

## **Sri Lankan Unions Demand Respect for Workers Rights from Brandix and World Bank on Six Month Anniversary of COVID-19 Outbreak**

### *Six Month Anniversary of COVID-19 Outbreak at Brandix Minuwangoda*

Six months ago this week, by October 10, 2020, over 1000 of 1400 factory workers at Brandix Minuwangoda tested positive for COVID-19: a superspreader event that sparked our first major COVID wave since March 2020.

In response, on October 15, 2020 Labor Minister Siripala de Silva announced appointment of a two-member committee to conduct an inquiry into the role of labor law violations if any in the Brandix Minuwangoda COVID-19 outbreak.

On October 27, the Sri Lankan Attorney General directed the acting inspector General of Police (AIG) to launch an investigation into potential claims of negligence and criminal conduct against Brandix. The Attorney General instructed the AIG to assemble an investigatory team and to submit a preliminary progress report before November 13. The team was finally assembled on November 19. The progress report was never made public, and the current status of the investigation is unknown.

On October 19, Brandix also announced it had appointed a “high-level three-member independent committee” to conduct an independent investigation into whether there were lapses of its health and safety protocols and publicly stated it “will share these findings and take the necessary action.” Almost six months later, no such findings have been announced.

### *The Brandix COVID-19 Outbreak Created a Crisis for Garment Workers*

Because of the Brandix COVID-19 outbreak, COVID-19 rates in EPZs have become extremely high, putting workers who are sustaining our economy at risk every day. In the past six months, unions and workers’ organizations representing FTZ garment workers, including workers at Brandix, have directly experienced the impact that this outbreak has had on FTZ garment workers. We have responded to this crisis with direct aid to quarantined workers and consistent demands that there be accountability for the impacts of the outbreak.

### *Workers Report Brandix Ignored Worker Whistleblowers; Violated Sri Lanka Ministry of Health COVID-19 guidelines*

Brandix workers, including our members, report that in September 2020, immediately before the COVID-19 outbreak, Brandix:

- Scolded, criticized, and did not listen to workers who reported COVID-19 symptoms to management and asked to quarantine;
- Ordered workers who reported COVID-19 symptoms to continue to come to work;
- Eliminated COVID-19 precautions like physical barriers in its cafeteria;
- Hosted a party for all 1400 workers at the factory without COVID-19 protocols in place;
- Neglected to take steps to facilitate or promote social distancing at hostels.

*At the Six Month Anniversary, Unions Demand Accountability for Serious Industrial Health and Safety Disaster.*

Six months later, neither Brandix nor the Sri Lankan government have not provided any public results from the investigations they each promised. Six months is too long to wait for Brandix to take responsibility for its role in this outbreak that could have been avoided if Sri Lanka's Ministry of Health's COVID guidelines had been followed.

*Unions Urge Workers' Rights Protections as part of World Bank Investment at Brandix*

In late March, FTZ unions made a submission about the outbreak including testimony from our members, to the International Finance Corporation, a part of the World Bank Group.

IFC is currently [considering](#) a USD \$50 million loan to Brandix. As part of its application, Brandix had to submit an [environmental and social](#) plan that includes protection for freedom of association and health and safety. In the FTZ unions' submission, we have made clear to the IFC that Brandix's existing plan for protecting workers' rights is not adequate.

We are concerned not only with workplace health and safety but also with freedom of association because workers' inability to escalate grievances regarding COVID-19 protocol violations directly contributed to the Brandix COVID-19 outbreak, raising serious questions about Brandix management's interference with fundamental rights enshrined in ILO C87 and C98.

The IFC has responded that they appreciate hearing our concerns and are taking them seriously in evaluating this loan; its initial projected date for the Board to discuss this loan has been postponed. GLJ-ILRF has supported these unions to engage with the IFC and jointly filed the complaint.

The submission requests that the IFC ensure that in its loan to Brandix that workers' rights are fully respected. FTZ unions are asking the IFC to:

- Highlight and take care of the specific impact of this outbreak on women workers;
- Engage in substantive and good faith consultations with all the signed unions and workers' organizations jointly;
- Revise its Environmental & Social Action Plan for the loan to ensure workplace health and safety and freedom of association in compliance with the [IFC's Performance Standard 2](#) on labor rights.

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