

CRO

COUNTRY PROFILE

# CROATIA



## CREDITS

# Clean Clothes Campaign



### **PUBLISHER:**

Novi sindikat  
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Clean Clothes Campaign  
[www.cleanclothes.org](http://www.cleanclothes.org)

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### **PRINT:**

Kerschoffset

### **PRINT RUN:**

500

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This country profile is based on an analysis of clothing industry data accessed through official sources, as well as on field research. The research and the production of the brochure were funded by an EU DEAR grant “Fashioning a Just Transition” and conducted under Novi sindikat’s leadership. From June 2024 to June 2025 we have conducted 25 interviews with workers from 11 factories – outside of their workplace – as well as 51 online interviews.

Quotes used in this document were not given by the workers shown in the photographs. Moreover, they are in no way related to the workers we spoke to during our research.



Co-funded by  
the European Union

## COUNTRY PROFILE

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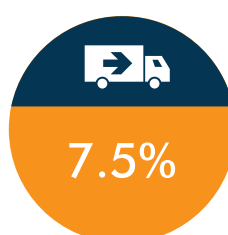
Population<sup>1</sup>



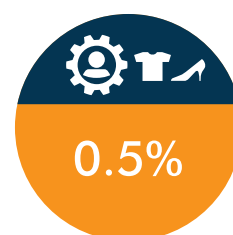
Registered companies and small businesses<sup>2</sup>



Number of employees in the textile, clothing and leather industry<sup>3</sup>



Share of the textile, clothing and leather industry in overall export<sup>4</sup>



Share of the textile, clothing and leather industry in GDP<sup>5</sup>

## WAGE LADDER



<sup>1</sup> Croatian Bureau of Statistics (DZS), Census of Population 2021: <https://dzs.gov.hr/vijesti/objavljeni-konacni-rezultati-popisa-2021/1270>

<sup>2</sup> DZS, Annual Gross Domestic Product, 1995 – 2022, Revised Data: <https://podaci.dzs.hr/2023/en/58254>

<sup>3</sup> DZS, Employment statistics

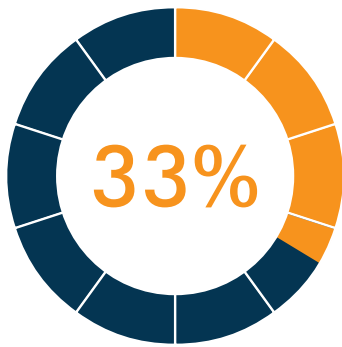
<sup>4</sup> DZS, Statistics in line: <https://podaci.dzs.hr/media/4snl4v1e/zaposlenost-administrativni-izvori.xlsx>

<sup>5</sup> DZS, Foreign Trade in Goods of the Republic of Croatia, 2024: <https://podaci.dzs.hr/media/icieduuz/vt-2025-1-2-foreign-trade-in-goods-of-the-republic-of-croatia-2024.pdf>

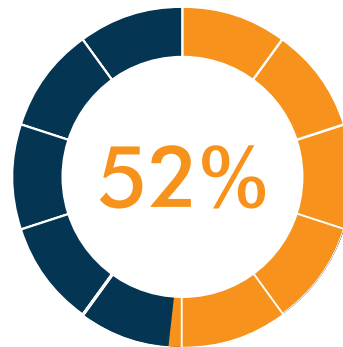
<sup>6</sup> DZS: <https://dzs.gov.hr/vijesti/prosjecna-neto-placa-za-travanj-2025-iznosila-1-439-eura/2260>

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> DZS, Income and Living Conditions Survey (EU SILC) for 2024: [https://dzs.gov.hr/UserDocImages/dokumenti/Quality%20report/ADS\\_2024\\_eng\\_12.06..pdf](https://dzs.gov.hr/UserDocImages/dokumenti/Quality%20report/ADS_2024_eng_12.06..pdf)



Share of interviewed workers' net wage in living wage



Share of interviewed workers' net wage in the poverty line

## THE CROATIAN TEXTILE INDUSTRY TODAY

From a once wealthy local industry that had its own production of raw material and finished products, the Croatian textile industry has become a sector whose survival of ten depends on foreign contractors.

The transformation and privatisation process of the 1990s brought in big changes. Independent production was gradually replaced by lower paid, post-production work, while the import of cheap fabrics continuously grew. At the same time, the local industry became increasingly dependent on foreign fashion companies (brands) that paid a pittance, and when their expenses grew, they moved their production into even cheaper countries.

All of this has resulted in a decrease in the number of workers, company shutdowns and the gradual collapse of the textile industry – a once strong economic backbone, and now a sector at the brink of extinction.

