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BIG FASHION & WALL STREET CASH IN ON WAGE THEFT

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In Spring 2020, at the height of the first lockdowns and economic upheaval around the globe from COVID-19, the Knight family, [the largest shareholder in Nike](#), Inc., the world's second largest fashion company, paid [themselves](#) \$74 million in [dividends](#) on their Nike, Inc. stock, adding to a [\\$45 billion net worth](#) that makes them the 25th wealthiest family in the world at time of writing.

At the same time, Diah,¹ who prints the famous Nike swoosh onto hundreds of gloves a day in an Indonesian factory in Nike's supply chain, saw her hours and salary cut in half in Spring 2020, throwing her family into a financial crisis. Nike has 1.2 million [workers](#) in its supply chain, and seven in ten are women. Working in Nike's supply chain, Diah could no longer afford meat or fish as she struggled to make ends meet for her family. She worried about the possibility of appearing ill at work, because her factory management might require her to take a COVID swab test, which would have cost Diah half her monthly income at the time.

Diah was just one of the millions of garment workers in the Global South who lost their paychecks en masse in Spring 2020. Already working for wages barely above the poverty line, these workers [were laid off by the hundreds of thousands from factories](#) that [supply Nike and other Big Fashion companies](#) and faced wage theft at an unprecedented scale, from illegal layoffs and terminations to arbitrary pay cuts, unpaid wages for hours worked, and gender discrimination. Big fashion companies including Nike triggered this crisis when they canceled or drastically reduced orders en masse in response to economic uncertainty during the initial months of the COVID pandemic. According to Asia Floor Wage Alliance's (AFWA) 2021 report [Money Heist](#), which reported findings from its 2020 survey of over 2000 garment workers, Big Fashion's factory workers lost roughly three months' pay on average during the first year of the pandemic. The impact on workers, families and communities that produce products for the global giants was profound.

Yet a year into the pandemic in 2021, as garment workers struggled to survive, Nike announced it had made the [largest profits in its history](#). Nike continues to thrive — as recently as December 2022, the corporate giant enjoyed its [best quarterly revenue growth in a decade](#). Nike is not alone. In the fashion industry, 20 giant corporations [generate 98% of the industry's economic value](#), hence the name "Big Fashion." Big Fashion is making its [highest profits in over a decade](#). As we approach the pandemic's three-year mark, Big Fashion has more than recovered from COVID, while workers on their supply chains are still reeling from the impacts.

In 2022, AFWA, [an alliance of garment sector trade unions in South and Southeast Asia](#), revisited factories from its 2020 survey to see if garment

¹ Diah's name has been anonymized to protect against retaliation. She is a member of an AFWA-affiliated union in Indonesia.

workers have shared in Big Fashion's pandemic recovery. They have not. Instead, the AFWA found that workers have been stuck in an ongoing crisis that keeps getting worse:

- **Nine in ten** revisited factories have not resolved workers' COVID wage claims from 2020, representing \$71 million;
- **Most** revisited factories have new and ongoing wage violations since 2020:
 - **More than half** (22 of 41 factories) are not paying workers owed overtime;
 - **One in five factories** (8 of 41 factories) are not paying workers minimum wages or owed benefits.

These wage claims are likely just the tip of the iceberg, representing a small portion of the expansive supply chains that produce clothing for Nike, and other companies like Levi Strauss & Co. (aka Levi's) and VF Corporation (aka VF), which owns North Face, Supreme, Vans, Timberland, SmartWool and more. In Big Fashion, widespread wage and hour violations have been called an "[open secret](#)", with Big Fashion companies contributing to the theft by [squeezing](#) down labor costs at the factories in their supply chain.

Table 1: COVID wage claims vs. Big Fashion dividends and buybacks

	COVID wage claims at AFWA surveyed factories, 2020 (USD)	Big Fashion dividends paid to billionaire family owners, Spring 2020 (USD)	Big Fashion stock buyback authorizations, as of January 2023 (USD)
Levi's	\$12.2 million	\$19.7 million	\$750 million
Nike	\$9.3 million	\$74 million	\$18 billion
VF	\$2.5 million	\$34.4 million	\$7 billion²

But Nike's pandemic profits have gone straight to Wall Street and billionaire fashion company owners – not to workers who are waiting to be paid back for wage theft. Nike did not only enrich investors through traditional dividends, but by Spring 2021, a year after the start of the pandemic, Nike [spent \\$650 million towards its \\$15 billion stock buyback program](#), a legal form of stock manipulation that is widely considered [bad for the economy](#) and [for workers](#). Nike [authorized](#) a new \$18 billion stock buyback program in 2022.

