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Struggle in the Garment Sector

Abstract:

This article considers what struggle means for the international garment worker of today. The typical worker will most likely be a woman who is experiencing exploitative and harsh conditions in a sector where, internationally, employers generally seek to crush independent trade unionism. The article briefly reviews the garment industry's history, including advances made to working conditions by the mid-twentieth century, and the erosion of working conditions that has been associated with capital's relocation and the internationalisation of production from the late 1970s onwards. It outlines the challenges of becoming a trade unionist and engaging in struggle under the very real threat of intimidation and violence.

Article:

In 1909, Clementina Black and Nancy Meyer published *The Makers of Our Clothes* – a detailed first-hand account based on twelve months' research into conditions in the clothing workshops of Britain. At the end of their study, intended as a contribution to the movement for Trade Boards for the sweated trades, they wrote that 'to go among them [women garment workers] is to be at the same time gratified by a deepening sense of human worth and oppressed by the weight of human burdens' (Black and Meyer, 1909: 11). Little has changed. Today, more than a century later, conditions in clothing workshops in Britain and around the world are as bad as ever they were.

This article considers what struggle means for the garment workers of today in the overtly hostile conditions that face activists and trade unions in the international garment sector. It begins with a brief review of the garment industry's history and notes the advances that had been made by the mid-twentieth-century as a result of unionisation and state regulation –improvements in working conditions that have since been deliberately rolled back as part of capital's relocation and internationalisation of production. The article then briefly considers the structure of international supply chain as a context for garment workers' struggle, before considering case examples from India which highlight typical conditions facing workers wherever this industry settles.

Industrial and Historical Context:

The mass manufacture of ready-made clothing has a long history in which workers' weak associational and structural power makes it very difficult for them to find leverage for bargaining with their employers. Cheap and easily replaceable, clothing workers thus remain vulnerable to the gross exploitation that has characterised this industry irrespective of time or place. Where meaningful bargaining relationships have been achieved with employers, history shows us that it must involve some form of binding legal contract or statutory foundation associated with trade union activity. In the early decades of the twentieth century, for example, it took a combination of collective organisation, social activism and public concern over disease and death in the garment sector to drive statutory measures that provided tailors' unions a platform for collective bargaining in Britain (see, for example, Blackburn, 2007). Trade Boards and later Wages Councils established sectoral collective bargaining between employers and the National Union of Tailors and Garment Workers (until abolished by the Tory governments of 1979-1997). Across the seas in the US, the International Ladies Garment Workers Union (ILGWU) won the 'pass through' clause. This was a binding contractual arrangement required that specified payments between a commissioning firm or retailer (then known as a 'jobber') and their suppliers were 'passed through' to workers' wages (Quan, 2013). Such measures meant that by the 1950s and 1960s in so-called mature economies, workers in larger factories were generally protected from the most extreme forms of exploitation and abuse and it was possible for them to earn at least a basic living (Rosen, 2002). This was to change from the 1970s onwards; today the majority of garment workers exist on poverty pay and are subject to bargaining contexts similar to those that prevailed at the turn of the twentieth century.

The liberalisation of economies heralded by the General Agreement on Trade and Tariffs (GATT) and the Multi-Fibre Arrangement (MFA) (1973-2004) established import and export quotas that created a fiercely competitive international environment for garment manufacturing. The ensuing 'Great Garment War' (Birnbaum, 2000) saw international brands and retailers scour the globe for cheap sites of production which offered the most favourable trading quotas and lowest labour costs. Relocation of the industry decimated production in mature economies. Clothing jobs disappeared from established sites with little fanfare and minimal compensation for workers (see for example, Blyton and Jenkins, 2012a and 2012b). The process of relocation raced away in the 1990s, as economies like China,

India, Bangladesh, Vietnam and Cambodia were 'liberalised' and opened up to foreign investment. Today, workforces concentrated across all parts of Asia (and more recently, southern and eastern Europe and parts of Africa) are pitted against one another, threatened that if they are not the most productive, the most compliant or the cheapest, their jobs will be captured by another workforce in another locality or another nation state. In this competitive environment workers' bargaining leverage is hard to find when there is always another geopolitical border for capital to cross, another workforce and another location to exploit.

