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**You could ask:**

What are the standards the company upholds? Does the company have a code of conduct or sourcing guidelines? If so, could you have a copy?

Simply having a code of conduct does not mean that it is automatically followed. Ask for details of how the company monitors implementation of the code. For instance:

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- How are the views of the workers - the only ones who can say whether their rights are genuinely upheld - collected given that workers often fear the consequences of speaking out?
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- Check that the company has a policy of working with suppliers to correct problems rather than terminating business without giving the opportunity to carry out improvements. Ask who bears responsibility, especially financially, for putting right the problems exposed in the course of monitoring.
- Do the company's prices and delivery times enable suppliers to comply with its code of conduct (including correcting problems where necessary) and pay workers a living wage?

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Many codes of conduct still exclude or are very vague about the right to be paid a living wage and the right to freedom of association and collective bargaining, two of the most important issues for garment workers. For instance:

**“Wages are to be paid according to locals laws.”**

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See above for questions to ask about codes and monitoring procedures.

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This means paying the national or regional legal minimum wage. The legal minimum wage is in most cases not sufficient for a single person to live on, let alone a family. In addition, the legal minimum wage rarely keeps up with inflation so that workers’ purchasing power is generally decreasing. Ask the company to include in its code the right to a living wage. Specify that this implies the company paying suppliers a price which allows them to pay workers a living wage.

**“Suppliers must not prevent workers from joining legal associations.”**

Most of the requests we receive for solidarity letter-writing concern the dismissal of workers who have carried out legal trade union activities. Ask the company what steps it is taking to ensure that workers are free to engage in trade union activity without fear of reprisals. Where workers have been fired for their legal trade union activities, what steps is the company taking to get workers reinstated?

**3. Company sends out its code and says that the implementation of the code is internally monitored.**

See above for questions to ask about codes and monitoring procedures.

A company’s monitoring of how its code of conduct is implemented is extremely important. Just as companies’ financial records are externally audited, so there is a need, from a public accountability and credibility point of view, for independent verification of working conditions. And because workers are the only ones who can say whether their rights are genuinely being upheld, they and their representatives must be involved in the process. While there have been several cases of international and local NGOs (non-governmental organisations) taking part in the verification process, there has mostly been no trade union involvement.

While some companies are experimenting with independent verification (eg: members of the UK’s Ethical Trading Initiative (ETI) and big brands such as GAP, H&M, Nike, adidas and Reebok), the practice is far from systematically applied. There are also concerns that all too often it consists of a check-list exercise carried out by for-profit, international auditing or accounting companies which do little to advance the cause of workers’ rights.

Ask what steps the company is taking to ensure independent verification of their claims of good practice.

**4. The company sends its code and says that the implementation is both internally monitored and working conditions are independently verified (audited).**

Congratulate the company on this. But ask for the following details:

- How are workers and their representatives (trade unions and other workers’ organisations) involved in these independent social audits?
- How often and how widely does the company plan to carry out such audits?

- What proportion of the company's suppliers are independently verified each year?
- How does the company set out to include in the verification process the smaller factories, workshops and homeworkers to which some of the work has been sub-contracted?
- How does the company deal with the problems identified by the audits? Where it costs to correct the problems identified, who pays for correcting them?

## **5. Summary**

### **Code**

Check how comprehensive the company's code of conduct is. In particular, does it include the right to a living wage and the right to freedom of association and to collective bargaining?

### **Internal monitoring**

- Does the company have an internal monitoring policy and procedures for ensuring its code is being implemented?
- How are workers involved in the process?
- How does the company deal with the findings?
- Are the company's purchasing practices compatible with the implementation of this code?

### **Independent verification**

- Does the company have an independent verification policy?
- If yes, what proportion of the company's supply base (sub-contractors included) is verified?
- How are workers involved?
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**Many of you have asked for suggestions on how to follow up letters you received from companies after you enquired about the conditions in which their goods are produced.**

Some companies have sent you a short letter, others a code of conduct, PR material etc. We have tried here to summarise the key issues so that you can keep up the pressure, and write a follow-up letter to the company Chief Executive.

**1. The company gives general reassurances without addressing the question (s) you asked, eg: 'Our company only works with suppliers who follow our own exacting standards' or 'Be assured that we are concerned [with] safeguarding the rights and safety of workers' etc.**

**You could ask:**

What are the standards the company upholds? Does the company have a code of conduct or sourcing guidelines? If so, could you have a copy?

Simply having a code of conduct does not mean that it is automatically followed. Ask for details of how the company monitors implementation of the code. For instance:

- What proportion of its suppliers does the company monitor? Who does the monitoring and what training in social issues have the monitors been given?
- How often are supplier factories inspected and how long do the inspections last? Are the visits/inspections announced or not?
- How are the views of the workers - the only ones who can say whether their rights are genuinely upheld - collected given that workers often fear the consequences of speaking out?
- How are working conditions monitored where the work has been sub-contracted (to a smaller factory, a workshop or home-workers)?
- Check that the company has a policy of working with suppliers to correct problems rather than terminating business without giving the opportunity to carry out improvements. Ask who bears responsibility, especially financially, for putting right the problems exposed in the course of monitoring.
- Do the company's prices and delivery times enable suppliers to comply with its code of conduct (including correcting problems where necessary) and pay workers a living wage?

**2. The company sends you a code of conduct but little else. It may say that suppliers are responsible for making sure everyone in the supply chain knows about and complies with the code.**

Regarding the code itself: is it comprehensive? It should include the following, taken from the base code of the Ethical Trading Initiative and based on the internationally agreed conventions of the International Labour Organisation:

- Employment is freely chosen
- Workers' right to freedom of association and collective bargaining is respected
- Working conditions are safe and hygienic
- Child labour is not used
- Working hours are not excessive
- There is no discrimination
- Regular employment is provided

- No harsh or inhumane treatment is allowed
- Living wages are paid

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