Nike is just one example. In this report, *Big Fashion and Wall Street Cash In on Wage Theft*, Global Labor Justice-International Labor Rights Forum (GLJ-ILRF) and the Asia Floor Wage Alliance (AFWA) detail the choice made by Big Fashion – and particularly Nike, Levi's and VF – to use the COVID-19 crisis and recovery to enrich investors and billionaire family company owners, while leaving

² VF, *VF Corporation Introduces Fiscal Year 2027 Long-Term Strategic Plan and Financial Targets with Revised Outlook for Fiscal Year 2023*, <https://www.vfc.com/news/press-release/1796/vf-corporation-introduces-fiscal-year-2027-long-term>. Note VF projects \$7 billion in buybacks and dividends and disaggregated figures are unavailable.

[hundreds of thousands of garment workers in financial ruin](#). This was *a choice*. As shown in Table 1, with a portion of just their payouts to billionaire family owners and to investors via buybacks, several of Big Fashion's giants could have paid workers back for wage claims in their supplying factories many times over.

AFWA with affiliate garment worker unions have joined forces with GLJ-ILRF and other international allies to demand that Big Fashion companies:

- **Sit down with garment workers and their unions for a systematic investigation of COVID wage claims, including specific impacts on women workers.**
- **Stop billionaire payouts from dividends and stock buybacks until all garment workers are repaid their lost wages.**
- **Transform their global supply chains to provide living wages for all workers.**

ORIGINAL “MONEY HEIST” CONTINUES DURING COVID RECOVERY

In 2021, AFWA released the findings of their 2020 [survey](#) of over 2000 garment workers in six countries — Bangladesh, Cambodia, India, Indonesia, Sri Lanka, and Pakistan — about the economic impact of Big Fashion's actions during COVID. At the 189 factories AFWA surveyed, workers lost at least an estimated \$164 million dollars in wages in 2020. In addition, the survey found that in 2020:³

- One in ten workers lost their job permanently. Eight in ten fired workers were not paid their severance benefits.
- Seven in ten workers were laid off.
- Seven in ten workers fell into poverty.
- Workers lost approximately three months of pay on average.
- Workers' debt doubled to \$420, roughly two to three months of pay.
- Three in five workers went into debt to pay for food.
- One in five workers went into debt to pay for rent.
- Workers who returned to work earned a quarter less than before COVID.
- Seven in ten workers who returned to work were not paid overtime rates for overtime worked.
- Women garment workers made 82% of what male coworkers earned – an increasing gender pay gap compared to earning 88% of male coworkers' pay before COVID.
- Workers with temporary contracts lost more wages than workers with permanent jobs.

At the end of 2022, AFWA returned to 41 factories in their original 2020 survey to learn about the situation of workers two years later. Between August and November 2022, AFWA and its trade union partners conducted site visits and worker interviews to understand whether workers' wage claims were resolved

³ Figures are calculated from original raw data from *Money Heist*, on file with authors.

and if factories were continuing to violate local laws and deny workers their wages. AFWA also spoke to unions and workers about their efforts to get remedy for wage violations at a local level.

At the revisited factories, workers' reports to AFWA show (Table 2):

- Nine in ten factories have not resolved workers' wage claims from 2020;
- More than half of factories are not paying workers owed overtime, beginning in 2020 onward;
- One in five factories are not paying workers minimum wages or owed benefits.

Table 2: Reviewed factories in 2022

	Reviewed factories	COVID wage claims unresolved	New overtime violations	New minimum wage or benefits violations
Cambodia	5	5	0	0
India	10	9	4	4
Indonesia	8	8	0	3
Pakistan	15	13	15	2
Sri Lanka	3	3	3	0
TOTAL	41	38	22	9

Despite our data showing the vast majority of wage claims remain unresolved, workers have been organizing to fight back. The original AFWA survey showed one in five workers were part of mutual aid programs for food and rent coordinated by their trade unions during COVID. Now unions' efforts are focused on legal claims, challenging non-payment of wages during COVID. Their resistance has been especially powerful given [anti-union retaliation](#) against workers [during COVID](#) at several of Big Fashion's supply chain factories.