The politics of the dispersed supply chain are thus crucial for the possibilities of struggle. In any location, the supplier's relationship with the brand or retailer – the so-called lead firm – may be direct or indirect. That is, a local manufacturer may directly contract with the lead firm and be what is known as a 'tier one supplier', or alternatively may be lower down in the supplier hierarchy. Beyond this first tier, there will be second, third, fourth and fifth tier suppliers who not only give workers progressively worsening wages and conditions but make identification of the exact workplace increasingly difficult (for a detailed explanation of the supply chain, see Hale and Wills, 2005). Unpicking the networks of supplier and lead firm relationships is impossible without the cooperation of lead firms and even then it is very possible that all that may be seen is first tier in the network of suppliers.

The complexity and opacity of the supply chain allows the grossest of abuses to persist as international brands and retailers squeeze margins and production deadlines for their suppliers, who in turn squeeze every aspect of labour in capturing surplus value (see for example, Nathan and Sakar, 2011). The 'predatory purchasing practices' of international brands and retailers have been identified as a prime cause of the worsening of labour conditions at workplace level. They provide a powerful 'downward pressure on wages and [an incitement for employers to use] non-standard forms of employment and greater verbal and physical abuse' (Anner, 2019).

The combination of the 'hidden workplace' and the mobility of capital allows employers to make credible threats of further relocation and consequent job loss in order to undermine workers' capacity to resist and organise. Thus, local employers sweat workers in bright modern workplaces and routinely subject them to various economic sanctions as well as physical and emotional abuse in minimising their costs and maximising control. This

complex international arena is where grass roots trade unions seek a bargaining toehold, while their governments neglect workers' rights in favour of attracting and retaining foreign direct investment and the potential onward relocation of the industry is a credible risk.

In this context, clothing manufacturers continue to seek out the young, the marginalised, the poor and the migrant to populate their factories. Most sewing machinists are female, with an 80:20 female to male ratio of workers in the international sector. The pattern of employment for a typical woman garment worker will ebb and flow depending on her marital status, childbearing and other family responsibilities. Workers' socio-economic and cultural vulnerabilities are understood and exploited by employers in every respect. Thus, factory hierarchies generally replicate the power relations of wider society and the twenty-first century factory floor is gendered, just as it always has been. Female workers are assigned most 'sewing' jobs and males assigned to skilled occupations such as cutting and engineering, as well as being dominant in the supervisory and managerial hierarchies. Indeed, employers in different producing countries have openly cited the supposed 'cheap and compliant' nature of female workers as their main attraction (Caraway, 2007). This has major implications for struggle as women have to overcome the constraints and cultural conditioning that define their socio-economic status and domestic roles even before they organise.

Compounding the range of barriers to organising is the reality that garment sector employers are generally and overtly hostile to trade unionism. This is a truth held to be self-evident among activists and campaigners in the industry, but if there were to be any doubt it is also directly evidenced in the abuses recorded more broadly in the industry. For example, the Clean Clothes Campaign – which is a leading network of trade unions, multi-stakeholder initiatives and other civil society organisations campaigning for better labour conditions for clothing workers – has an Urgent Appeals mechanism which is dominated by complaints of violations of freedom of association and other attacks on trade unionists. It is therefore not surprising that in such dangerous environments garment workers are often initially fearful and suspicious of collective organisation. Nevertheless, workers organise. In the remainder of this article, examples from the Indian ready-made garment export industry will be used to illustrate the concrete realities facing garment workers as they seek to mobilise in defence of their interests. The challenges faced by workers and activists in struggle may differ in point

of detail according to exact location of the site of production, but over twenty years of research in this sector has taught me that what is remarkable is the continuity of workers' concrete experience of their work and the weight of opposition to collective organisation they have to overcome, which is in no way restricted to place.

Examples of What Struggle Means:

The city of Bangalore is perhaps best known as a centre of information technology (IT), but it also provides work for around 500,000 garment workers – a garment workforce almost the same size as that of Cambodia. In Bangalore the IT sector and garment industry operate as two parallel economies, with very little cross fertilisation between them. There are some five or six grass roots garment sector unions functioning in the city. They are small in size, with membership numbered in thousands rather than tens of thousands, but through painstaking organising they have established their presence, which in itself is a major achievement.

