At its inception, the Union of Concerned Researchers in Fashion set its stall out as a mechanism to hold the apparel sector to account on some of its misguided or hollow rhetoric. A few months into its existence, it has not disappointed.

It was only in the last issue of Ecotextile News that founding member of the union (UCRF) Kate Fletcher was interviewed to discuss the organisation’s launch. Now, a matter of weeks on, it’s selected the 2019 Copenhagen Fashion Summit as the subject of its inaugural critique.

While this type of declaration is new to the sector, the union is keen to stress that the debate most certainly isn’t. The industry, it claims, has “spent 30 years trying to fix the old system, and it is getting worse, not better.”

The statement was published in response to some of the communications circulated in advance of the show. “Paradoxical or even misleading use of language in describing ‘sustainable fashion’ activity,” was one of the allegations made by the UCRF, as part of a broad assessment of the marketing materials and agenda for the annual event.

When launching its manifesto, the UCRF outlined the “over-simplified, fragmented and obstructed by the growth logic of capitalist business models” as a key area of concern. Perhaps predictably then, when Copenhagen Fashion Summit used the term ‘sustainable growth’, the union hit back. The statement was described as oxymoronic language “favoured by investors and asset managers.”

If it was ever in doubt, it appears the UCRF will not be pulling any punches. Global Fashion Agenda (GFA), the summit’s organising body, was in no way hostile towards the statement. A GFA spokesperson told Ecotextile News that the industry needs such bodies to “bring forward reflections and make sure to create a lively debate based on their academic research. Sessions titled ‘Hidden Supply Chains’ and ‘The Power of Creatives’, held at the fashion show, attracted the union’s disdain for advancing a narrative which it believes to be untrue.

In response to these panel discussions, the union challenged the fashion industry to “admit finally that it is not capable of making this overly complex system traceable in a way that truly matters on a systemic level,” and stated: “continually stating that designers have the power to create systems change not only paralyses designers, but it takes business leadership off the hook.”

Explaining how it views its own role in advancing sustainability in the sector, the GFA told us: “It’s to bridge the gap between fashion and sustainability and facilitate action taken by leaders. We do this, for example, through the Copenhagen Summit which brings together all parts of the industry to accelerate change. We facilitate more than 500 business meetings through our Innovation Forum matchmaking between fashion companies and solution providers.

“In the just launched Pulse of the Fashion Industry 2019 update there is even a stronger call to the industry to dramatically speed up the pace.”

In another first for 2019, this year’s Copenhagen Fashion Summit was preceded by the new Sustainable Fashion Research Agenda event, also held in the Danish capital. The debut conference’s organisers say it has been conceived as a tonic to industry events that “have celebrated the concept of sustainable fashion,” despite a perceived absence of “concrete information about the actual progress.”

While not naming any particular events to which it referred, all the established names on the sustainable fashion trade show circuit will be placed firmly under the microscope. The Union of Concerned Researchers in Fashion and Sustainable Fashion Research Agenda will hold them to a higher standard of openness and transparency.

As a parting shot in its debut statement, the UCRF urged those attending Copenhagen Fashion Summit to “think critically and to continuously ask questions.” This approach is not exclusively only open to delegates, however. A brief report can be found on page 45. Put on your best scepticism-tinted spectacles and make up your own mind.