Today, the local industry consists of 1019 smaller subcontracting companies and 1276 small business that mostly produce for the local market. The three currently largest factories belong to the Italian Calzedonia Group, which employs around 2000 workers. Aside from them, there are 15 other factories employing between 100 and 400 workers, while all of the others only employ tens of workers.

According to figures from July 2025, the textile, clothes, leathers and related products industry employs a little over 16 000 workers. By way of comparison, it employed 51 000 workers in January of 2000.

Factories are still closing down. The last wave of plant shutdowns was induced by the COVID-19 pandemic, which some companies took advantage of as an opportunity to leave the country. The

### FOREIGN FASHION BRANDS IN CROATIAN FACTORIES\*

Benetton, Calzedonia, Marc Cain, Intimissimi, Wolford, L'Oreal, Hanro, Antonio Marras, Roberto Cavalli, Hugo Boss, Gimo's, Mercedes, BMW, Volvo, Rover, Salomon, Exenne, Solidus, Rosenbauer.

\*According to worker statements and internet searches

German brand Olymp abruptly ended its 50-year collaboration with the Orłjava company, a symbol of textile in the city of Požega. In August 2021, Orłjava was liquidated and the workers, who had spent decades sewing button-down shirts for the German market, lost their jobs overnight.

The shutdowns continued in the years that followed. The Benetton branch in the city of Osijek ceased operations at the beginning of 2025, causing 300 workers to lose their jobs. Benetton's subcontractor Leonarda, from the city of Daruvar, closed down even earlier, in September 2024, leaving around 30 workers to fight for unpaid severance pay.

At the end of 2024, several more big names were liquidated: Varteks from the city of Varaždin, sock manufacturer Jadran, and Zlatna igla – Siscia, a garment factory in the city of Sisak. Varteks – once the pride of Varaždin that employed several thousands of people in the past, and 700 last year – has now been reduced to about a hundred workers. Additionally, Kotka and Krateks from the city of Čakovec drastically reduced the number of their employees. We also suspect that a series of smaller factories was shutdown without a single shot fired.

Today, over half of the employees in the industry are over 45 years of age, and women make up 79 per cent of the work force. The face of the average employee in the Croatian textile industry today is the face of a woman in her middle to elderly age, with decades of work behind her and an unpredictable future and restless retirement in front of her.

Through our field research, we studied the conditions they work in, the things that drive them and how they live in spite of it all.



*"Went deaf, went blind, went incapacitated, my back's gone, my arms and shoulders hurt."*

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## FIELD RESEARCH

We spoke directly with the textile workers to learn more about the working conditions in Croatia and compare the situation to how it was in 2019, when we conducted our first research into this industry. Workers from 11 factories shared their experiences in 25 in-depth interviews. We covered six counties: Bjelovarsko-bilogorska, Osječko-baranjska, Požeško-slavonska, Međimurska, Splitsko-Dalmatinska and Varaždinska. We also collected testimonials via an online survey we conducted from March to May, which was filled out by 51 people from 30 different textile factories and small businesses. The study has an additional dimension – the working conditions of foreign workers employed in a factory in the Međimurje region. That case study shows how the structure of the textile industry workforce is changing and how employers are treating foreign workers.

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## THE FACE OF A TEXTILE WORKER

She is over 40 years old, she is married and has two adult children. One still lives with her. Grandma and grandpa, her husband's parents, also live in the household and are in need of daily help and care.

Her day begins early in the morning. After her factory work, she arrives home to cook, work in the house or around it, work in the garden and take care of the livestock, and sometimes to do it all at the same time. She has no time to rest, no time for herself – on average, that is what life looks like for a textile worker with 20 years of experience in the industry.

Sewing, tailoring, ironing, working with special machines like the linking machine (used for linking separate knitted pieces into knitwear), post-production tasks like sorting and packaging, quality control – these are the most common workplaces our interview participants worked in.

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## AT THE PLANT

Uncomfortable wooden chairs, old, noisy machines, confined and stuffy workspaces, heavy air due to dust and humidity, poor ventilation, weak heating that gets turned off during the shift, working in intense heat in the summer due to inadequate air conditioning – these are the conditions the workers describe experiencing at the plants.

Most of them complained of back, arm and leg pains that get stronger when they sit in an uncomfortable position or stand for a long time. Cuts, pierced nails or weakness and feebleness due to heat and fatigue are not uncommon. Textile industry jobs require the workers to repeat the same actions for hours on end, resulting in all workers experiencing similar health issues. But, these issues could be alleviated by more frequent breaks for stretching and resting the eyes, changes in the workplace so the working position could change as well, machine modernization, regular health checks, longer holidays etc.