Bangalore's garment workers are typically female and likely to be rural migrants who are first- or second-generation paid industrial workers. On first gaining employment in the garment sector they are likely to have limited understanding of employment as a contractual relationship, have weak conceptions of themselves as 'workers' and little or no understanding of legal employment rights. Increasingly, local employers are seeking out migrant labour not only from villages bordering the city, but also from tribal peoples further afield. Such migrants are particularly likely to be young, female, isolated and vulnerable to exploitation inside and outside the factory.

Workers are quickly educated in the truth of their factory lives. If they enter the factory with expectations of mutual respect and care from their employers, as many such workers do, their illusions are quickly dispelled. The workplaces are the sites of their commodification. Yet they may not immediately turn to trade unions as their solution. Particularly for women, a trade union may be viewed as an unfamiliar and exclusionary organisation that is inappropriate and will be of no help. While some violations or perceived threats may give rise to spontaneous protest by workers, this is very much distinct from organised resistance. For example, in Bangalore in April 2016, there was a spontaneous mass protest by garment workers against changes proposed by the Central Government to

the Employment Provident Fund (PF) (PUCL and WSS, 2017). Workers spilled out of garment factories to protest on the city streets, fearful of losing access to contributions made to the PF from their wages. The PF protests won concessions and the proposed changes were shelved by the Central Government, yet protesters encountered considerable violence and were photographed by police for targeting in the months following the protest and the protests did not convert into more coherent collective organisation. Embedding broader conceptions of solidarity among workers is a major challenge for organisers who are acutely aware that, as one senior union leader put it, ‘the employers are so organised’.

The process of engendering any solidarity among workers is a pressing but immensely difficult task. Organisers are faced with a garment workforce which is subject to constant churn, generally new to paid industrialised work and typically unused to the concept of being a ‘worker’ with interests distinct from the ‘employer’. There may also be few ‘safe havens’ where workers feel able to speak with complete freedom. The workplace is most definitely unsafe for anyone identified as a union supporter and women are particularly susceptible to family and community controls that tell them to be wary of confiding in others, to keep information within the family. They are encouraged, for example, not to trust their secrets to fellow workers who may also be neighbours and may one day use that information against them. Managers will also contact husbands and families to check on women workers’ whereabouts or report their behaviour, and thus extend their control and influence at the workplace through the social structures of home and community. These pressures exist in the context of unrelenting poverty and domestic burdens which together drain women workers’ energy and time for struggle. Despite garment sector employers’ common assertions that their female workers are second wage earners in a two-income household, such workers in Bangalore – and elsewhere in the sector – are far more likely to be the sole or main breadwinners for an extended family. Looking at the faces of workers as they stream along the roads at the end of the factory day, the exhaustion on malnourished faces is plain to see. Women in particular need to return home as soon as they possibly can, to collect and care for children and commence cooking for their families. How are they made into trade unionists?

It is difficult to adequately express the stamina and psychological strength that is required of workers and activists in this context. Friendship groups that grow at workplaces

provide opportunity structures that may allow leaders to emerge, but any individual who is deemed to be too vocal in defending her interests or those of her fellow workers is likely to be targeted and victimised by supervisors. Emergent female leaders may be subjected to a range of sanctions, such as the assignment of difficult work or higher targets, physical isolation from other workers and various forms of verbal and gender-based violence, while a common tactic to undermine male activists is to falsely accuse them of some criminal act, ranging from theft to rape. Becoming an informal leader or moving into activism thus incurs significant social and economic costs and it is important to understand that these tactics are endemic to the sector. In no way are they distinctively 'Indian' initiatives. Rather, garment sector employers are remarkably consistent in their repertoire of intimidation – workers in Pakistan, Bangladesh, Cambodia and Turkey, for example, would be likely cite similar sanctions with only small local or regional variations in employer tactics.

Above all, employers are determined to prevent workers feeling their own strength, forming their own independent trade unions and exerting some small influences over their working lives. When earning poverty wages, subject to strict social norms and possibly living in accommodation rented from a landlord who is socially connected with their employer (if not one and the same person), resistance and struggle may offer only distant hope to an individual. The very weight of social, economic and cultural pressures can make change seem impossible. It is thus the case, particularly in the case of the female worker, that their struggle is likely to have to begin in the home, and it is all the more remarkable for that. Most of the leaders that I have had the privilege to speak with in the course of my research, in India and also other parts of Asia, have survived personal stories of hardship and loss on the road to activism. It may indeed be true for some that freedom is only realised when there is little left to lose.

