

INTERNATIONAL TRADE UNION CONFEDERATION

ITUC OnLine

Qatar: ILO Sets Ultimatum to Government to End Modern Slavery of Migrant Workers

Brussels, 23 March 2016 (ITUC OnLine): The International Labour Organisation has given Qatar 12 months to reform its labour laws and ensure effective labour inspection, or face the prospect of an ILO Commission of Inquiry being launched next March. Government, employer and worker delegates to the ILO's Governing Body meeting in Geneva set the deadline yesterday, despite a major lobbying effort by the Qatar government. An ILO Commission of Inquiry is one of the most powerful elements in the UN body's mechanisms to help ensure compliance. In close to a century of history of the ILO, the procedure has been invoked only thirteen times:

http://www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=NORMLEXPUB:50011:0::NO::P50011_ARTICLE_NO:26 .

The meeting received a report from a high-level mission of union, employer and government representatives in February, which underlined Qatar's failure to comply with key international labour standards that it has ratified but not implemented.

Sharan Burrow, ITUC General Secretary, said: "Qatar now has 12 months to do what it has so far refused to do. It must end the use of modern slavery in the huge migrant workforce by bringing its laws in line with ILO standards. An immediate start is needed, to start treating the hundreds of thousands of migrant workers as human beings with human rights and end the appalling treatment of the people delivering its massive infrastructure programme - construction workers, domestic workers and those providing the services on which one of the world's richest countries depends."

The complaint against Qatar, brought by ILO delegates in 2014, calls for the government to respect ILO Conventions 29 on Forced Labour and 81 on Labour Inspection. Cosmetic reforms announced by the government have failed to convince the international community that it is yet serious about ending forced labour. Key steps which the government needs to take are:

Ratification of the Protocol updating Convention 29, adopted by the ILO in 2014;
Complete abolition of the notorious exit visa, which is used to force migrant workers to remain in Qatar;
A non-discriminatory living minimum wage; and
Allowing migrant workers to have a collective voice without fear of punishment.

"Qatar embarked on a massive infrastructure programme to underpin its hosting of the World Cup in 2022, but it did so without regard to the consequences for the very people who are delivering the roads, bridges, utilities, sports facilities and all the rest needed to become a global sporting centre. The death and injury toll continues to rise, and migrant workers remain impoverished and trapped in servitude. Qatar has the financial means to make the real reforms, ensure safe work and decent wages, and the international community is ready to help when the government finally shows that it is serious. That day has yet to come, but the new ruling from the ILO should hasten Qatar's realisation that the world will only be convinced by real change, not by public relations exercises," said Burrow.

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