

INTERNATIONAL TRADE UNION CONFEDERATION

ITUC OnLine

007/210111

New Campaign to Combat Forced Labour of Nepali Migrant Workers in the Gulf

Brussels 21 January 2011 (ITUC OnLine): Anti-Slavery International and ITUC (International Trade Union Confederation) are launching a campaign to highlight the forced labour of Nepali migrant workers to the Gulf States and to call for an improvement in the fundamental rights of workers across the region.

The campaign is aiming to improve the working conditions of Nepali migrants by protecting workers from unscrupulous recruitment agents, persuading governments to allow the freedom of association and ending the abusive ‘kafala’ sponsorship system.

An estimated six million Nepali workers live abroad. Every day, 600 migrants leave Nepal legally, with as many again estimated to migrate illegally. Around 700,000 Nepali migrants work in the Gulf States, with 125,000 in UAE, where at least 45 per cent work in the construction sector. Many also work in hospitality, as security guards and as domestic workers.

In Dubai, some Nepali migrant construction workers are trapped in conditions of forced labour after not being paid by their employers following the economic crisis. They have no choice but to leave their work to scrape a living illegally. They are known as ‘khalliballi’, which means those without status.

One Nepali ‘khalliballi’ said: “I’d cancel my visa, get a ticket and go. I’m only hanging around here because I haven’t been paid. Friends who get money from home to go back are better off than suffering in a foreign land.”

Many Nepali migrant workers fall victim to unregulated recruitment agencies who promise a good living overseas. To afford the agent’s fee, many migrants take out huge loans, only to find on arrival in the Gulf that their agreed salary fails to materialise. Most are paid half of what they are promised and many are not paid at all.

Anti-Slavery International and ITUC are calling on better regulation of recruitment agents in Nepal and the Gulf States and an end to the illegal practice of migrant workers paying fees to agents, who in law are only entitled to receive payment from the employer for successfully recruiting a worker.

Both organisations are also calling for the UAE to end the ‘kafala’ sponsorship system, which aside from Bahrain, exists across the region. Under this system migrant workers’ visas are linked to one employer or ‘sponsor’, and in most countries they have no right to seek alternative employment. Combined with the low pay this method traps many thousands in exploitative conditions and even forced labour.

Anti-Slavery International and ITUC are also demanding all migrant workers in the Gulf States to be given the freedom of association and collective bargaining. Currently in the UAE migrant workers are not allowed to join a trade union and do not have the right to strike.

Workers who protest against unfair working conditions or unpaid wages can face imprisonment and deportation.

See the ITUC and Anti-slavery video “The Cost of living” on migrants workers at:
<http://www.ituc-csi.org/the-cost-of-living.html>

Anti-Slavery International is the world’s oldest human rights organisation and campaigns for the eradication of slavery, exposing current cases, supporting local organisations to release the minimum 12.3 million people in slavery, and the implementation of international laws against slavery. www.antislavery.org

The ITUC represents 176 million workers in 151 countries and territories and has 301 national affiliates. <http://www.ituc-csi.org> and <http://www.youtube.com/ITUCCSI>

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