In particular, I have a long association with the female leaders of the Garment Labour Union (GLU) and Munnade Social Organisation (Munnade) in Bangalore. They have shared with me the material realities of *their* struggle. As workers, each of those who have now become leaders were garment workers who experienced the tyranny of the production line and the harassment and abuse that continues to characterise the factory floor. When first contemplating resistance, these women were earning poverty pay and had a range of family responsibilities and obligations to fulfil. Their first challenges in taking up their activism was

therefore financial and domestic in nature. Becoming a union member puts employment at risk – any identified union activist has to face the prospect that their manager will see to it that they are dismissed or harassed into forced resignation. Not only one job may be lost, as employers typically threaten to circulate workers' names and have them blacklisted by all employers in the locality.

These material risks are what face a garment worker on the path to becoming an activist in struggle. How will she feed her child now that she has decided it is time to make a stand? But before that question is even formed, exactly *how* is a stand to be made? As first-generation industrial workers with very little schooling to rely on, women and men who now lead their fellow workers in struggle have had to start from zero when learning how to first gain the attention of a factory manager, let alone bargain with them. Activists' marginalisation from formal education, exclusion from knowledge of government bureaucracy and ignorance of their rights in law meant that in their earliest days these intelligent and clever women had great instincts but no plan of how to begin to 'organise'. How could they begin to formulate a written claim, engage with government officials or contest a point with a factory manager or supervisor? How could they reach workers to talk about collective organisation without transport to get to factories dispersed across a large urban sprawl? Even the most basic of tasks was an enormous challenge. The women who are now leaders of GLU began by tackling women's social issues and moved into more formal organising around a union identity only after some years of establishing connections with workers. Senior activists from the Karnataka Garment Workers' Union (KGWU), another union in the city, tell of it taking two years of attendance for some women to even speak at union meetings. Struggle in this context is painstaking, it inches forward and cannot be rushed.

Each of the women leaders I have come to know has prevailed in her activism, but at high personal psychological and material cost. After more than a decade of experience as trade unionists, members of GLU's Executive are clear about their sense of self-fulfilment and self-esteem, which has grown over time. Early opposition from their families and sections of their communities has evolved into respect. However, as a senior representative of a supportive non-governmental organisation (NGO) with many years' experience of work in the field of employment rights was keen to emphasise, "they may be given *respect*, but

we cannot assume [this means] that they are being *supported* [at home and in their community at large]”. Not least among the challenges they encounter is the constant demand to satisfy expectations in a context where multiple layers of socio-economic and cultural disadvantage present a wide range of problems that crystallise at the workplace. In this context, workers’ expectations of the trade union can be high. Relatively naïve conceptions of justice influenced by the type of authority wielded by local politicians and village councils may underpin workers’ expectations that trade union leaders can do the same. How can activists satisfy fundamental and complex social needs as well as tackling specific workplace issues where worker power and bargaining leverage remains so low? The realities of life mean that expectations are likely to be disappointed on both sides. The worker who expects the union leader to be able stop a factory closure is inevitably let down. The union activist who finds a worker has turned to another community organisation instead of an independent trade union, thereby undermining their organising efforts, is similarly disappointed. Nevertheless, trade unionists persist.

To the observer, it would seem that what keeps activists focused in the face of seemingly overwhelming odds, is a driving need to change their own reality as well as a calling to help others. Despite the power of the employer and the wider supply network, they have the capacity to celebrate the value of small victories at the local level, while never losing sight of their desire for major change and a better world. These activists are in struggle for a lifetime, not for a campaign, and their pragmatism allied with vision is essential if hopelessness is not to win.

In this context, employers have seen to it that the workplace is a dangerous place for organising. Making oneself known – or being somehow identified – as a trade unionist is an act of courage which typically results in victimisation and intimidation inside the factory. The reputation of the industry as geographically mobile means that workers who openly support a trade union are likely to find themselves isolated from their fellows at best and at worst paraded in front of them as the person “who wants to lose you your job”. Typical sanctions visited upon workers who are known to have spoken to a union include being locked in rooms and isolated from other workers, being forced to resign, being subjected to false allegations of theft or violence, being made to stand in front of other workers while being verbally abused by supervisors and managers, being singled out for unfavourable treatment

in the assignment of work, being subjected to serious sexual harassment and being physically assaulted by supervisors and managers. Compounding this overt abuse is the practice of employers establishing their own workers' committees (often under guidance from international brands) or yellow employer-led unions to give an illusion of so-called 'worker-voice'. There is plentiful evidence that such abuse is systematic and systemic to the industry in all its many locations.

