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Gulf Countries and Forced Labour

Brussels, 12 December 2016 (ITUC OnLine): Reports that Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries will enter into discussions on compliance with international conventions on forced labour as part of global efforts to combat modern slavery are a welcome signal that the UAE, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and other countries in the region may finally move to bring their repressive labour systems into the modern age. The reports emerged from a GCC meeting with British Prime Minister Theresa May on the weekend.

Gulf countries have some of the worst employment laws in the world, with millions of migrant workers denied the right to form and join unions and "sponsorship" systems that tie workers to their employer and in some countries, such as Qatar, require employer approval to obtain an exit visa to leave the country. Foreign workers will still require exist visas under the labour law "reforms" announced by Qatar, which is re-naming its kafala system but retaining the worst aspects of a legal system that denies the most fundamental rights to migrants. Other countries in the region also use the kafala system, leaving workers completely at the mercy of their employers. Thousands of foreign workers remain stranded in Saudi Arabia, with their wages unpaid and having to ask their home governments to help them return home.

Sharan Burrow, ITUC General Secretary, said: "Employment laws in most of the GCC countries are deeply exploitative, and the governments there have been using their global economic power to avoid and deflect criticism from other governments. The indication that they may finally be willing to join the 21st century gives some hope for the millions of workers and their families who depend on work in the Gulf for a living. A series of simple steps are needed to bring their laws into line with ILO standards: ending the kafala system and exit visas, allowing workers to form and join unions and bargain collectively, and as a first step, ratifying and implementing the 2014 ILO Forced Labour Protocol. These steps, along with the guarantee of a non-discriminatory minimum living wage to migrants, would transform the lives of millions. There is certainly no lack of money - all that is needed is the political will."

Frances O'Grady, General Secretary of the TUC-Great Britain, said: "We're glad that our Prime Minister is raising modern slavery with Gulf states. In particular, we want the British Government to press Qatar harder to abolish kafala."

Some of the Gulf countries do permit trade unions, with the Kuwait national centre KTUF calling for an end to kafala and with migrant workers entitled to union protection in Oman. Bahrain, where the GCC meeting with Theresa May took place, does have trade unions; however, the government launched a wave of repression against the national centre GFBTU following public unrest in 2011.

The ITUC represents 181 million workers in 162 countries and territories and has 340 national affiliates.

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