International Labour Organization (ILO) Background Guide

2026-2027

Cleveland Council on WORLD AFFAIRS

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The International Labour Organization (ILO) was established in 1919 as the United Nations (UN) only tripartite agency. The tripartite delegations of the ILO are comprised of representatives from the government, workers, and employers of each member state.[1] Members of the ILO represent 187 states across the globe, covering every continent and region. The ILO seeks to promote internationally recognized human & labor rights and social justice. The ILO pursues this mission by creating better opportunities for employment and income, as well as enhancing the strength of social protection for workers globally.[2] The ILO functions under the leadership of a Director-General and the Governing Body of the International Labour Office, who oversee the functioning of ILO programs and activities across 107 of the 187 member countries.[3]

The headquarters of the ILO are in Geneva, Switzerland, and house the offices of the ILO as well as serve as the location for its convenings.[4] The ILO's Governing Body is the Executive Committee of the ILO, with 56 officer positions and 66 deputy positions, held by worker, government, and employer representatives from various member states who are elected for three-year terms, referred to as tripartite delegations.[5] While the ILO functions with tripartite delegations, for the purpose of the meeting of this committee, each delegation represents only the governmental representative of each Member State of the ILO. The ILO's policies and legal standards are set each year at the International Labour Conference (ILC), the organization's global forum on social and economic policies held in Geneva for the 187 tripartite delegations of member states.[6]

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[1] International Labour Organization, "About the ILO | International Labour Organization," www.ilo.org, January 28, 2024, https://www.ilo.org/about-ilo.
[2] Ibid.
[3] International Labour Organization "Organizational Structure of the International Labour Office." https://www.ilo.org/about-ilo/how-ilo-works/organizational-structure-international-labour-office.
[4] Ibid.
[5] International Labour Organization, "ILO Governing Body," International Labour Organization, January 28, 2024, https://www.ilo.org/ilo-governing-body.
[6] International Labour Organization "International Labour Conference." https://www.ilo.org/international-labour-conference.

The Governing Body of the ILO meets three times a year, in March, June, and November, to make decisions on ILO policies, dictate the agenda of the International Labour Conference, agree on the budget sent to the ILC, and oversee the election of the Director-General and Governing Body of the ILO every three years.[7] The ILC functions to set international labor standards and ILO general policies for the next year, as well as serves as a discussion forum for labor issues and topics.[8]

The programs of the ILO are financed by the Regular Budget of the ILO, which is funded by assessed contributions of Member States, as well as by the Regular Budget Supplementary account funded by the volunteer contributions of key partners, and by voluntary contributions from both private and public organizations.[9] The proposed budget for the 2026-27 biennium was $930,500,000 USD, but the failure by some member states to pay their required sums often limits the ability of the ILO to complete all its programs.[10] As a result, the ILO has faced budget cuts resulting in the shortening of ILO programs and the cutting of staff and scope of programs. This has limited the ability of the ILO to fully engage in its mission.

This committee must confront the weight and pressing nature of the topics of environmental impacts and labor rights concerns in the fast fashion industry and human rights in the global fishing industry. This committee provides standards and guidance to its members and the international community to ensure the rights and safety of workers across every industry are protected and upheld. The committee should aim to provide regulation recommendations to its member nations, as well as provide resources for both member states and those impacted by these issues to seek support and/or advice. As global demand for laborers continues to rise, it is important for bodies such as the ILO to maintain and promote labor standards to ensure that cycles of abuse are not perpetrated across various labor-based industries. Ultimately, the work of this committee will impact the standards and levels of workplace safety and quality that member states enforce in their own industries as participants in the ILO. The policies set forth by this

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[7] International Labour Organization “ILO Governing Body” https://www.ilo.org/ilo-governing-body .
[8] International Labour Organization, “International Labour Conference,” International Labour Organization, January 28, 2024, https://www.ilo.org/international-labour-conference.
[9] International Labour Organization “Funding.” https://www.ilo.org/about-ilo/how-ilo-works/results-based-management/funding.
[10] International Labour Organization ”Programme and Budget 2026- 27." https://www.ilo.org/resource/other/programme-and-budget-2026-27.

committee will establish and reaffirm worker rights as well as safety and well-being standards for laborers across every industry.

I. Addressing Environmental Impacts and Labor Rights Concerns in the Fast Fashion Industry

Statement of the Issue:

The ILO convenes to discuss the issue of environmental impacts and labor rights concerns in the fast fashion industry. These include violence and harassment within the garment industry, and exploitation of migrant workers. Fast fashion, defined as the production of low-cost, often trendy clothing with rapid turnaround times rather than following a seasonal schedule, has grown massively over the past two decades, with approximately 100 billion items of fast fashion clothing produced each year.[11] By design, the fast fashion industry is inherently harmful to garment industry workers. Cheap prices, constantly changing trends and consumer demands, and expected fast turnaround of these items mean that manufacturers must cut costs throughout the production process, often in the form of low wages, long hours and unregulated subcontracting and poor workplace conditions.

This committee will work to affirm labor standards to promote decent work for all, improving both quality of life for workers, as well as ameliorating working conditions to lessen environmental impacts.[12] Workers in the garment industry often face dangerous working conditions, unfair wages, and even threats and violence. These workers sometimes utilize equipment without proper protection, work in facilities that lack proper light and ventilation, and are often forced to work incredibly long hours doing difficult jobs for little to no overtime pay. The extreme conditions and exhaustion affecting these garment laborers because of fast fashion product demand can also put employees at risk when they are operating machinery, creating an added layer of danger in the workplace.

