

## Arab labour on the move

*The Grand Maghreb is one of the main suppliers of manpower to Europe while the countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) receive thousands of migrant workers.*

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Constantly on the move, the Arab world is experiencing a major migration of its workers. None of the countries in the Arab League<sup>1</sup> can really be described as large-scale host or sending countries. Many workers from countries such as Oman and the Syrian Arab Republic migrated during the 1970s and these countries were consequently forced to call upon immigrant workers to replace the workforce they were lacking. Others, such as Algeria and Egypt, became sending countries in the mid-1990s in the wake of the civil war raging within their borders. Iraq is a special case. Although traditionally a country that exported workers, like Saudi Arabia it turned to importing migrant workers in the 1980s. Due to the Gulf War, its level of economic activity is now lower than it was in the 1980s and it has become one of the main sending countries.

The Grand Maghreb region of North Africa (comprising Algeria, the Libyan Arab Jamahiriya, Mauritania, Morocco and Tunisia) is still the main source of Arab migration. According to Boutros Boutros-Ghali, over the next 30 years, between 20 and 25 million North Africans and Arabs will join the population of Europe. A similar number of workers has also migrated to the six member States of the Gulf Cooperation Council (Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE)). The vast majority of migrants are from South-East Asia, Egypt, Jordan, Sudan, Yemen and areas control-

led by the Palestinian Authority. Some 61 per cent of workers in Oman are foreigners, while the figure is 83 per cent in Kuwait and 91 per cent in the UAE. With a population of 19.5 million, Sri Lanka has for many years provided around 500,000 housekeepers to the Middle East.

In 1975, the number of immigrant workers from GCC countries increased by 1.12 million. Over the past decade (1990-2001), the number has increased from 5.21 million to 9.42 million, with the majority of such workers coming from Asia. As an indication, the private sector in GCC countries employs less than 10 per cent of local workers.

In contrast to the European Community where internal trade accounts for 50 per cent of the total, there is very little trade between Arab countries, accounting for just 5 per cent to 9 per cent of total volume. Since 1996, Saudi Arabia has been pursuing a restrictive policy on immigrant workers. According to a report by the UN's Economic and Social Council,<sup>2</sup> Riyadh has drawn up a five-year economic plan designed to encourage the hiring of Saudi nationals in the country. To this end, the Government plans to offer loans as an incentive and to issue recruitment licences only to those employers hiring a certain quota of Saudi nationals. Thereafter, companies are obliged to increase the number of Saudi workers they employ by at least 5 per cent a year otherwise they will face penalties. Even as early as 1996, Saudi Arabia de-

clared 13 professions closed to foreigners and a year later, a further 11 were added to this list. Bahrain and Oman have also brought their labour legislation into line with Saudi Arabia's. In 1997, Riyadh increased the budget available for providing training for local workers to US\$11.1 billion, an increase of over 40 per cent compared with the previous year.

Between 1990 and 1995, foreign workers in Saudi Arabia were paid a total of US\$100.3 billion (an average of US\$16.7 billion a year). In countries such as Pakistan, Tunisia and Yemen, foreign workers are paid a total of 30 per cent more than the amount of Public Development Aid (PDA) provided by the international community.

### **Substantial wage difference between locals and expatriates**

All too often, migrants fall victim to difficult working conditions. They are forced to work extra hours without pay and have no contract. Many of them do not receive social security or legal protection. They are often branded criminals and are blamed for all kinds of trafficking, diseases (AIDS), drugs and yet more ills. Nationals of GCC countries generally hold management positions in both the public and the private sectors and as such, there is usually a significant wage difference between the local population and expatriates.

Unions are not well-established in the Middle East, especially in Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the UAE. In this context, Yemeni workers are in a much better position since they do have a functioning and active union organization. In Israel, Palestinian workers are not allowed to form or join unions. According to the ILO, some Arab countries do not even comply with its Minimum Age Convention, 1973 (No. 138). This is the situation in Morocco, in particular, where 12 is the legal minimum working age, as established in 1947.

Migrant workers are vulnerable to exploitation, racial discrimination, and sexual and physical abuse, particularly when

they do not have any legal status. In 2000, the ILO launched a project to create an international database designed to offer a viable solution to discrimination against migrant workers. In addition, the training measures that it presented to governments in order to implement an effective policy against all forms of intolerance towards migrants were reinforced in 2000. The ILO is also supporting the United Nations' efforts to ratify its 1990 International Convention on the Protection of Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families and has played an active role in UN initiatives to introduce an International Migrants' Day.