Table 3: Revisited COVID wage claims as of 2022

	Surveyed Factories (2020) ⁴	COVID wage claims at 2020 surveyed factories (USD)	Reviewed factories	COVID wage claims at 2022 reviewed factories still unpaid (USD)
Bangladesh	21	\$455,000	0	NA
Cambodia	20	\$12.7 million	5	\$5 million
India	33	\$65.3 million	10	\$37.1 million
Indonesia	22	\$11.3 million	8	\$2.9 million
Pakistan	40	\$65.1 million	15	\$20 million
Sri Lanka	9	\$9.2 million	3	\$6.5 million
TOTAL	124 factories	\$164 million	41	\$71.1 million

⁴ From original raw data from *Money Heist*, on file with authors. Table reflects factories verified via [Open Supply Hub](#) and companies' own public factory lists, among total 189 factories surveyed.

But while unions have made important progress factory-by-factory fighting uphill against fashion goliaths' suppliers, the unresolved claims show that the scope of wage losses can only be addressed by the fashion companies at the top of these supply chains. AFWA's 2020 survey reached a small but significant sample of the factories supplying major fashion companies in six Asian countries. Taking data collected as representative of a likely overall trend, the total potential COVID wage claims for Nike, Levi's and North Face parent company VF Corporation in just the six surveyed countries could be hundreds of millions of dollars. This estimate, based on the total number of factories in each company's supply chain as shown in Table 4, represents life-changing pay cuts for hundreds of thousands of low-income garment workers and their families.

Table 4: COVID wage claims by fashion company

	No. surveyed factories (2020) in supply chain	COVID wage claims at surveyed factories (2020) (USD)	Ave. wage claims per factory in supply chain in six countries (USD)	No. company reported factories in surveyed countries ⁵
Levi's	8	\$12.2 million	\$1.25 million	156
Nike	9	\$9.3 million	\$1.03 million	93
VF	4	\$2.5 million	\$625,000	218

Big Fashion companies can pay these wage claims back, having made an incredible, profitable recovery. By March 2022, Levi's, the [world's largest jeans company](#), had its highest revenues [in over two decades](#). In December 2020, VF Corporation spent \$2.1 billion on [acquiring](#) viral streetwear brand Supreme. Despite ongoing challenges in the sector, many companies have come out stronger from the COVID pandemic. As Nike's CEO [said](#) to investors in September 2020, "We can thrive in this environment." Nike may have thrived, but the data shows garment workers did not.

WORKERS SPEAK OUT

The financial crisis for Big Fashion's garment workers in the Global South did not begin in 2020. Supply chain factories have paid sub-poverty and even subminimum wages for generations. And while brands like Nike, VF and Levi's may not count these workers as employees, their cheap labor produces Big Fashion's clothing and profits.

Garment workers spend long hours in factories cutting, spinning and sewing under the enormous pressure of production quotas, just to earn the wages that

⁵ See supplier lists for [Levi's](#), [Nike](#), and [VF](#).

they need to live — and when they are cheated out of fair pay, the impacts are devastating for them and for their families.

Netra and Diah, working in Nike's supply chain in Indonesia

Netra⁶ has worked for five years in an Indonesian factory where she sews more than two thousand pieces of Nike apparel each day and earns a monthly salary of roughly \$270 USD. Like many of her coworkers, Netra migrated from a small village in central Java to the capital Jakarta, where she moved in with her aunt and found work in one of hundreds of garment factories in the area. At first, Netra began to earn enough to send home and support her mother and two older siblings. Her family made plans to add a room to their home so not all family members would have to sleep together.

Then the pandemic began, and Netra's factory rotated workers in two-week periods to reduce personnel as fashion companies cut their orders. She earned roughly half of her usual monthly income from April through August of 2020. Even when her hours returned to normal, pay came late for months more. The plans to fix the family home came to a halt, and Netra struggled to send enough back just to keep her brother in school. Netra's meager savings evaporated, and more than two years later she has not been able to build it back.