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[11] Storm Birch, "Explained: The History of Fast Fashion," Ocean Generation, August 31, 2023, https://oceangeneration.org/the-history-of-fast-fashion/.
[12] International Labour Organization, "About the ILO." https://www.ilo.org/about-ilo

The conditions faced by workers in the fast fashion garment industry make the commitment of the ILO to initiatives such as the Better Work programs, the Decent Work Country Programs (DWCPs), and the policies passed at the ILC of the upmost importance. The Better Work programs focus on improving working conditions through factory assessments, advisory services, and training in eleven countries for 3.7 million workers.[13] While enhancing garment workers' treatment, the Better Work program is reliant on the governments of participating nations to comply with ILO standards through local legislation and regulations and continued implementation of the program's initiatives.

The Decent Work Country Programs are the country-to-country programs of the ILO. They identify specific issues for ILO members to tackle in each country and are developed in collaboration with government officials as well as employers and workers organizations.[14] These programs provide tailored goals which seek to improve working conditions for laborers, but typically only run for four to six years, with the occasional extension when funding allows. While the Decent Work Country Programs provide strong frameworks for improvements in the garment industry, their short runtimes make it difficult to ensure that all policies will be followed in the long-term. Ensuring that these programs make a permanent difference in industry working conditions requires additional funding, which the ILO seeks to gain. The popularity of fast fashion products ensures that laborers of the garment industry will continue to see demand for work, but without further progress on international labor standards and continued education and enforcement, many laborers in the garment industry who are affected by fast fashion practices will continue to be exploited.

In addition to the poor treatment of workers, fast fashion also damages the environment due to vast amounts of carbon emissions from usage of non-biodegradable polyester fabrics and the creation of vast amounts of discarded garments when trends pass, clogging landfills with discarded polyester clothing that remains in landfills for nearly two centuries before decomposing. Furthermore, the garment industry utilizes 215 trillion liters of water annually and utilizes thousands of chemicals that are extremely harmful for both the people working in the

[13] Betterwork, "Better Work – Better for All.," Betterwork.org, 2019, https://betterwork.org/.
[14] International Labour Organization, "Decent Work Country Programmes | International Labour Organization," www.ilo.org, January 28, 2024, https://www.ilo.org/about-ilo/how-ilo-works/results-based-management/decent-work-country-programmes.

industry and the surrounding environment. [15] The impact of fast fashion in the garment industry will only deepen with the projected growth of the global middle class: with a larger global population able to purchase "affordable" garments, demand for fast fashion clothing is expected to grow.[16] This issue raises questions about global garment consumption, workers' rights across the globe, and reduction of the carbon emissions created by the growth of fast fashion, which due to the mass speed and scale of production, as well as the types of fabrics used, create more emissions than traditional methods of clothing production.

The increasing demand for products and burgeoning negative environmental impacts of fast fashion continue to drive the long hours, poor conditions, and low wages experienced by many workers producing products for companies like Shein, Temu, and Fashion Nova, among others, in factories across Southeast Asia, China, and elsewhere. The continued purchase of these products by consumers across Europe and the Americas feeds into this cycle of exploitation, with the brunt of the detrimental impacts being felt by workers in these factories, the majority of which exist across Southeast Asia. At the same time, many countries rely heavily on the garment industry to provide jobs and revenue. Some are actively working towards or already have in place policies to protect their workers from the harms of the fast fashion industry. This committee must reconcile with the growth of fast fashion and the resulting increases in demand for workers, with the negative human rights and environmental impacts of this industry.

History:

The growth of the garment industry exploded following the beginning of the Industrial Revolution with the rise of sweatshops, where many workers were employed for low wages in poor working conditions. [17] The average age of garment workers during this period was teens to early twenties, but there was also employment of children as young as five years old, who not only worked the twelve-to-sixteen-hour shifts but also operated heavy and dangerous

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[15] Vibhu Mishra, "Fast Fashion Fuelling Global Waste Crisis, UN Chief Warns," UN News, March 27, 2025, https://news.un.org/en/story/2025/03/1161636.
[16] International Labour Organization, "Decent Work Challenges and Opportunities in the Textiles and Clothing Sector," International Labour Organization, March 28, 2025, https://www.ilo.org/publications/decent-work-challenges-and-opportunities-textiles-and-clothing-sector.
[17] Storm Birch, "Explained: The History of Fast Fashion," Ocean Generation, August 31, 2023, https://oceangeneration.org/the-history-of-fast-fashion/.

machinery.[18] The ILO has established the international minimum working age as 15 years old, and 18 years old for any work involving hazardous conditions, meaning operation of dangerous machinery or risk of chemical exposure, which the child laborers of the Industrial Revolution faced each day they worked. [19] The chemicals used in these processes were not only dangerous and deadly to the workers operating machinery and producing garments, but the environment as well. Greenhouse gas pollution that became abundant during the Industrial Revolution damaged the ozone layer of the Earth, effectively limiting global protection from sun and heat damage.

In the United States, many of the workers in early garment industry during the Industrial Revolution were young immigrant and migrant women, who were paid based on the number of garments completed, rather than a fixed hourly salary.[20] One young woman working in the garment industry attested that she was hired by the week and paid only three USD for that time.[21] The exploitative conditions of garment production led to the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire, which cost the lives of 146 young, mostly immigrant, women who worked producing garments.[22] When a fire broke out in the factory, workers were unable to escape the building, as their superiors locked the room in which the women worked during the day so they could not steal or leave. The fire resulted in the first U.S. workplace safety regulations and set in motion a regulatory system that ultimately led to the creation of the Occupational Health and Safety Administration to enforce worker protections in the United States.