The risks of being a trade union activist or supporter are aptly illustrated by a case from 2018 involving the Karnataka Garment Workers' Union (KGWU), as reported by the Worker Rights Consortium (WRC) (June 2018). KGWU was attempting to organise a factory owned by one of the largest Indian clothing manufacturers and the union had submitted a formal demand for improvements in company-supplied drinking water (which was unsafe and was making workers unwell), along with better bus transportation and higher wages. The employer in question owns more than 50 production units and supplies a range of well-known North American, UK and European brands. In response to the submission of the demand for improved conditions in water, transport and wages, members of the union were searched out inside the factory and were violently attacked and beaten. The attacks were led by managers, including the HR manager, who incited other workers to beat trade unionists for jeopardising (as they claimed) the continued existence of the factory. These were criminal offences, and police were called to the factory. However, little concrete was done in terms of remedy or worker compensation until KGWU publicised the violence to a wider audience and drew on the help of international allies including the Worker Rights Consortium (WRC).

WRC is an independent labour rights monitoring organisation which was founded in 2000 by university academics, labour rights experts and the United Students Against sweatshops movement in the United States. As some of the brands being manufactured in the factory in Bangalore bore university and college logos, there was scope for the WRC to investigate the violence. Their ensuing report provided a thorough assessment of the case, based on extensive first-hand testimony, and was circulated to the factory's international customers (brands). It is this Report which exposed these events to wider scrutiny and it makes for shocking reading. In general terms the WRC found that the list of sanctions visited upon the trade union and its supporters by management included:

- surveillance, interrogation and attempted bribery of trade union activists;
- threats of mass termination of workers and incitement of other employees against workers who were union supporters;
- sexually-based verbal abuse of union supporters;
- pressure on union supporters to provide false testimony;
- death threats, threat of false imprisonment, incitement of violence, physical assaults and battery against union supporters. (WRC Report, 2018: 2).

It is clear from the foregoing list that factory management's hostility to KWGU's attempts to organise was intent on eradicating its influence at the workplace. The Production Manager was very clear with workers, telling them:

“Do not sign any document that the union gets to you. If you are seen signing anything, then we will terminate you.... You will be left to starve if the union is formed as the factory will then close down. There are some workers amongst you who are trying to stab you in your back. Beware of them.” (Statement by Production Manager: WRC Report, 2018: 8)

Such 'advice' was supplemented by the incitement of other workers (by supervisors, operational managers and human resource managers) to direct acts of violence against union supporters. Little can more fully illustrate the dangers facing unionised workers than the words and actions of supervisors and managers themselves, as documented by the WRC Report.

“This woman [a union supporter] is not fit to be a worker. Her caste is meant to burn dead people and that is what she should be doing. Beat her and throw her out.” (Statements by supervisor and production manager: WRC Report, 2018: 4)

‘The Human Resources Manager, [named], asked the employee, [a named union supporter], for his home address and then told him that ... management would send thugs to his house to kill his entire family.’ (WRC Report, 2018: 12)

In the threats documented here, one can see the incitement of violence based on caste as well as gender, which is illegal. Threats materialised into physical attacks on workers inside the factory on 4 April 2018, when union supporters found themselves being summoned by

managers to face gangs of workers who stood ready to beat them. Finding themselves trapped and under physical attack in different departments and sections of the factory, union supporters ran for their lives from one place to another inside the building as they were singled out by managers and thrown to mobs of other workers. The violence was extreme, as may be seen in the following quote:

“You are the main culprit who organized the union.... It won't be a sin, if people kill you and get rid of you. You should be shot and disposed of. No one will miss you.”