Diah, introduced at the beginning of this report, who works at the same Indonesian Nike-sourcing factory, stamps the famous "swoosh" logo onto pairs of gloves. She recalls how her family's eating habits changed as her income was slashed toward the beginning of the pandemic. They cut meat, chicken and fish from their diet and could only afford vegetables and eggs. Before COVID, Diah had managed to send a full half of her salary to her hometown to support her parents. She did everything she could to continue that support, keeping only what she needed for food and transportation to and from the factory. Diah had dreamed of saving up to eventually open a small coffee shop, but her savings disappeared completely in 2020.

Netra and Diah agreed that the employer ignored workers' needs throughout the pandemic, offering nothing but hand sanitizer and temperature checks. Workers also had to buy their own face masks. When she felt ill, Diah was desperate not to look pale and to avoid coughing at work, terrified she would be forced to take a swab test – tests that the factory required but that workers had to pay for themselves. One test would have cost Diah half of her monthly salary in those most difficult months of 2020.

Netra and Diah have common stories as women workers and internal migrants who try to use low garment factory wages to cover their own and distant

⁶ Netra's name has been anonymized to protect against retaliation. She is a member of an AFWA-affiliated union in Indonesia.

families' necessities. They both describe stretching low wages to get by when pay and working hours were "normal," but sinking into financial crisis as soon as the pandemic interrupted normal operations – a crisis from which they have not recovered nearly three years later.

Arham, working in Levi's supply chain in Pakistan

In Lahore, Pakistan, Arham⁷ has worked for seven years as an assistant supervisor in a factory that supplies Levi Strauss & Co. Before the pandemic, his salary was just barely enough to support his family of seven, especially as his daily commute cost a full 20% of his paycheck. However, he was pleased to be able to pay to put his children in private schools.

When the pandemic began, and the government imposed a two-month lockdown, half of Arham's coworkers were laid off without pay while the other half remained at the factory. The bonuses that made up a significant part of workers' regular income, and money from a "workers profit participation fund," disappeared for those who kept working. Arham borrowed money and had trouble providing meals to his family. Even after the lockdowns ended and the Pakistani government offered tax relief to the garment industry, Arham's factory cited decreased orders to cut salaries in December 2020 by 20-25%, making the crisis permanent for workers.

More than two years later, Arham and his family remain in debt. They have adjusted their lives to accommodate the decreased income, including moving their children out of their private schools.

Dilhani, working in Nike's supply chain in Sri Lanka

In Sri Lanka, Dilhani worked for six years in a factory that sources Nike, piecing together enough income together with her husband to care for their three children. COVID did not slow down Dilhani's factory – the orders continued and production targets increased at the same time that more people missed work due to the pandemic. Even as they worked harder than before, Dilhani and her coworkers found their pay reduced. One month they only received half of their salaries. They were not paid for many hours of forced overtime. Meanwhile, food became scarce and more expensive.

As a representative on the factory's employee council, Dilhani had always been one of the voices who spoke up about workplace issues. And she did so again in 2020 and 2021, advocating repeatedly for repayment of the subminimum wages and unpaid overtime. Instead of listening to her demands, the company called Dilhani into a room in August of 2021. They showed her a resignation letter to sign and refused to let her leave. They held her for four hours, denying her access to her belongings or a washroom. In the end, she agreed to sign. Since this incident, Dilhani has fallen into a cycle of debt and sells fruit by the

⁷ Arham's name has been anonymized to protect against retaliation. He is a member of an AFWA-affiliated union in Pakistan.

roadside to try to make ends meet as she pursues her case for justice at the factory.

These four workers are just a tiny sample of the millions of garment workers in the region whose financial stability collapsed due to pandemic wage theft and wage losses. Worse yet, by the beginning of 2023, none of these workers had recovered. The Big Fashion companies that profit from their labor, on the other hand, have recovered and thrived – but they have *chosen* not to address the massive claims of these workers, instead helping their wealthiest investors amass larger and larger fortunes.

