

INTERNATIONAL TRADE UNION CONFEDERATION

International unions warn Qatar's work visa system allows employers to use forced labour
New case lodged with ILO ahead of Qatar's World Cup building frenzy

Brussels, 18 January 2013 (ITUC OnLine): International unions have today lodged a new case with the International Labour Organisation presenting evidence on the use of forced labour in Qatar. With only 300,000 Qatari nationals, 1.2 million migrant workers are needed for the country's infrastructure boom and are forced into unsafe conditions and poverty wages.

This is the first time forced labour has been used to define working conditions in Qatar in a case to the ILO. The representation has been lodged jointly by the ITUC and the Building and Wood Workers' International (BWI) and features seven individual cases from hundreds which have been reported to the ITUC.

ITUC General Secretary Sharan Burrow said the visa sponsorship system in Qatar allows the exaction of forced labour by making it difficult for a migrant worker to leave an abusive employer or travel overseas without permission.

"Under Qatari law, employers have near total control over workers. They alone choose if a worker can change jobs, leave the country or stay in Qatar.

"In the next few months the contracts for the new World Cup stadia and infrastructure will be announced. Millions more workers will be hired from overseas for the road, rail and building infrastructure for the World Cup.

"We are putting multi-national companies tendering for these contracts on notice to abide by international law and respect workers' rights," said Sharan Burrow.

The Labour Relations Department of the Ministry of Labour in Qatar received 6000 worker complaints last year. According to local media reports, the top concerns facing workers included employers not fulfilling obligations under the visa sponsorship system including refusal to give end-of-service benefits, and also delays in paying wages. In some cases, workers are not paid at all.

"Many workers suffer exploitation for fear of retaliation. The Government must put their 150 labour inspectors to work and make the complaints process accessible to the majority of workers, many of whom don't speak English or Arabic," said Ambet Yuson, General Secretary, Building and Wood Workers International.

A committee was set up by the Government last year to look at the sponsorship rules, among the most restrictive in Gulf countries, but has not responded to the growing number of sponsorship abuses.

Once received, the ILO will establish a tripartite committee to review the evidence and make recommendations to the Government of Qatar on how to comply with its international commitments.

The ITUC points to six practices that violate workers' rights including:

- false promises on the nature and type of work by recruiters and sponsors
- employer obligations on wages and working conditions not met
- contracts entered into prior to departure not respected in Qatar
- workers indebted to recruiters or moneylenders who extract high fees
- passports withheld by employers
- workers forced to live in squalid overcrowded labour camps

Last month the ITUC intervened to the Qatari Minister of Labour in the case of one worker caught in the sponsorship trap. Watch the case of Benjamin Cruz featured on Equal Times.

For interviews with Sharan Burrow contact Gemma Swart +32 479 06 41 63

The ITUC represents 175 million workers in 153 countries and territories and has 308 national affiliates.

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