In 2013, the Rana Plaza complex, an eight-story building that housed garment factories in Savar, Bangladesh, collapsed, killing over 1,100 garment workers and injuring thousands more. Factory owners ignored warnings from inspectors who found cracks in the structure of the building and mandated that more than 3,600 garment workers return to work the next day despite

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[18] History on The Net, "Industrial Revolution Working Conditions - History," History on the Net (Salem Media, April 13, 2018), https://www.historyonthenet.com/industrial-revolution-working-conditions.
[19] Office of the High Commissioner of the United Nations Human Rights Council, "Minimum Age Convention, 1973 (No. 138)," OHCHR, 2025, https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/minimum-age-convention-1973-no-138.
[20] University of Puget Sound, "Work and Conditions in the Garment Industry – Stories of Shirtwaists and Tenements: Labor, Immigration and Americanization on the Lower East Side," Stories of Shirtwaists and Tenements: Labor, Immigration and Americanization on the Lower East Side, n.d., https://edblogs.pugetsound.edu/shirtwaistsandtenements/?page_id=157.
[21] Ibid.
[22] History.com Editors, "Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire - Date, Significance, Cause | HISTORY," HISTORY (A&E Television Networks, December 2, 2009), https://www.history.com/articles/triangle-shirtwaist-fire.

the risk.[23] The subsequent collapse of the building brought the violations of workers' safety and building permits to the global stage and led clothing companies around the world to shift how they engage with suppliers and workers. The ILO helped to facilitate reforms within Bangladesh to aid in the prevention of similar disasters, such as the inspection of every garment factory in Bangladesh. However, violations of ILO policies and workplace safety continue, and without consistent funding and personnel to enforce ILO policies, many workers remain at risk.

Analysis:

The growing scale and popularity of the fast fashion industry is likely to result in continued high demand for these products as well as a continued uptick in resulting emissions and violations of workers' rights. The ILO committee should focus on ways to fund and sustain long-term programs in international labor rights standards that both protect workers and increase the sustainability of the industry.

Fast fashion has a large-scale impact on the workplace environment in countries that are mass producers of garments, many of them in Southeast Asia. In Indonesia alone, 80 percent of women reported sexual harassment in the workplace while working in the garment industry.[24] A lack of consistent enforcement of labor laws, and thus, any of the consequences that should accompany their violation despite the strong efforts of the ILO, contributes to the high number of reports of harassment seen in the garment industry. Additionally, the garment industry in Indonesia has the lowest minimum wage in relation to other sectors of the economy, worsened by the 6.5 percent pay gap between men and women who work in the same job.[25] The effects of poor labor regulations and lack of fair wages are often ignored by consumers who reap the benefits in the form of affordable and trendy clothing, but the long-term negative impacts of fast fashion both environmentally and on the workers of the garment industry become more pressing as the industry continues to expand. The average person consumes 11.4 kilograms of apparel

[23] International Labour Organization, "How to Achieve Gender Equality in Global Garment Supply Chains," Ilo.org, 2023, https://webapps.ilo.org/infostories/en-GB/Stories/discrimination/garment-gender.html.
[24] International Labour Organization, "How to Achieve Gender Equality in Global Garment Supply Chains," Ilo.org, 2023, https://webapps.ilo.org/infostories/en-GB/Stories/discrimination/garment-gender.html.
[25] Ibid.

each year, a number which is only likely to continue rising as fast fashion becomes the staple mode of production for many brands like Zara and H&M, among others.[26]

While the Rana Plaza disaster and similar events have led to changes being made in the regulation of worker rights and safety, the international community still lacks legal standards that meet the ILO's definition of a safe and healthy work environment. The ILO remains committed to improving the quality of life for garment workers, passing a safe and healthy working environment resolution in June 2022.

Environmental impacts of fast fashion are multi-layered, affecting more than just the immediate ecosystems surrounding areas of production. Studies have found that 85% of the textiles used to produce cheap fast fashion garments end up in landfills after a year, wasting the fabrics and further clogging up landfills as synthetic fabrics take far longer than other fabrics like cotton to decompose.[27] Fast fashion also drains non-renewable resources as well as renewable ones, using around 2,000 gallons of water to produce a singular pair of jeans, that when a trend passes, will be thrown out, adding to the waste made by fast fashion practices.

The Global South bears the brunt of the environmental fallout of fast fashion production, though all countries experience detrimental effects such as textile waste and chemical runoff. Chile's Atacama Desert, renowned globally as a destination for stargazing and space research, has become one of the world's fastest-growing clothing dumping sites.[28] Chile is home to Iquique, one of the largest duty-free ports in South America; in 2025, the country imported $70.6 million, or roughly 123,000 tons, of used clothing[29]. Chile has a large secondhand market which takes the best quality imported clothes to be resold in Chile and neighboring Latin American countries. However, the decrease in quality of these imported and reused clothes, many of which are products of fast fashion, leads to tons of clothing that aren't repurposed ultimately being discarded. After arriving in Chile, these discarded garments are trucked out to the Atacama

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[26] Storm Birch, "Explained: The History of Fast Fashion," Ocean Generation, August 31, 2023, https://oceangeneration.org/the-history-of-fast-fashion/.
[27] Rashmila Maiti, "The Environmental Impact of Fast Fashion, Explained," Earth.Org, January 20, 2025, https://earth.org/fast-fashions-detrimental-effect-on-the-environment/.
[28] John Bartlett, "Chile's Atacama Desert Has Become a Fast Fashion Dumping Ground," *National Geographic*, March 5, 2024, https://www.nationalgeographic.com/environment/article/chile-fashion-pollution.
[29] Observatory of Economic Complexity. "The Observatory of Economic Complexity." *The Observatory of Economic Complexity*, 2025. https://oec.world/en/profile/bilateral-product/used-clothing/reporter/chl.