AT PEAK CRISIS, BIG FASHION COMPANIES GIVE BILLIONAIRES WINDFALL WHILE ABANDONING WORKERS

In April and May 2020, as millions of garment workers in Big Fashion supply chains were locked down and being laid off or fired *en masse*, Big Fashion gave its billionaire owners a windfall — while workers got nothing. As shown in Table 5, March 2020 *alone* the Barbey family, owner of VF Corporation, raked in \$32.4 million in dividends. In April 2020 *alone* the Haas family, owner of Levi's, paid [themselves](#) \$19.7 million in dividends. In March and May 2020, the Knight family, which controls Nike, paid [themselves](#) \$74 million in [dividends](#), as mentioned in the introduction of this report.

Table 5: Fashion billionaire dividends, Spring 2020

	Family	Total shares as of Spring 2020	Dividend	Total payout, Spring 2020
Levi's	Haas family ⁸	246,628,690⁹	\$.08 <u>per share in April 2020</u>	\$19,730,295
Nike	Knight family ¹⁰	151,207,399¹¹	\$.245 per share in March and May 2020 (\$.49 total)	\$74,091,265
VF	Barbey family ¹²	67,529,185¹³	\$0.48 <u>per share in March 2020</u>	\$32,414,008

Big Fashion profits a few dynastic families like these that have inherited wealth for decades or centuries since the corporate founding of their family's

⁸ Members holding Class B stock and more than 5% of total shares, who are: Mimi Haas, Margaret Haas, Robert Haas, Peter Haas Jr., Peter Haas Jr. Family Fund, Daniel Haas, Jennifer Haas. Members and stock holdings [as of February 14, 2020](#).

⁹ Total shares held by the Haas family as per above, as of February 14, 2020.

¹⁰ Phillip K. Knight and Travis A. Knight 2009 Irrevocable Trust II.

¹¹ Held by Knight family as of [May 31, 2020](#).

¹² Barbey Family Trust and Todd Barbey.

¹³ Barbey Family Trust held 39,670,165 and Todd Barbey held 27,859,020 shares [as of May 29, 2020](#).

company. The [billionaire Haas family](#) has been living off inherited wealth for over 150 years from Levi Strauss & Co, which they control. The Knight family, which has owned Nike since Phil Knight founded the company fifty years ago, is worth \$45 billion, making them the 25th wealthiest family in the world. The \$7.3 billion dollar Barbey family is the [50th wealthiest family in America at time of writing](#) from over a century of inherited wealth from the founding of what is now VF Corporation.

The payouts during the worst moment of pandemic lockdowns in Spring 2020 are only the beginning of the story of Big Fashion companies creating windfalls for ownership families and wealthy investors while neglecting workers. In October 2020, Mimi Haas cashed in a chunk of her Levi's [stock](#) for \$7.8 million. In the first year of the pandemic, Phil Knight's net worth [increased](#) \$20.4 billion. In Fiscal Year 2020 and 2021, Nike [spent](#) a total of \$3.1 billion on dividends, which would have returned several million more back to the Knight family.

These families have spent their pandemic windfalls to further enrich themselves. In 2022, Levi's Mimi Haas spent \$100,000 to [defeat](#) a proposal that would mitigate climate change but raise her taxes. In 2021, Levi's heir Daniel Lurie (stepson of Mimi Haas) bought a [\\$15 million dollar house](#) in San Francisco. Nike's Phil Knight [spent over \\$7 million](#) to unsuccessfully influence the Oregon governor's race towards a pro-corporate candidate. The Barbey Family's widely [publicized](#) and [influential](#) donations of \$20 million through their charitable trust was a fraction of what they earned during the pandemic through dividends, while workers in VF's supply chain waited to be paid for hours they worked making VF products.

SINCE PANDEMIC, BIG FASHION COMMITS BILLIONS TO SHARE BUYBACKS FOR WALL STREET

Wall Street also cashed out on their holdings of Big Fashion during COVID through share buybacks.

Share buybacks contribute to an economy that works for Wall Street instead of working people. Corporations use [stock buybacks](#) to inflate their share prices, making millions for shareholders by repurchasing their own stock, cutting the number of shares that represent the total value of the company and therefore making each share worth more. Wall Street benefits from buybacks in large part because big Wall Street firms Blackrock, State Street and Vanguard — known as the [Big Three](#)— have a controlling stake in companies and drive buybacks. The substantial corporate profits of Big Fashion could be used as reinvestment, including for increased production or living wages for workers throughout supply chains. Instead, corporations are extracting wealth from companies and from their workers to create shareholder value for the already

powerful and wealthy: an increasingly consolidated group of dominant investors.