(Statement by Supervisor, WRC Report 2018: 4)

These were the words of a supervisor to a female worker before she was dragged, forcibly, before a group of employees who were incited to beat her. This they did. She was hospitalised after the attack (WRC Report, 2018: 16) and she was not alone. Similar treatment was meted out to others, with gender, caste and religious abuse used to turn workers against one another. Beatings resulted in hospitalisation and in some cases permanent injury. Police were called and helped some workers to escape when beatings had become extreme, however, it was the WRC Report, not the institutions of the state, which appears to have had the most significant influence on the outcome of the case.

The WRC provided a thorough assessment of events, and their report was circulated to the international brands supplied by the factory. The testimony of workers exposed the hollowness of claims to support ‘freedom of association’ or forms of ‘worker voice’ so typical of the brands’ codes of social compliance and sustainability. International exposure ensured that the brands had to act to ensure, eventually, that remedial action was taken. The exposure of the violence resulted in the managers responsible being dismissed and disciplined. KWGU now has a growing membership in the factory and meets with the factory management on a regular basis, though it still cannot be said that organising is welcomed at the workplace. This is not an insignificant win for the union, but arguably it needed international engagement in order to be realised. The union was unable to rely on the state, or its own bargaining power alone in delivering remedy for the wrongs its supporters endured. The perversity of international brands, who preside over a toxic business model, acting as the arbiters of just remedy for grossly abused workers, is disturbing, as is the wider issue is that similar events are more than likely taking place now, in some location, as your eyes move across the page. While the case outlined here is indeed extreme, the use of

different forms of emotional, verbal, physical and gender-based violence is not exceptional. Such abuses are not perpetrated by the lone 'bad' employer and cannot be thus explained. Rather, intimidation and violence are strategies of control in this sector and the garment employer's typical method of inhibiting independent trade union activity and struggle.

Conclusion:

No matter what the challenges, the hard work of localised struggle for improved working conditions in the international garment sector *is* taking place, and is being done at considerable risk by trade unionists, civil society activists, and some the world's most vulnerable workers. In the face of the sheer scale and strength of opposition they face, it might be easier for activists to give up – or not to begin – struggle. However, despite the drudgery of low-quality work, the grinding nature of poverty and intense socio-economic oppression, there comes a point where some brave individuals arrive at struggle as a pathway to dignity and self-fulfilment. As is the case for workers in other labour intensive, internationally dispersed supply chains, such as leather, electronics and agricultural goods, garment workers have very limited associational and structural power without external allies. This said, if power is to shift it is struggle at the local level, at the point of production, that must be seen to deliver change. Collective organisation is the thing that local employers and international brands appear to fear most in their race to maximise their profit margins. *They* know that there is power in struggle, as do the workers whose lives are made both more dangerous but also more bearable by breaking the various chains that bind them and 'doing something'. It allows them to dream, they say.

In combatting the employer's use of the tools of fear, discrimination and poverty, workers in struggle need support. International allies can exert pressure at crucial points in the supply chain and they are sorely needed sources of leverage as 'the market' does not punish abusive conditions of work and employment. Though brands and retailers are, apparently, afraid of reputational damage the reality is that however gross the scandal, however big the loss of life, their bottom line doesn't really suffer.

As grass roots activists struggle to establish solidarity at the local level, the international labour movement in all its varied forms must be more imaginative in finding

ways to support them and to forge broader solidarity across transnational borders. We have much to learn from one another. Global union federations are attempting to tackle some of the issues through global framework agreements and multi-party bargaining structures, but the gap between the international, national and local activist in struggle is far too wide. The risk is that international agreements give false reassurance that ‘something is being done’ while power relations at the local level mean that workplace conditions change not at all. Allies in struggle must understand the material conditions faced by grass roots unions and the workers they represent and then respond to their needs. Thus, in searching for a way to assist, we should not believe that simply exposing scandalous examples such as those mentioned in this article will make change inevitable. ‘Raising awareness’ through a front-page article or social-media post may engage public sensibilities but it will not stop a union activist from being dragged out of a room and beaten with an iron bar. At that point, public outrage is far away and of little use. The struggle of grass roots activists begins in small groups of workers with big ideas, and it is surely past time for meaningful change to come into their lives. In assisting in highly complex environments, international allies need to build long term alliances and cultivate detailed knowledge of local politics and power relations. In this way, international support need to find innovative ways of assisting bona fide grass roots unions in achieving their own triumphs in struggle – as it is their hard-won gains, and ultimately only these, that will shift the balance of power at the local level, and deliver hope for change.

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