Desert where they are dumped or burned, creating mountains of unused clothing waste and clouds of black smoke that pollute neighboring cities and towns on the outskirts of the desert, drastically degrading air quality and contributing to, or exacerbating, respiratory illnesses in the surrounding communities[30].

Microplastics, defined by the U.S. National Ocean Service as pieces of plastic less than five millimeters in length, are shed by clothing items during wash cycles, seeping back into household water systems and infiltrating the water used for cooking, drinking, and washing.[31] These microplastics are difficult to filter out completely, even for the most sophisticated treatment systems, and eventually end up polluting waterways and traveling to the ocean, furthering marine plastic pollution. In Ghana, the nation's wetlands, internationally recognized conservation sites, are reportedly clogged with synthetic fast fashion products, endangering species of turtles and disrupting fishing sites and local vegetation.[32] Although the import of used clothing has provided economic opportunities through the secondhand clothing market, the poor quality and abundance of fast fashion products have made many of the pieces unsuitable for resale, resulting in even more waste as resellers are forced to discard or burn them.

In addition, at the beginning of 2020, the ILO reported that around 160 million children, or 10 percent of children worldwide, participated in child labor.[33] The largest percentage of child labor was found in the lower tiers of the textile supply chain, particularly in cotton production in Asia and Africa.[34] The ILO has made promising headway on reducing the number of child laborers in the industry, with an encouraging estimate of two million children removed from Uzbekistan's cotton sector since 2015.[35] Despite the success of the ILO in Uzbekistan, millions of children globally still work when they should be in school, and many face harsh and sometimes violent working conditions.

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[30] Maya DaSilva, *The Atacama Desert Clothing Dump: A Global Fashion Crisis*, *The Borgen Project*, June 4, 2024, https://borgenproject.org/atacama-desert/.
[31] National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, "What Are Microplastics?," *Noaa.Gov* (National Ocean Service, June 16, 2024), https://oceanservice.noaa.gov/facts/microplastics.html.
[32]John Bartlett, "Chile Targets Fast Fashion Waste with Landmark Desert Cleanup Plan," the Guardian (The Guardian, June 26, 2025), https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/jun/26/chile-fast-fashion-waste-atacama-desert.
[33] International Labour Organization, "How to Achieve Gender Equality in Global Garment Supply Chains," Ilo.org, 2023, https://webapps.ilo.org/infostories/en-GB/Stories/discrimination/garment-gender.html.
[34] Ibid.
[35] Ibid.

Many garment workers also face dangerous working conditions, as exemplified by the Rana Plaza collapse. They face more subtle dangers as well. For example, distressed denim products are sometimes manufactured using sandblasting, which can cause serious respiratory issues.[36] Workers who iron clothes before they are shipped abroad to America, Europe, and Australia have provided accounts of working in windowless, unventilated rooms that become so sweltering and steam-filled that workers have fainted.[37]

Following the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, demand for fast fashion products skyrocketed even as global shipping and trade slowed to a halt. Online ordering for clothes became more popular and the spread of micro-trends via Tik Tok and Instagram meant that the desire for fast fashion products remained, even as COVID-19 increased the risk of dangerous working conditions. Workers producing rubber gloves in Malaysia, for example, ironically lacked access to personal protection equipment (PPE) in factories, showcasing the lack of care taken in protecting laborers who produce crucial materials for the rest of the world.[38] Following the pandemic, some states suspended workplace regulations to boost their struggling economies. For example, in India, workplace safety laws, legal working hours, and trade union recognition were suspended in some states for three years to aid with commercial advancement.[39]

A special issue of the *Anti-Trafficking Review* found that over the past forty years, capitalism and expanding global markets has led to massive deregulations of labor conditions.[40] Many "flexible" working arrangements presented as accommodating women and the need for a work/home balance actually favor businesses. Irregular employment and self-employment have become more common, even for major corporations who outsource digital tasks to "microworkers" through subcontracting.[41] Subcontracting is also commonplace in the fast fashion industry due to ever-changing and large demand for products. The use of microworkers and subcontracting places workers in a gray area with often unregulated, unapproved labor

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[36] Collective Fashion Justice, "Garment Workers," Collective Fashion Justice, 2025, https://www.collectivefashionjustice.org/garment-workers.

[37] Ibid.

K D Ewing and Lord Hendy Qc, "Covid-19 and the Failure of Labour Law: Part 1," *Industrial Law Journal* 49, no. 4 (2020), https://doi.org/10.1093/indlaw/dwaa026.

[39] J Quirk, C Robinson, and C Thibos, 'Editorial: From Exceptional Cases to Everyday Abuses: Labour exploitation in the global economy', Anti-Trafficking Review, issue 15, 2020, p.4, https://doi.org/ 10.14197/atr.201220151.

[40] Ibid. P.5

[41] Ibid. P.5

conditions because they are not directly employed by the corporation producing the fast fashion products, making the workers far more susceptible to exploitation.

The value placed on low wages to maximize profit is also an issue the ILO is deeply concerned about. The minimum wage for entry-level garment workers in Bangladesh is 113 USD per month, meaning that workers earn 0.80 cents per hour of work.[42] Similarly, the average salary of garment workers in Indonesia is between 120-298 USD per month, which is significantly below the estimated living wage of 503 USD per month in Indonesia.[43]

Reports of extreme working conditions compiled with low wages and little to no representation or the outright banning of laborer unionization in many of these factories lead to massive disenfranchisement for many of the workers manufacturing fast fashion products. ILO programs like the Better Work Program help to ensure the upkeep of both ILO policies and regulations as well as individual governmental laws, but with the loss of funding from key financial backers and other nations within the ILO failing to pay their allocated sum to organization, it is the underpaid workers who are affected, not the multi-million- or billion-dollar corporations who promote fast fashion products.

