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Qatar's labour law "reforms" a sham

Brussels, 28 October 2015 (ITUC OnLine): Labour law changes announced by the Government of Qatar for 2017 add a new layer of repression for migrant workers and leave the kafala modern slavery system intact.

Sharan Burrow, ITUC General Secretary, said, "Promises of reform have been used as a smokescreen to draw in companies and governments to do business in Qatar as the Gulf State rolls out massive infrastructure developments to host the 2022 FIFA World Cup."

The new labour law does not abolish the notorious exit permits, and workers still have to get their employers' permission to leave the country. Workers will supposedly be able to appeal to the Interior Ministry, but most workers live in fear of that Ministry. Migrant workers do not have the right to join a union or have a collective voice with elected workplace and representative committees. Domestic workers remain wholly excluded from the labour law.

"International companies doing business in Qatar can no longer be lured by Qatar's promises of reform. The threat to the reputation of international companies using an enslaved migrant workforce in Qatar has increased with the Government's sham reforms," said Burrow.

A meeting of the International Labour Organization's Governing Body in Geneva in November will consider a Commission of Inquiry into abuse of migrant workers in Qatar putting governments and companies under increasing pressure to protect migrant workers in Qatar.

The investigation would look at Qatar's failure to act on ILO findings that it is violating both the ILO's forced labour Convention and labour inspection Convention and would have wide ranging implications for companies doing business in Qatar. More than \$200 billion is being spent on infrastructure for the 2022 World Cup and Qatar's 2030 Vision.

"The tragedy of 1.7 million migrant workers trapped in Qatar defines modern-day slavery and the denial of trade union rights for workers in the Gulf States. Qatar continues not only to deny workers their rights, but to obscure and ignore the deaths of migrant workers building the 2022 World Cup infrastructure," said Burrow.

New census data released by the Government of Qatar last week shows the population has increased by 40 per cent since Qatar was awarded the World Cup in 2010.

"700,000 more migrant workers have been drafted into Qatar to develop the country at breakneck speed. The relentless pressure to develop regardless of the human cost puts working people at risk. Enslaved by the kafala system, with no trade union rights or recourse to grievance procedures, workers are trapped in Qatar.

"More than 7,000 workers will die in Qatar before the start of the 2022 World Cup, based on data from the Qatar Supreme Council for Health on death rates of migrant workers of working age which reveal an annual death toll of over 1,000 migrant workers," said Sharan Burrow.

Access to the labour camps and millions of workers has become increasingly restrictive as the government seeks to cover up its mistreatment of workers. There is an increased police presence in the industrial areas, and in May this year, BBC journalists were arrested after being invited into the country for reporting on conditions in labour camps. Migrant workers found near to residential areas for Qatars and wealthy expats are at increasing risk of detention and harassment by police, as the authorities entrench the system of segregation of poorer workers.

The ITUC has produced a new multi-media investigation – www.qatarexposed.org – with interviews of workers in Qatar, undercover footage of the labour camps, and stories of survivors who have returned to Nepal.

“Qatar has to stop covering up its treatment of migrant workers, and governments and business need to end their complicity with modern slavery. Qatar’s migrant worker population is set to peak by 2017, to deliver the infrastructure for the 2022 World Cup. Only by ending the kafala system now, giving workers the right to freedom of association, can we ensure migrant workers in Qatar have a safe and secure future,” said Sharan Burrow.

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