Nevertheless, the UN has not received support from member States for its suggestion to convene a conference to address migration issues. UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan has called for such a conference three times since 1995. Of the 189 member States, only 78 have responded to the suggestion: 47 were "in favour", 26 opposed it and 5 offered "partial support".

In December 1999, the ILO organized a symposium of regional Asia/Pacific unions in Malaysia, which concluded that migrant workers have traditionally been ignored by unions: in their home countries, they are not considered because they do not belong to a union. Despite helping to reduce the unemployment rate in their sending country and generally boosting their home country's economy, they remain largely outside the unions' main area of interest. In host countries, even if they form a permanent part of the regional economy, they are seldom welcomed with open arms by the locals because they impact on market standards and wages. Those who attended the symposium also recognized that migrants are not necessarily in direct competition with local workers and that the latter's working conditions would also become more favourable if those of migrants were improved. Participants also considered it essential that unions take account of migrant workers.

Unions in the Asia/Pacific region are well aware of the intrinsic difficulties of encouraging migrants to join a union or take

part in union activities. Unions are unable to guarantee a satisfactory service to migrants because of the situation in their different countries of origin where the principle of keeping religion and politics closely linked is widespread; this characteristic is particularly evident in the “state-society” relations seen in Arab countries.

Unions face different problems in host countries. Migrants change employers frequently and work in a wide range of sectors. They are also often very difficult – if not impossible – to contact. Language and cultural barriers make access difficult. In many cases, migrants themselves have not received a decent education and do not see any need to join a union. Policies and practices in host countries, too, are often very restrictive and for those belonging to a union the chances of finding a job can be very slim. Unions themselves often do not have the financial resources or networks to assist migrants actively. They also find it extremely difficult to make their views on extending services to migrants known to members.

The ILO relies on unions to put pressure on governments to ratify the 1990 Convention. The final report by the symposium of regional Asia/Pacific unions in Malaysia made the recommendations below to unions.

***Sending countries.*** Unions should:

- offer accredited programmes and training to prepare workers before they leave. They should provide country-specific information on recruitment, employment, entitlement to social security and international labour standards;
- negotiate standardized, internationally recognized employment contracts. These should be signed by the employer, the migrant and the job centre;
- work towards complete abolition of recruitment fees, in line with ILO Conventions. They should ensure that before the migrant leaves, he/she has the addresses and other details of local unions in the host country;

- put pressure on employers’ associations to reintegrate migrants returning to their home country swiftly;
- make reintegration of migrants easier by organizing information sessions on employment as well as training to obtain vocational qualifications. Unions should also help to set up migrant co-operatives and provide information, particularly for migrants who have been victims of abuse; and
- ensure that female migrants receive adequate protection, specifically in connection with discrimination and human trafficking.

***Host countries.*** Unions should:

- press for legislation guaranteeing migrant workers equal treatment in terms of working conditions, social security, non-discrimination and other rights enshrined in ILO Conventions;
- use different forms of communication to make their members aware of problematic issues with a view to stamping out anti-migrant attitudes and finding real solutions;
- organize regular information sessions with locals to keep them up to date with the developments in migration issues in the region. Unions should exchange programmes and initiatives, and discuss the best course of action to take with regard to migration; and
- ensure that their charters do not contain anything that may constitute discrimination against migrants. They should encourage female migrants to join by offering benefits that would be attractive to women.

They should cooperate in circulating up-to-date information on the social and cultural aspects of sending and host countries in order to keep cultural difficulties between migrants and employers to a minimum. They should cooperate in identifying job and recruitment centres providing false information to migrants, encourag-

ing substitution of employment contracts or charging excessive fees. Legal action should be taken against such centres.

Unions should work together to identify agencies, immigration officials and contractors involved in human trafficking, in particular that of women or children.

They should ensure that legal action is taken against any individual involved in such activities and set up a committee for migrant workers' rights appointed by union members to improve protection for migrant workers. In particular, they should create databases to ensure the ILO can intervene on the basis of authoritative information and put pressure on their

respective governments to incorporate social clauses into international and bilateral treaties. They should also sponsor International Migrants Day.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The Arab League comprises the following countries and entities: Algeria, Bahrain, Djibouti, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, the Libyan Arab Jamahiriya, Mauritania, Morocco, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, Sudan, the Syrian Arab Republic, Tunisia, the United Arab Emirates, Yemen and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO).

<sup>2</sup> United Nations: ECOSOC report E/1998/100, New York, 1998.