Conclusion:

Dangerous working conditions, unfair wages, limitations on worker organizing and trade unionization, and significant environmental impacts are all hallmarks of the growing fast fashion industry. ILO programs like the Better Work Program are working to improve regulation of this industry by member states and enforce ILO standards, but the loss of funding from key financial backers and the failure of some members to pay their dues have undermined the ability of the ILO to continue this important work.

The ILO's programs also work to improve transparency through the publication of statistics and surveys from employees in the garment industry, providing important insight into critical environmental and humanitarian impacts. Despite the binding nature of ILO membership

[42] Fair Labor, "Wage Trends: Bangladesh," Fair Labor Association (Fair Labor Association, January 11, 2024), https://www.fairlabor.org/resource/fair-labor-associations-bangladesh-wage-trends-report-and-recommendations/.
[43] Business & Human Rights Resource Centre, "Indonesia," Business & Human Rights Resource Centre, n.d., https://www.business-humanrights.org/en/from-us/covid-19-action-tracker/indonesia/.

and policies, which include the passing and enactment of labor laws by member states to protect wages, unionization, and health and safety in the workplace; the ILO and the international community face barriers to enforcing global standards.

As fast fashion increases its dominance within the global garment market, the committee should work to reinforce the importance of member states' efforts to create safe workspaces for personnel with livable wages and fair hours. Environmentally, fast fashion's prevalence threatens long-lasting disruptions to global environmental stability by filling expansive landfills with non-biodegradable materials and textile waste and plastic pollution, as well as chemical pollution and degradation of crucial waterways. These environmental dangers are exacerbated by inequalities in global waste management systems, which in turn contribute to negative cardiovascular and respiratory health impacts on the individuals and communities most immediately connected to the fast fashion industry. The unifying goal of worker enfranchisement, limiting product waste, and environmental protection remain of the upmost importance to the ILO.

Questions to Consider:

1. How can the labor and environmental impacts of fast fashion be mitigated without the loss of jobs for workers around the world?
2. How can the ILO and member nations support the use of more sustainable practices in the garment industry (i.e. legislation, education, recycling, second-hand stores)?
3. What strategies can the ILO adopt to ensure member states are contributing funding, and that the funding is used to make positive impacts on the garment industry?
    a. Consider the UN's 2030 Sustainable Development Goals addressing the dangers of fast fashion.

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University of Puget Sound. “Work and Conditions in the Garment Industry – Stories of Shirtwaists and Tenements: Labor, Immigration and Americanization on the Lower East Side.” Stories of Shirtwaists and Tenements: Labor, Immigration and Americanization on the Lower East Side, n.d. https://edblogs.pugetsound.edu/shirtwaistsandtenements/?page_id=157.

II. Human Rights in the Global Fishing Industry

The ILO's dedication to ensuring a safe, healthy, and fair workplace for men and women across the globe expands past the boundaries of terrestrial industries. The ILO's approach to commercial fishing is focused on combatting the exploitation of those working aboard vessels. Fishing is an incredibly lucrative and important industry across the globe, as people in every region of the world consume seafood products on a daily basis. The industry produced 406 billion US dollars in 2020 alone, with that number continuing to rise.[44] However, the industry is rife with abuse of workers, who are often forced to spend extended time at sea under dangerous working conditions, limited communication, and little pay. As stocks have been depleted due to overfishing, fishers have been forced to move further out to sea.

The hidden side to the problem of over-fishing is the loss of these small-scale fisheries, not just because they prevent the industry from solely being dominated by large companies, but also because employees from small-scale fisheries often end up being exploited aboard large-scale vessels when small ventures go under. The loss of small-scale fisheries means that large-scale fisheries that exploit laborers have become the only source of fish and seafood products for many large companies like Walmart and Aldi to sell. Whether or not these companies are aware of the exploitative nature of the products they sell, they unintentionally benefit from this exploitation by both purchasing and selling the product at a lower price, which the consumer also benefits from. Thus, inadvertently consumers aid in the exploitation of workers in the fishing industry through the purchase of seafood products.

Statement of the Issue:

The ILO convenes to discuss the paramount issue of human rights in the fishing industry, particularly the exploitation of migrants, the prevalence of forced labor, and the lack of regulatory enforcement that has facilitated overfishing. The workers of the fishing industry are often taken advantage of, and physically and mentally. Many of these abuses occur within the context of illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing (IUU fishing), which include fishing

[44] FAO, "Global Fisheries and Aquaculture at a Glance," www.fao.org, 2022, https://openknowledge.fao.org/server/api/core/bitstreams/9df19f53-b931-4d04-acd3-58a71c6b1a5b/content/sofia/2022/world-fisheries-aquaculture.html.

activities that violate national and international fishing regulations and standards.[45] This committee's action on this multi-faceted topic is crucial to the protection and enhancement of workers' rights aboard fishing vessels across the globe. The issue of illegal fishing is one that should concern not only every member state of the ILO, but the citizens residing in these member states as well. Every piece of seafood consumed worldwide could be the product of exploitation or overfishing. Many workers aboard fishing vessels are migrants who are subjected to inhumane working conditions for months or even years at a time.[46] Without legal recourse in their home or adopted countries, many migrants taken advantage of by the fishing industry lack the tools and ability to secure fair wages and decent treatment for their work, and face additional threats such as the withholding passports to force them to continue working aboard these vessels.