However, we are currently still at the level of slave labor, with no humanity. Some of the workers stated that their production managers scolded them for going to the restroom too often, that they were not allowed to go when the CEO was coming, and that they kept themselves from going to the restroom because they felt the pressure to work faster and produce more to fill the daily norm.

Due to the difficult working conditions and their age, many of the workers need sick leave more often. But they encounter obstacles here as well: employers sometimes coerce them into not taking sick leave by refusing to pay their Christmas bonus or vacation allowance if they do. They also force them to use their vacation days instead of sick leave or they badger them when they return from sick leave. A third of the workers were offered bonus pay in exchange for not using their sick leave. This makes health a luxury – workers fear getting sick or they work while sick so they could make an additional euro or two that they need to live. Without rest, their health progressively deteriorates.

*“Women were told that they can’t eat at their work station because they will dirty up the clothes... As if they didn’t know how to take care of the clothes that they spend their whole day handling. Little by little, workers are humiliated by that kind of unpleasantness, and are made to question their worth.”*



## INSUFFICIENT PAY

Depending on the moment of research, the workers were receiving between 677 and 750 euro a month, i.e. pure minimum wage. Only a part of them received a Christmas bonus. When asked whether they received compensation for a warm meal or a vacation allowance, they just smirked. A third of the workers worked unpaid overtime hours. All of the respondents told us that their salaries were not enough to cover their basic living expenses, which is why they depend on income from other members of the household, or they themselves do all they can to make a little more money. If they are hit by an unexpected expense, they have to purchase things in installments or manage a way to borrow the money. When asked whether they had any ability to save money, the workers replied: “no way”, “we used to be able to save a little, but then the euro was introduced”, “ha-ha... there’s never enough” or “saving money isn’t worth it”.

According to the workers’ opinions, in order to live stress-free – without the constant pressure of strategizing when they could pay for what, or whether they could buy something or not – their monthly salary would have to amount to 1345 euro. That is a pretty modest amount for this day and age, which shows that they are used to a modest living. According to Novi sindikat’s figures, a living wage in 2025 should amount to 2025 euro – almost triple what they receive at the moment.



## WHAT WOULD YOU AFFORD YOURSELF IF YOUR SALARY WERE HIGHER?

*“I would help my child so they wouldn’t have to rent an apartment.”*

*“If I had a better salary, I could afford heating in my house.”*

*“I would love to go to the seaside because I’ve never been.”*

*“I would solve my housing issue, I’ve never been able to get a loan.”*

*“My kids didn’t have the conditions. We never went to the seaside. I don’t have a single memory with my children where we went to the seaside together or had dinner at a restaurant downtown. I wasn’t even able to give my son 10 euro to treat himself.”*

## WHAT WOULD YOU LIKE TO CHANGE IN YOUR WORKPLACE?

*“The salary.” / “The boss.” / “Working conditions – I wish supervisors were more humane.” / “The organization of labor.” / “The silencing.” / “Working conditions so we could be more comfortable... instead of people feeling unwell and fainting.” / “Reducing the norms.” / “Prolonging vacation days.” / “The behavior and approach of the managers.” / “For our work to start being appreciated.”*

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# WORKING CONDITIONS FOR FOREIGN WORKERS

Three female and one male worker from the Philippines are employed in a factory in Međimurje County that produces clothes for luxury brands like the German Marc Cain and the Austrian Woldorf. The factory also employs around 60 other workers from the Philippines.

The female workers work at sewing machines, and the male worker does manual labor in the cutting department. They are employed on a year-long, fixed-term contract, although they were promised two-year contracts before they arrived in Croatia. They signed the contracts, even though they did not understand what they said. They knew they had no choice – they had to start working to pay off the costs of travel from the Philippines and to start sending money to their families. They work for minimum wage, and in their first six months, their salary was deducted to cover the plane ticket from the Philippines to Croatia, which only left them with some 300 euro a month.

Their work week is 58 hours long – 10 hours a work day and eight on Saturdays. They do not receive pay for overtime work; instead, the employer counts it as “compensation” for their accommodation, which was supposed to be free of charge according to their agreement. This is why the workers have never refused overtime work. They had no choice there, either – if they get fired for refusing to work overtime, they immediately lose the roof over their heads as well. They were also coerced into maintaining their accommodation; they were told: “If something is messy, it will be deducted from your pay.” They live in the accommodation with a dozen other people.

The workers were not allowed to use their vacation days, which was justified by them being “newly employed”, or to use their sick leave, so they also worked while sick. They went to work on used bicycles, even in the rain and cold weather.