While most Big Fashion companies temporarily paused their buybacks in 2020, Nike and Levi's not only restarted but increased their share buyback programs by 2022. [Nike](#) authorized a new \$18 billion dollar buyback program (\$3 billion more than before), [Levi's](#) approved a \$750 million share repurchase program (\$650 million more than [before](#)). VF Corporation [reinstated](#) its existing share buyback program in 2021, and [projects](#) spending \$7 billion on share repurchases and dividends in the next four years. Big Three Wall Street firms own an average of 15% of these companies and a comparable percentage of much of the industry.

We compared Big Fashion's current share buyback authorizations to COVID wage claims in their supply chains. With their current share buybacks authorizations, Big Fashion companies can pay back the workers in the factories that AFWA surveyed on average more than a thousand times over. As a particularly extreme example, Nike could pay back workers in these factories almost two thousand times.

Garment workers are among workers around the world who are fighting back against buybacks that keep them from getting a fair share and decent wages. In the United States, [fast food workers](#), [coal miners](#), [airline workers](#) and [retail workers](#) are taking on major corporations including McDonalds and Walmart to demand an end to buybacks. Airline workers are demanding airlines — who have ongoing operational crises and unmet worker demands — commit to “No Stock Buybacks” moving forward, after the US government required a pause on buybacks as a condition of COVID relief, thanks in part to pressure from labor. Workers at Warrior Met Coal who have been on [strike](#) for over a year are challenging buybacks by the company that have enriched its largest shareholder Blackrock. [Studies](#) show that if McDonald's and Starbucks had redirected the money they spent on buybacks to workers instead, they could have paid their several million workers \$4,000 more and \$7,000 more, respectively.

Nike, Levi's, and VF Corporation all celebrated spending billions on Wall Street, describing share repurchases as a recognition of generating “shareholder value” — but what about the workers who make any value possible? While billionaire families and their Wall Street allies raked in millions during COVID, is anyone in Big Fashion making sure workers and their families stayed afloat?

WORKERS VS. BIG FASHION: FIGHTING BACK

The data from AFWA's *Money Heist* report and its most recent revisiting of factories, together with the high levels of dividends and stock buybacks since the beginning of the COVID pandemic, tell a clear and infuriating story. Big Fashion companies like Nike, Levi's and VF used the COVID-19 pandemic to facilitate an enormous extraction of wealth from hundreds of thousands of low-wage Asian garment workers to a few of the world's richest fashion heirs and investment firms.

Workers who create the clothing and fortunes of Big Fashion's most recognizable brands deserve living wages and clear protections to assure that they are not fleeced again in future global crises. For that reason, workers are coming together across borders and employers to demand direct bargaining with Big Fashion companies. They are demanding systemic investigations of all COVID wage claims, an end to billionaire payouts from dividends and stock buybacks until all garment workers are repaid their lost wages, and a new partnership between garment worker unions and fashion companies to create fair supply chains with living wages.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



Asia Floor Wage Alliance (AFWA) The Asia Floor Wage Alliance (AFWA) is an Asian labor-led global labor and social alliance across garment-producing countries in Asia and consumer regions of USA and Europe. Founded in 2007, AFWA aims to build regional unity among Asian garment unions to overcome the limitations of country-based struggles in global production networks and holds global fashion brands accountable. AFWA's historic cross-border living wage formulation for Asian garment workers is also the only women-centered formulation of its kind. For more information, please contact AFWA at contact@asia.floorwage.org.



Global Labor Justice – International Labor Rights Forum (GLJ – ILRF) is a new merged organization bringing strategic capacity to cross-sectoral work on global value chains and labor migration corridors. GLJ-ILRF holds global corporations accountable for labor rights violations in their supply chains; advances policies and laws that protect decent work and just migration; and strengthens freedom of association, new forms of bargaining, and worker organizations. For more information, please contact Noah Dobin-Bernstein, GLJ-ILRF at noah@globallaborjustice.org.

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