The ILO is committed to utilizing its resources and deploying key programs such as the Global Action Program against forced labor and trafficking of fishers at sea (GAPfish) to push towards global action against exploitation in the fishing industry. The program aims to develop sustainable solutions to prevent abuse of fishers in transit states, address compliance with international and national laws, and establish better responses in port states to forced labor.[47] The ILO has estimated that over 128,000 people are trapped in force labor aboard vessels in the fishing industry.[48]

In the past, small fishing vessels fished close to shore and docked frequently to offload their catch. In recent years, depleted fish stocks have forced fishers further out to sea, while the practice of transshipment – where small vessels offload their catch to larger ships – has made it less necessary for them to regularly return to shore. With this setup, smaller vessels can fish for months and sometimes years without having to return to land to offload, isolating workers aboard vessels and making them far more vulnerable to abuse and exploitation.[49] The lack of

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[45] NOAA Fisheries, "Understanding Illegal, Unreported, and Unregulated Fishing," NOAA, 2019, https://www.fisheries.noaa.gov/insight/understanding-illegal-unreported-and-unregulated-fishing.
[46] International Labour Organization, "Forced Labour and Human Trafficking in Fisheries," International Labour Organization, January 28, 2024, https://www.ilo.org/topics-and-sectors/forced-labour-modern-slavery-and-trafficking-persons/forced-labour-and-human-trafficking-fisheries.
[47] Ibid.
[48] Stanford Center for Ocean Solutions, "Addressing Illegal Fishing and Labor Abuses | Center for Ocean Solutions," oceansolutions.stanford.edu, n.d., https://oceansolutions.stanford.edu/key-initiatives/addressing-illegal-fishing-and-labor-abuses.
[49] Royal Museums Greenwich, "Protecting Human Rights in the Fishing Industry," Rmg.co.uk, 2015, https://www.rmg.co.uk/stories/ocean/protecting-human-rights-fishing-industry.

available medical care and communication on these small vessels using this setup is also a risk, regardless of whether or not physical violence is being used on workers aboard the vessel. Conditions aboard vessels are often dangerous, resulting in fishers suffering from physical injuries, psychological abuses, long work hours, and no pay for months.[50]

History:

The commercial fishing industry came to prominence in the late nineteenth century, with the industry becoming a lucrative source of trade and high-value exports for countries across the globe.[51] By the beginning of the twenty-first century, nearly 42 million people were employed to catch fish, with hundreds of millions more working in related industries such as manufacturing fish-related products. [52] The industry generates hundreds of billions of dollars every year globally, but has also resulted in the depletion of coastal fish population and contributed to environmental impacts that in turn harm workers.[53]

The ILO's previous work in this area includes the GAPfish program and C188 – the Work in Fishing Convention passed by the ILO in 2007. GAPfish, established in 2015, was initially a 5-year program that took aim specifically at forced labor and the trafficking of fishers at sea, but has since continued in a reduced capacity to continue combatting the issue of trafficking aboard fishing vessels.[54] The program has been successful in supporting member states to target and prosecute traffickers while providing resources to victims of trafficking within the fishing industry. This program has helped to identify regions where forced trafficking aboard these vessels occurs and empowers governments to act against traffickers through the justice system to both support survivors of trafficking in the fishing industry while encouraging sustainable growth in the sector.

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[50] Sufinnah Singlee, "ILO Report on Labour Exploitation in the Fishing Sector," Blue Justice, November 25, 2016, https://bluejustice.org/news/pescadolus/ilo-report-on-labour-exploitation-in-the-fishing-sector/.
[51] Elizabeth Schafer, "Fishing Industry and Global Warming | EBSCO," EBSCO Information Services, Inc. | www.ebsco.com, 2024, https://www.ebsco.com/research-starters/agriculture-and-agribusiness/fishing-industry-and-global-warming.
[52] Ibid.
[53] Ibid
[54] International Labour Organization, "GAPfish - a Global Action Programme against Forced Labour and Trafficking of Fishers at Sea," International Labour Organization, November 24, 2015, https://www.ilo.org/publications/gapfish-global-action-programme-against-forced-labour-and-trafficking.

Despite the success of GAPfish, trafficking in the fishing industry remains a widespread problem for which the ILO requires more funding and participation from individual national governments to combat. [55] C188, otherwise known as the Work in Fishing Convention, establishes the understood danger surrounding the fishing industry as an occupation by the ILO, meaning it acknowledges and outlines potential dangers of working aboard fishing vessels .[56] The convention requires minimum decent work requirements for workers aboard vessels and revises the minimum age to ensure there are legal workers below the age of sixteen, or fifteen years old with proper training that meets individual national standards.[57] The convention served to effectively bring the standards of both the ILO and the international community into the twenty-first century by ensuring that workers should be of an appropriate age and/or training to work aboard fishing vessels.

The issue of forced labor and other abuses of fishers is particularly prevalent in Asia and parts of Africa, which have large-scale fishing industries and where many of the workers being exploited are migrants.[58] The policies adopted by the ILO are dependent on member states to incorporate into their own national law, so despite frameworks like C188 and other resolutions that focus on workplace safety and requirements, the ILO is reliant on the member states to ensure policies are ratified and enacted to the full capacity. Although the human rights of the fishing industry have increasingly become a priority to the ILO, the difficult nature of navigating worker trafficking, exploitation of native versus migrant workers, and over-fishing have led to a challenging road ahead to making a positive impact in this industry.

