

Governments should reject Qatar's false and misleading claims at the ILO

Over 2 million workers continue to suffer under system of modern slavery

Brussels, 15 March 2017 (ITUC OnLine): A submission by the government of Qatar to the International Labour Organisation, in the lead up to next week's ILO discussion on a complaint lodged by the ITUC on Qatar's "kafala" system of modern slavery, is full of false and misleading claims, according to the ITUC. More than two million migrant workers there are still subjected to pervasive violations of their fundamental rights, forced to seek their employer's permission to leave the country or change jobs, denied the right to form unions and bargain for decent pay and conditions, subjected to dangerous working environments and made to live in squalid labour camps with up to 12 people per room sleeping on makeshift bunks.

Sharan Burrow, ITUC General Secretary, said "The most outrageous claim in Qatar's deceptive report to the ILO is that the notorious exit permit system has been repealed. This is a blatant lie – the truth is that workers still have to ask permission from their bosses to leave the country. In addition, figures provided by Qatar to the ILO on deaths and injuries to workers are highly misleading, ignoring for example the tragic deaths of 11 workers and injuries to 12 others in a company labour camp fire in June 2016. The truth is that hundreds of migrant workers die each year in Qatar due to the appalling working and living conditions. Qatar is putting in a huge public relations effort and using its financial power to try and compel governments to close off any possibility of an ILO Commission of Inquiry, but it continues to treat migrant workers as the property of their bosses and to suppress the truth behind the façade of the 2022 World Cup preparations. None of the benchmarks for reform already set by the ILO have been properly met. Governments need to stand up to Qatar's bully tactics and show that they will not accept the evil of modern slavery in one of the world's richest countries."

A briefing <http://www.ituc-csi.org/complaint-against-qatar-329th> for ILO Governing Body members prepared by the ITUC provides a detailed rebuttal of the claims of the government of Qatar. Along with the fact that migrant workers still have to ask their employer's permission to leave the country, other key issues include:

- Employers are still able to stop workers changing to another employer for a period of up to five years;
- The government's report contains no information on any dissuasive sanctions against any employer for non-compliance of the existing weak regulations;
- Confiscation of workers' passports remains commonplace. More than 230 migrant workers interviewed in an Amnesty International report published in 2016 said they were not in possession of their passport;
- The report refers to five key areas of possible technical cooperation between the ILO and Qatar discussed during an ILO mission to Qatar in February 2017, concerning non-payment of wages, labour inspection and occupational health and safety, recruitment and contracts, protection from forced labour and "voice" for workers. The only possible reason for this is that Qatar is still not compliant in these areas; and,

- The government is actively blocking the signing of agreements between multinational construction operators in Qatar and the global union federation for the construction sector, BWI, concerning company operations in Qatar.

“The ILO Governing Body will consider a proposal next week that would require Qatar to undertake real reforms, and to defer until November any decision on initiating a Commission of Inquiry. Qatar thus has another six months to demonstrate stop the use of modern slavery and meet its international legal obligations on workers’ rights. Millions of migrant workers and their families are hoping that governments at the ILO will stand with them in ending slavery, and the international trade union movement will hold governments to account,” said Burrow.

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