The workers cite low pay and high levels of stress as the worst factors. Aside from the exhausting working hours and the pressure to fill the norms, additional stress was caused by the employer taking away their passports. This move was presented to them as insurance for the employer, who thought it would make the workers stay where they wanted them to, at their workplace. With no travel documents, they could not leave the country, or move within it because they did not feel safe. It was only when they connected with local activists that their passports were returned, and they ended up filing a criminal complaint against the employer.

The workers say they would love for the public to know how foreign workers are being treated. They are tired from the work and it has left them traumatized. According to their statements, if they had better pay, they could afford a car and a better phone, and they would also like to be able to save more money and send more of it to their families in the Philippines.

Their story and the stories of Croatian workers show us that, behind every shirt, dress or pants sewn, there are people who deserve respect, fair conditions and the opportunity to live a dignified life from their work.



## INFLUENCE OF CLIMATE CHANGE ON TEXTILE WORKERS

*“On a monthly basis, I get four tons of clothes from my friends, and I go through a lot of trouble to forward them to those who need them. There are plenty of children’s clothes that have only been worn once or not at all. No one wants used clothes, even if it’s undamaged. I don’t want it to get thrown out because I consider the textile industry to be the biggest polluter.”*

*“Many things get covered up when Ministers of the environment come to certain companies. The air-polluting machines are usually off during that time.”*

The textile industry produces over 100 billion new pieces of clothing annually, while 92 tons of clothing end up in landfills each year. This excess production is leaving a deep mark on our planet, polluting the environment, air, ground and water, and contributing to ever more pronounced changes in the climate.

Each year, the summers are increasingly warmer and the winters increasingly milder and without snow. Extreme weather conditions such as sudden storms, floods, hail and drought are now almost routine. All of these changes are also felt by textile workers. They say that the heat brings them fatigue and headaches, which makes them slow down their work and makes coming to work more difficult.

At the plants, they face a series of problems related to climate change, but there is also a lack of investment into the factories themselves. Companies avoid it to keep the production costs as low as possible. For example, even though the roof in one of the factories was leaking, the workers were made to work. In another factory, the wind had lifted the roof from the building, and the heavy rain leaked through the windows so the workers had to put polystyrene foam on them.

In the summer, the issue is the inadequate air-conditioning – some of the units do not work long enough, and others blow too forcefully, so the workers freeze and catch a cold. Even though they work in great heat, many also do not drink enough water due to limited access to the restrooms. Nevertheless, the workers are still expected to work full throttle and fill the norms, even when their productivity is reduced due to the exhaustion and the heat.

Due to all these factors, the mode of production has got to change. Production must become more sustainable for the environment and fairer for the people who work in the industry. The climate crisis is not some distant threat – workers are facing its direct consequences. Still, the fashion brands they produce for, which dictate the clothing prices and consequently the working conditions, are doing nothing to improve the conditions in the factories their goods are made in.

And the workers do not ask for much...

“Cold drinking water.”

“Lemonade with sugar so I could prevent fainting.”

“A functional fan on every five to 10 workers.”

“Uncontaminated water that won’t give me aches in my stomach.”

The workers’ demands would only cost a fraction of the wealth the fashion companies make on their backs. It is time for brands to take responsibility – both for their workers, and the planet.

The solution lies in *just transition* – the process of moving to a sustainable economy with low greenhouse gas emissions, which will ensure that neither the workers nor the environment are neglected.

### JUST TRANSITION MUST ENSURE:

- Respect for workers’ rights
- Living wages
- Freedom of association

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# WORKERS ARE A UNION'S STRENGTH

Our research has shown that many workers face injustice on a daily basis, but they rarely get the chance to report it. A portion of the workers state that, when they have complaints, they turn to the management or their higher-ups, but for the most part they do not receive any kind of response. Up to 38 % of workers do not turn to anyone due to a fear of getting fired, pressure from their employers and the feeling of powerlessness.

In companies where there is a union, workers often express doubt in its work and describe it as inadequate – an organization that only exists “on paper”. Many think “there is no sense in joining because nothing changes either way”. Most workers do not know whether there are collective contracts, workers’ councils or representatives who are supposed to advocate for them. Strikes are almost non-existent, apart from the sparse and short rebellions like refusing to work on Saturdays.

Nevertheless, there are examples that show change is indeed possible. Novi sindikat, together with the workers and the support of international organizations, has fought its way to gaining severance pay for the workers of Orłjava. Today, it continues to exert pressure on the German brand Olymp in order for it to admit responsibility for the workers’ fates. That example clearly shows that courage and organizing can produce real results.

