

Sri Lanka: Apparel sector signs historic MoU with trade unions

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Sri Lanka's apparel sector and key industry trade unions signed a historic agreement that ensures business owners and employees work together to maintain continued vigilance on pandemic prevention, discuss issues of mutual interest and jointly participate in addressing grievances.

In a key milestone in the industry's efforts to continuously elevate its human resource practices and safeguard employees from the COVID-19 pandemic, a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) was signed between the Joint Apparel Association Forum Sri Lanka (JAAF) and the Union Collective.

JAAF is the apex body of Sri Lanka's apparel industry while the Union Collective comprises of three of the sector's most prominent trade unions; Free Trade Zones & General Services Employees Union, Sri Lanka Nidahas Sewaka Sangamaya and the National Union of Seafarers.

According to the MoU, trade unions will be represented in the Bipartite Health Committees established in each apparel factory. These committees ensure that guidelines issued by the Ministry of Health are strictly adhered to at each production plant.

In addition, JAAF and the unions will establish a Bipartite Dispute Resolution Mechanism to collaboratively address worker grievances in a transparent manner. Any grievance raised by the unions will be forwarded to the Executive Committee of JAAF and the Trade Union Collective for review.

JAAF and the respective union will discuss every valid complaint and resolve the issue in a period of one month, unless it is mutually agreed to extend that timeline.

The MoU also recognises employees' freedom of association and their rights to collective bargaining.

In another landmark move, JAAF and the Union Collective signed a second agreement, which lays out how employers and the unions will collaborate to assess and coordinate their efforts to manage the negative impact of the pandemic on all stakeholders, cooperating as partners to address identified issues and challenges the pandemic may create.

"Collaborations between the employers and trade unions have been critical in elevating Sri Lanka's human resource practices above many of its peers in the sector and in ensuring business continuity following the pandemic," JAAF Secretary General Tuli Cooray said.

"The protection of employees and their wellbeing is a foremost priority of both the industry and the trade unions; our interests are strongly aligned. These agreements will formalise our cooperation and lay the foundation for further collaboration, thus benefiting our employees."

“The organisations which form the Union Collective have demonstrated their strong and enduring commitment to health, wellbeing and upholding the rights of apparel sector employees,” said Sri Lanka Nidahas Sewaka Sangamaya General Secretary Leslie Devendra.

“We welcome this agreement, which paves the way for employees to be represented in the decision-making process in matters of vital importance to them and increases transparency in the handling of grievances. We look forward to collaborating with employers in this regard.”

The partnership complements the ‘Better Work’ program, of which JAAF is a partner. The program is a collaborative effort between the International Labour Organisation (ILO) and the International Finance Corporation (IFC), with support from Government partners, employers and trade unions.

It contributes to addressing issues related to the improvement of economic performance and competitiveness of enterprises, covering gender dynamics, workplace cooperation through Occupational Safety and Health (OSH) and advancing common interests, especially the emerging challenges stemming from the pandemic.

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