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Lotte Debell

**“What is significant about Arco’s decision to join the ETI is that it does not follow similar moves by all the big retailers, and this shows a progressive attitude on the trade side”**

The ethical trade movement received a boost in January with the announcement that Arco has become a member of the Ethical Trading Initiative. The first supplier of safety products to take this step, Arco did so in order to affirm its commitment to the principles of fair trade, move its already advanced ethical auditing programme to the next level and share best practice with others in the industry.

Hot on the heels of this announcement came another last month, this time from Tate and Lyle, which has taken the huge step of switching its entire retail cane sugars range to Fairtrade, a move which is expected to result in at least £2m in Fairtrade premiums to farmers in the first year alone.

Also this year, Tesco, followed by M&S and others, has banned the use of raw cotton from Uzbekistan in its clothing and textile products while child labour is used to harvest the crop.

Historically, both the sugar and textile industries have had rather a bad reputation for unethical practices, and both have been a focus of the increasing awareness of these issues and pressure to improve. They also now seem to be among the industries at the forefront of pushing for change, and that such large retail brands are taking these steps sends a positive message to the industry as a whole, and will have an influence on other companies. But let’s take off our rose-tinted glasses for a second because, relative to the size of the industry, a lot remains to be done.

Now, the traditional relationship between corporatewear and retail generally means that things happen first in retail and are adopted later by the corporatewear industry. What is significant about Arco’s decision to join the ETI is that it bucks this trend. It does not follow similar moves by all the clothing retailers, far from it, and this shows a very progressive attitude on the trade side.

Arco is a major player in the corporatewear market, and as such is quite a ‘catch’ for the ethical trade movement because where big companies lead, smaller ones will (hopefully) follow. And what makes this all the more likely is that Arco’s own brand products, to which the membership applies, are not the most expensive products on the market, and the company has said that it will not need to increase its prices as a result of membership. This proves once and for all that ethical trade is not just achievable for high end goods, but for every day ordinary items like boiler suits.

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