The strength of a union is not in its leadership, but the people who make it – the workers who decide to stand by one another. The union is not “them”, the union is you, the workers.

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FASHION BRANDS

- Instead of moving into countries with cheaper labor, invest in existing production, factory sustainability and training quality workers
- Revise and increase the prices you order clothes for, in order to allow the suppliers to, first and foremost, pay living wages and respect the Croatian Constitution. Then also invest in the work environment, safety standards and occupational health. Establish a transparent system of price setting which will include social and economic criteria, not just cost efficiency.
- Take responsibility for your supply chain! Control the working conditions in the factories you order from, make sure your supply chain adheres to national and international laws and regulations on workers’ rights





## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FACTORY OWNERS

- Adhere to the law on work and collective contracts. Working hours, occupational safety and the right to rest are not a cost – they are the foundation of a sustainable business model
- In negotiating with your buyers, include prices necessary to adhere to constitutional law, i.e. to pay living wage
- Provide the workers with basic workplace conditions: drinking water, a warm meal, clean toilets, tidy and comfortable facilities
- Respect the right of the employees to organize in unions and negotiate collectively. Listen to the workers' suggestions related to dealing with workplace issues.

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE CROATIAN GOVERNMENT

- Raise the minimum wage to the level of living wage so the workers could live, instead of merely surviving
- Increase inspection and fines for breaking workers' rights
- Urgently begin developing an industry policy aimed at preserving the existing capacities of the textile industry on the national level

## PROTECTING WORKERS IN THE AGE OF CLIMATE CHANGE

- Adapt the workspace to the new climate conditions: ensure drinking water, enough breaks and flexible working hours during heatwaves
- Protect the workers and the environment by investing in better isolation and equipment that is more energy efficient. Modernize the ventilation and air-conditioning to protect the workers from extreme temperatures

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## MAJA'S STORY

Maja is sixty years old. She has spent 12 years working for minimum wage at the darning department in a factory producing for the Italian fashion company Benetton. She told us that the Italian bosses were mobbing the workers – there were issues with going to the restroom, complaints about the amount of work done and insults. Workers had a half-hour break, but Maja says that was not enough, because “a person needs to rest their eyes more often when working with textile”.

Her salary was not enough to cover her needs and she spent all of her working life making ends meet. She was lucky, she says, because she only had one child to take care of. In the “third shift”, she also grew a garden, so there were always fresh, homegrown fruits and vegetables for the table. Her day and her decades were spent working, working and working.

In spite of it all, working in textiles mattered to her, and on one level was very emancipatory for her life. She valued the social component of her work, spending time with other workers, the opportunity to earn her bread.



*"I loved my job, my co-workers and our friendships. The factory was my second home. But no one took care of that home – not the city government, not the state, not Benetton. They promised us new workplaces and better pay, and no one answered for the fact that none of those promises came true. We were left oppressed, undervalued and underpaid. Our work was treated like it was for pocket money, and not a real and hard job. I'm living on crumbs right before my retirement, and the state doesn't care."*



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## SENKA'S STORY

Senka is 42 years old. She has two children who still live with her and her husband. Her husband's parents, whom they care for together, also live in their household. For almost 20 years, Senka worked at a small factory that produced for the Italian Benetton, and was always paid minimum wage.

“Everything is determined by the owner, the brands set their conditions, it doesn't even cross their mind that they could increase our pay”, says Senka. She tells us that the factory workers would be yelled at if they did not do something “quick enough” or “good enough”. After strenuous shifts, she would always have housework to do. At her job, she had a poor diet, mostly eating “bread with spreads”. The clothing dye would often stain her hands.

She thought about finding another job, but was afraid to go to some other company. “Our town is small, we don't have a choice, you know how it is in Croatia”, she says with a sigh. Senka dreams of a more secure life – she would love to have a bigger paycheck so she could finally renovate her house and help her children fulfill their dreams.





*"I would like for the workers and our work to be appreciated more. Workers should be allowed to go to the restroom and have a glass of water like people with dignity, instead of looking at the sewing machine for eight to 12 hours straight. People's pay shouldn't be reduced by 50 to 120 euros for no reason, there should be more mercy for the sick. Every worker should have equal rights and they shouldn't be discriminated against compared to their bosses and the servicemen. These people's wages should be increased because they surely deserve it, considering how much they go through at their workplace. They should simply be respected and appreciated and given what they deserve, because the conditions in textile factories are miserable. I know what exploitation means, I worked in the textile industry and that is precisely the reason I quit."*

# Clean Clothes Campaign



COUNTRY PROFILE CROATIA 2025