Activism within the fishing industry has been seen through the tracking of vessels, and judicial cases against both individuals and corporations. Activist and journalist Ian Urbina has spent years traveling around the oceans, chasing fishing vessels and attempting to contact fishers onboard to report and prevent exploitation. Urbina recounts many interactions with laborers

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[55] Sufinnah Singlee, "ILO Report on Labour Exploitation in the Fishing Sector," Blue Justice, November 25, 2016, https://bluejustice.org/news/pescadolus/ilo-report-on-labour-exploitation-in-the-fishing-sector/.
[56] International Labour Organization, "Convention C188 - Work in Fishing Convention, 2007 (No. 188)," Ilo.org, 2017, https://normlex.ilo.org/dyn/nrmlx_en/f?p=NORMLEXPUB:12100:0::NO:12100:P12100_INSTRUMENT_ID:312333:NO.
[57] Ibid.
[58] Julia Cirne Lima Weston and Ingrid Kelling, "Navigating Responsibility for Human Rights Compliance in the Fishing Industry," *Reviews in Fisheries Science & Aquaculture* 32, no. 4 (2024): 529–44, https://doi.org/10.1080/23308249.2024.2329915.

aboard fishing vessels, many belonging to the Chinese long distance fishing fleet, in which workers told him their passports were being held as ransom, and begging him to help them reach land and embassies.[59] While this is the work of one man's experiences with attempting to combat the abuses of the fishing industry, the number of workers that Urbina found to be exploited or who were being threatened showcases the widespread abuses within the industry. Urbina's books and articles are just one example of the compiled evidence for the exploitation of fishing industry workers and the abuses they face in the multi-faceted issue, and document the individual experiences of abuse which help to bring a personal focus to the topic, which allows Urbina's readers and the public at large to understand exploitation in the fishing sector through stories rather than statistics.

[59] Ian Urbina, "How a Tiny Team of Journalists Held the World's Biggest Fishing Fleet to Account," TIME, October 26, 2023, https://time.com/6328528/investigation-chinese-fishing-fleet-ian-urbina-essay/.

Analysis:

The ILO seeks to find a way to alleviate the impacts on workers whose rights have been abused and ensure that those in the fishing industry violating human rights law are brought to justice. This committee should pursue solutions that enhance and enforcement of labor regulations in the industry, focusing on finding legal justice and protection for workers who have been abused, exploited, or trafficked in the fishing industry. The practice of illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing (IUU fishing) accounts for a massive portion of fishing annually, up to 26 million metric tons a year, making these abuses of the fishing industry massively concerning to the ILO.[60] The exploitative nature of the global fishing industry is easily overlooked, as abuses take place at sea, far from cameras, auditors, and human rights monitors, but the effects of these violations and environmental impacts can be felt across every sector of society. The ILO should push for better communications guidelines that ensure that workers are always able to contact both family and authorities on shore.

Another key recommendation this committee should consider is the possibility of routine and regulated vessel searches, whether it be every time a vessel docks and leaves port. This could be of great potential change to the exploitation of the fishing industry due to its elusive nature. It is difficult for the ILO and its member nations to monitor all employer/worker interactions on each vessel, and the shift in the industry from high and middle-income countries to low-income countries has exacerbated the obstacles facing the ILO's work in the fishing trade.[61] The lack of surveillance and enforcement of regulation globally has led to reports of sexual violence, threats, physical violence, and even the deaths of crewmates aboard fishing vessels.[62]

One important factor in the abuse of migrant workers in fishing is the practice of "flags of convenience" where fishing boats are registered to countries far from where they actually fish, exempting them from the legal jurisdiction of surrounding states and creating an added challenge for workers to find legal recourse.[63] The flag of convenience model distorts and delays the

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Pew, "How to End Illegal Fishing: The Role of the Flag State," Pew.org, 2019, https://www.pew.org/en/research-and-analysis/fact-sheets/2019/08/how-to-end-illegal-fishing-the-role-of-the-flag-state.

[61] International Labour Organization, "Forced Labour and Human Trafficking in Fisheries," International Labour Organization, January 28, 2024, https://www.ilo.org/topics-and-sectors/forced-labour-modern-slavery-and-trafficking-persons/forced-labour-and-human-trafficking-fisheries.

[62] Ibid.

[63] Ibid.

process for workers to raise legal issues. The ability of every nation to be a flag-state, regardless of their coastline or proximity to fishing waters, provides a multitude of opportunities for exploitation of workers aboard these vessels as the distance not only from vessels to aid on land can be vast, but the distance from states to the coastline can create even more hardship in legal cases surrounding worker abuse in the fishing industry.[64] Thus, the pursuit of constant access to communication for workers aboard these vessels should be of the upmost importance to the ILO in its mission of eradicating and preventing worker abuse in the fishing industry.

C188, while important to fishers' rights, took nine years to acquire the 10 ratifications needed to enter into force, which shows the hurdles the ILO faces in preventing exploitation.[65] Even with the progress made through the ratification of C188, the lack of ratification by major flag states and coastal states for the fishing industry undermine the goals set forth in C188 and by the ILO for the fishing sector.[66] Exploitation and forced labor within the fishing industry are not the only concerns that the ILO faces in this sector. A U.S Department of Labor report documented that child labor had been identified in the production of shellfish, fish, and dried fish industries in 20 countries.[67] In 2020 alone, Taiwan exported 139 million USD worth of seafood to the United States, which was purchased and sold in U.S markets by massive retailers such as Costco and Walmart.[68] Although only one example, this statistic out of Taiwan exemplifies the ways in which the abuse and exploitation of workers on fishing vessels benefits people across the world.

As the ramifications of fishing industry exploitation are felt across the world, it is imperative that the ILO and the UN do everything in their power to recommend and pursue

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[65]Julia Cirne Lima Weston and Ingrid Kelling, "Navigating Responsibility for Human Rights Compliance in the Fishing Industry," *Reviews in Fisheries Science & Aquaculture* 32, no. 4 (2024): 529–44, https://doi.org/10.1080/23308249.2024.2329915.

[65]Julia Cirne Lima Weston and Ingrid Kelling, "Navigating Responsibility for Human Rights Compliance in the Fishing Industry," *Reviews in Fisheries Science & Aquaculture* 32, no. 4 (2024): 529–44, https://doi.org/10.1080/23308249.2024.2329915.

[66] Ibid.

