IS WORKER-DRIVEN SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY (WSR)?

The Failure of Corporate Self-Regulation

In a shrinking world of increasingly globalized markets, low-wage workers at the base of corporate supply chains remain isolated, vulnerable, exploited and abused. Governments, which should be responsible for protecting the rights of their citizens, often lack the resources or political will to do so. State-based enforcement agencies and policy frameworks consistently fail to protect workers from dangerous sweatshop conditions and even severe abuses, including forced labor, sexual harassment and rape, in no small part because those suffering the abuses are largely voiceless. Where collective bargaining rights exist and are enforced, unions can provide effective workplace protections. But even when those rights exist in the law, they are ignored in practice for millions of workers, while millions more are excluded from the legal right to form a union altogether.

Corporations bear responsibility for ensuring that human rights are respected in their suppliers' operations, but they tend to treat the discovery of abuses in their supply chains as public relations crises to be managed, rather than human rights violations to be remedied. Seeking to protect their brands from reputational harm, corporations embrace strategies that profess adherence to fundamental human rights standards but offer no effective mechanisms for enforcing those standards. This approach, known broadly as Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), is characterized by voluntary commitments, broad standards that mostly mirror local law, ineffective or non-existent monitoring, and the absence of any commitment to or mechanisms for enforcement of the meager standards that do exist. CSR, in effect a form of corporate self-regulation, has failed to address the ongoing human rights crisis in global supply chains in large part because it does not put workers—the very people whose rights are in question and who have the most direct knowledge of the

relevant environment—at the center of developing and enforcing solutions to the problem. This failure is evident at all levels of CSR—in its structure, governance, operation and allocation of resources—and it is this fundamental design flaw that makes the failure of these systems inevitable.

From CSR to WSR

In recent years, however, this bleak portrait has begun to change. Both in the US and abroad, workers and their organizations have forged effective solutions that ensure the real, verifiable protection of human rights in corporate supply chains. This new paradigm is known as Worker-driven Social Responsibility (WSR). WSR has been tested in some of the most stubbornly exploitative labor environments in the world today—from the agricultural fields of Florida, which were once dubbed “ground zero for modern-day slavery” by federal prosecutors, to the apparel sweatshops of Bangladesh, the locus of some of this century’s most horrific factory



Two dozen children were among the 275 people freed from a forced labor operation on a large Mexican farm after authorities raided it in 2013.

fires and building collapses. In these oppressive environments, WSR has demonstrated its ability to eliminate longstanding abuses and change workers' lives for the better.

WSR provides a proven new form of power for previously powerless workers to protect and enforce their own rights. These rights can include—according to the circumstances and priorities of the workers driving the program—the right to freedom of association, the right to a safe and healthy work environment (including the right to work free from sexual harassment and sexual violence), and the right to work free of forced labor or violence, among other fundamental rights.

The WSR paradigm is founded on the understanding that, in order to achieve meaningful and lasting improvements, human rights protections in corporate supply chains must be worker-driven, enforcement-focused, and based on legally binding commitments that assign responsibility for improving working conditions to the global corporations at the top of those supply chains. Several essential features distinguish the WSR approach from the failed CSR model. Specifically:

- Worker organizations must be the driving force in the creation, monitoring, and enforcement of

programs designed to improve their wages and working conditions;

- Brands and retailers must sign legally binding agreements with worker organizations, and those agreements must require the brands to provide financial support to their suppliers to help meet the labor standards established by the program, and to stop doing business with suppliers who violate those standards;
- Monitoring and enforcement mechanisms must be designed to provide workers an effective voice in the protection of their own rights, including extensive worker education on their rights under the program, rigorous workplace inspections that are effectively independent of brand and retailer influence, public disclosure of the names and locations of participating brands and suppliers, and a complaint mechanism that ensures swift and effective action when workers identify abuses.

Recognition of this new paradigm is increasingly widespread, and supporting it is now a moral and functional necessity. Accordingly, the accompanying statement of principles has been developed and circulated for endorsement by interested individuals and organizations.

Principles of WSR

We are committed to a vision of a just workplace where every worker is assured dignity, decent conditions, and the right to organize, and we recognize that effective programs to protect the rights of workers in contracted supply chains must be based on agreements between global corporations and worker organizations that embody the following principles:

1. Labor Rights Initiatives Must Be Worker-Driven:

Workers are the only actors in the supply chain with a vital and abiding interest in ensuring their rights are protected. If, therefore, a program intended to improve their situation is to work, workers and their representative organizations—global, national or local labor unions, worker-based human rights organizations, or other organizations that genuinely represent workers' interests—must be at the head of the table in creating and implementing the program, including its priorities, design, monitor-

ing and enforcement. An initiative's labor standards must be based on universal labor and human rights principles, which are embodied in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and defined by the Conventions of the ILO.

2. Obligations for Global Corporations Must Be Binding and Enforceable:

Respect for human rights in corporate supply chains cannot be optional or voluntary. Effective enforcement is key to the success of any social responsibility program. Worker organizations must be able to enforce the commitments of brands and retailers as a matter of contractual obligation.

3. Buyers Must Afford Suppliers the Financial Incentive and Capacity to Comply:

Corporations at the top of supply chains place constant price pressure on their suppliers, which inexorably translates into downward pressure on wages and labor conditions: the market incentivizes abuse. Corporations



1,137 garment workers died in the 2013 Rana Plaza factory collapse in Dhaka, Bangladesh. The Accord on Fire and Building Safety is addressing these risks to prevent future tragedies.

must instead be required to incentivize respect for human rights through a price premium, negotiated higher prices, and/or other financial inducements that enable suppliers to afford the additional cost of compliance with the agreed labor standards.

4. Consequences for Non-Compliant Suppliers Must Be Mandatory: The obligations of global brands and retailers must include the imposition of meaningful, swift, and certain economic consequences for suppliers that violate their workers' human rights, whether or not ending the supplier relationship suits the economic and logistical convenience of the brand or retailer. Only programs that include such economic consequences can ensure protection for workers.

5. Gains for Workers Must be Measurable and Timely: The ability of brands and retailers to obscure the failure of voluntary labor rights initiatives is greatly aided by the absence from these initiatives of the obligation to achieve concrete, measurable outcomes at the workplace level within specific time-frames. To ensure accountability, any program designed to correct specific labor rights problems must include objectively measurable outcomes and clear deadlines.

6. Verification of Workplace Compliance Must Be Rigorous and Independent: Workplace audits—often infrequent and perfunctory and never free of buyer influence—are the exclusive monitoring mechanism in traditional CSR programs and have proven inadequate time and again. Effective verification of supplier compliance is essential and must include the following components: inspectors who have deep knowledge of the relevant industry and labor issues and who operate independently of



Workers on a Fair Food Program farm receive training on their rights and mechanisms for redress established under the Code of Conduct.

financial control and influence by buyers; in-depth worker interviews, carried out under conditions where workers can speak freely, as a central component of the process; effective worker education that enables workers to function as partners with outside inspectors; and a complaint resolution mechanism that operates independently of buyers and suppliers and in which workers organizations play a central role.

We recognize that an approach that embodies these principles, increasingly known as Worker-Driven Social Responsibility (WSR), is the best model for ensuring respect for human rights in supply chains where workplace abuses are prevalent and we commit to ensuring that less effective approaches are not promoted at the expense of the expansion if this model and the well-being of workers.