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FIFA Turmoil: Qatar Risks Losing World Cup

Brussels, 3 June 2015 (ITUC OnLine): The announcement that FIFA President Sepp Blatter will step down gives hope to Qatar's migrant workforce that FIFA may finally come onto their side, but exposes Qatar to the possible loss of the World Cup if it fails to reform its labour laws in the coming months.

Sharan Burrow, ITUC General Secretary, said: "FIFA under Sepp Blatter not only awarded the World Cup to Qatar, it has helped shield Qatar's brutal kafala system from reform. With Sepp Blatter stepping down, there's a chance for FIFA to undo the damage it has done by telling Qatar to bring its labour laws up to global standards as a condition to host the World Cup. Qatar needs to wake up to the reality that the world will not accept a World Cup built on modern slavery."

With the US and Swiss corruption investigations bringing FIFA closer to the tipping point for reform of its own behaviour, the spotlight is also swinging onto FIFA's corporate sponsors, as well as the giant construction multinationals making huge profits from the kafala system in Qatar and some of its Gulf neighbours.

"The construction giants have to go beyond CSR-speak and ensure their huge workforces in Qatar, most of them in hidden employment, get the same basic rights as workers in countries that do respect workers' rights. The sponsors too are tainted by the stink of modern slavery in Qatar, and must not let up pressure over the twin evils of corruption and worker exploitation," said Burrow.

Ambet Yuson, General Secretary of the BWI, the global union for construction workers, said: "The biggest crime of FIFA is not the corruption. It is ignoring all the thousands of workers who get trapped in modern-day slavery or work to death while building for the World Cup. This could easily have been avoided if FIFA had only put clear demands on host nations to respect workers' rights and ensure decent working conditions. Football should be about building bridges and bringing people together. We believe that FIFA has the power to make football a force for change and human rights in the countries where the World Cup is arranged. It is high time that they take that responsibility and make workers' rights part of the criteria for hosting the World Cup. No one should have to die in the name of football."

Burrow also reacted angrily to denials by Qatar's chief public health official of any responsibility for the death toll in Qatar's migrant workforce. Sheikh Mohammed bin Hamad bin Jassim Al Thani has reportedly blamed the soaring rate of heart attacks of the mainly young migrant workforce on an un-named "genetic" condition, as well as the fact that many of the migrants come from areas of high altitude.

"Public health officials should be protecting public health, but it seems that in Qatar their priority is to protect the crumbling reputation of the medieval kafala system. The fatality figures reported in the media are conservative estimates, and we believe the reality is likely to be much worse. Qatar's massive infrastructure programme is totally geared to the 2022 World Cup, and attempts to portray football stadiums as islands of hope in a sea of despair are completely misleading. As the 2022 deadline approaches for the delivery of the stadiums,

hotels, public transport, roads, utilities and all the other things required to host the World Cup, the pressure on an already exhausted workforce is growing," she said.

Attention is also focusing on the home-country governments of the migrant workers. "Of all the countries of origin, only Nepal has publicly called for an end to kafala to protect its citizens. Others should show the same courage as Nepal to speak out and act for their own people," said Burrow.

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