[67] Michael Sainato, "'A Fishing Accident Blinded Me but I Was Forced to Keep Working': Abuses Faced by Workers Who Catch Our Fish," *The Guardian*, March 13, 2024, sec. Business, https://www.theguardian.com/business/2024/mar/13/fishing-industry-worker-abuse.

[68] Michael Sainato, "'A Fishing Accident Blinded Me but I Was Forced to Keep Working': Abuses Faced by Workers Who Catch Our Fish," *The Guardian*, March 13, 2024, sec. Business, https://www.theguardian.com/business/2024/mar/13/fishing-industry-worker-abuse.

solutions to limit abuse. This includes promoting communication, vessel searches, and potentially changes in national laws that would limit the amount of time vessels can spend at sea. However, as funding has been an issue for the ILO with the ability to carry out more long-term and permanent programs, it is important that this committee pursue solutions that can be codified into national and international law, foster cooperation between member states, and create long-lasting impact on the fishing industry. Many large corporations in the fishing industry perform self-audits of their supply chains, which have a mixed record of identifying abuse, especially for vessels at sea for which auditors have limited access. Which can be altered, skewed, or simply falsified in the favor of profit for these corporations.[69] Lack of accurate data and clear silencing of worker opinions prevents the ILO from both being able to advocate for and protect workers, as well as obscures regions of the world where the ILO might be needed most.

A particular report on the Thai fishing sector done by the humanitarian organization Human Rights Watch revealed that government inspections in 2015 failed to find a single case of forced labor out of 474,000 workers despite previous evidence contradicting the governmental report. [70] This statistic is one example of a pattern of neglected or hidden abuses across the global fishing sector that the ILO is dedicated to combatting, as despite what reports may show, fear of unemployment or threats of violence often prevent those in forced labor situations in the fishing sector to report exploitation.

The extent of danger and injury faced in the fishing industry is a topic that the ILO seeks to highlight and why the ILO maintains devoted to the improvement of health and safety standards aboard fishing vessels. One worker reported blindness in one eye as the result of an accident aboard a vessel when a fishing line snapped, and the injured employee testifies that the ship's captain forced him to continue working instead of seeking medical assistance. [71] It is the mentality seen by the ship's captain and the captain's ability to force the continuation of work

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[69] Michael Sainato, "'A Fishing Accident Blinded Me but I Was Forced to Keep Working': Abuses Faced by Workers Who Catch Our Fish," *The Guardian*, March 13, 2024, sec. Business, https://www.theguardian.com/business/2024/mar/13/fishing-industry-worker-abuse.

[70] Human Rights Watch, "Hidden Chains | Rights Abuses and Forced Labor in Thailand's Fishing Industry," Human Rights Watch, September 13, 2018, https://www.hrw.org/report/2018/01/23/hidden-chains/rights-abuses-and-forced-labor-thailands-fishing-industry.

[71] Michael Sainato, "'A Fishing Accident Blinded Me but I Was Forced to Keep Working': Abuses Faced by Workers Who Catch Our Fish," *The Guardian*, March 13, 2024, sec. Business, https://www.theguardian.com/business/2024/mar/13/fishing-industry-worker-abuse.

that the ILO is staunchly opposed to. The devastating consequences of this accident and the resulting blindness will continue to cause difficulty and distress for the fisherman for the rest of his life, while the captain faced no negative ramifications from the incident. The danger faced by workers of the global fishing industry cannot be understated. The tactics of illegal, unregulated, and unreported fishing not only harm the workers being exploited, but negatively impact the ecosystems in which they fish in.

Conclusion:

This committee should pursue solutions that address the varying issues of the industry, including flag-state neglect, meaning that the state operating the vessel negates the legal responsibilities of any crime that occurs onboard. This committee also needs to address worker abuse, wage abuse, and migrant exploitation within the industry. The impact of violations of conventions like C188, humanitarian regulations, and other ILO initiatives goes vastly unseen to those outside of the industry, yet the products produced by forced labor, trafficking, and child labor are widely consumed by markets and people across the globe. The mass consumption of fishing industry products across almost every region internationally makes it hard for the ILO to dismantle the practices of abuse within the sector due to the demand for the commodities produced by the industry.

The nature of the industry as well is a roadblock to the promising initiatives like GAPfish and C188 because the isolating nature of fishing prevents the looming promise of consequences for abuse that affect terrestrial industries from being present. The distance from these vessels to the shore allows for more abuse and injury to occur without intervention from authorities. The growing popularity of "factory ships" exacerbates these issues and prolongs those committing labor and human rights violations for weeks and even months. The statutes passed by the ILO and other UN bodies are "unequivocally applicable" to the fishing industry and are reliant on full application from member states, thus, this committee must seek solutions to both encourage tripartite participation in reducing the negative impacts of the industry on its employees and preventing these abuses from being profited from. [72]

[72] Julia Cirne Lima Weston and Ingrid Kelling, "Navigating Responsibility for Human Rights Compliance in the Fishing Industry," *Reviews in Fisheries Science & Aquaculture* 32, no. 4 (April 18, 2024): 540, https://doi.org/10.1080/23308249.2024.2329915.

Questions to Consider:

1. How can the ILO and its member states facilitate the recommendation of stricter transparency policies surrounding fishing industry products to other regulatory bodies such as the UN or individual nations?
2. How can the ILO support the growth of resources for survivors of abuse in the fishing industry? Are there regions where this aid is most needed, and if so, how can the ILO focus on these areas and encourage national governments to provide support when some of these nations are the primary locations in which these abuses occur?
3. How should governments enforce regulations in the seafood industry to prevent abuse and improve current regulations? How can the ILO work to maintain the employment value of the fishing industry while dismantling practices of abuse?

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