

Fashion giant faces 'slavery' investigation

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FULL TEXT

Legal Notice: This article is the subject of a legal complaint from Jaswal Fashions Limited

Workers in Leicester making clothes destined for the fashion giant Boohoo are being paid as little as £3.50 an hour, an undercover investigation by The Sunday Times has found.

The factory, which displayed the sign Jaswal Fashions, was also operating last week during the localised coronavirus lockdown without additional hygiene or social-distancing measures in place. The undercover reporter spent two days working in the factory where he was told to expect £3.50 an hour, despite the minimum wage in Britain for those aged 25 and over being £8.72.

He obtained covert video footage of himself packing garments made in the factory under the label of Nasty Gal, which is owned by the fast-fashion brand Boohoo, whose boss, Mahmud Kamani, is set to scoop a £50m bonus. At the factory the foreman warned: "These motherf***ers know how to exploit people like us. They make profits like hell and pay us in peanuts."

Last week Priti Patel, the home secretary, asked the National Crime Agency (NCA) to investigate modern slavery in Leicester's clothing factories. The development came after this newspaper, with the Conservative MP Andrew Bridgen, raised the alarm with the Home Office after being approached by whistleblowers about the illegal practices allegedly employed in some of the city's clothing factories.

Patel described the allegations as "truly appalling" and commended this newspaper for its role in "uncovering such abhorrent practices".

"I will not tolerate sick criminals Continued on page 4 ?

? Continued from page 1 forcing innocent people into slave labour and a life of exploitation," she added.

"Let this be a warning to those who are exploiting people in sweatshops for their own commercial gain. This is just the start. What you are doing is illegal, it will not be tolerated and we are coming after you."

The factory foreman warned of how little workers were paid, despite the national minimum wage which is meant to ensure that everyone receives a fair rate: "Anywhere in Leicester, you will only find textile factories that pay £3.50-£4 per hour rate. That's what they will pay you here.

"Take me for instance, I've been working for so many years in this industry, I've been here for five years but never could I take a proper pay packet. I'm still only on just over £5 an hour."

The reporter was also warned by another member of staff to keep his job secret, adding: "You are working illegally, so do not discuss or talk anything with people about working here. You have to be discreet. Don't discuss this with anyone. I mean no one at all."

Boohoo has already come under fire for allegedly risking the spread of coronavirus in Leicester after claims that factories supplying the online retailer told staff to come to work during lockdown despite being ill. Bridgen, who has repeatedly raised the issue with the government over the past year, said: "Slavery is not modern, but is unfortunately still with us and uncomfortably close to home."

A report by the Commons environmental audit committee last year found that wage exploitation was flourishing in

the city and across the sector.

Former Labour MP Mary Creagh, who chaired the committee when the report was published, said: "People pride themselves on buying fairtrade fruit or free-range eggs —yet they ignore the conditions suffered by the UK's garment workers.

"Fashionistas need to realise that behind the perfect Instagram feeds of online fashion retailers, workers face illegally low pay and dangerous conditions. Garment workers and their families are paying a heavy price for fashion fans' cheap clothes."

Boohoo, which owns Nasty Gal, PrettyLittleThing, MissPap, BoohooMAN, Karen Millen and Coast brands, is Britain's fastest-growing online retailer and is valued at £4.9bn, more than twice as much as Marks & Spencer. A statement from Nasty Gal said the company would investigate this newspaper's claims, but insisted that Jaswal Fashions was not a "direct supplier". It said: "Nasty Gal does not allow any of its suppliers to pay less than the minimum wage and has a zero tolerance approach to incidences of modern slavery.

"We have terminated relationships with suppliers where evidence of noncompliance with our strict code of conduct is found.

"We will take immediate steps to fully investigate the allegations and if they are substantiated we will ensure our suppliers cease working with Jaswal Fashions."

Boxes packed at the factory displayed the name Morefray Limited, another Leicester-based clothing manufacturer.

The man identified as the factory boss refused to answer questions in detail but said: "We have legit staff."

Details of the investigation have been passed to the NCA. It said: "In the last few days, NCA officers, along with Leicestershire police and other partner agencies, attended business premises in the Leicester area to assess concerns of modern slavery and human trafficking." Additional reporting: Niamh Kirk

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DETAILS

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