

Immigrant workers: Millions face expulsion

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Millions of migrant workers throughout Asia are among the hardest hit by the economic crisis. As unemployment and poverty rise, governments are shamelessly playing the nationalist card.

In Malaysia, the Mahathir government is moving to expel up to a million "illegal" foreign workers- many of them from Indonesia. Another 700,000 immigrant construction workers face the prospect of having their work permits revoked unless their employer proves they are essential to the completion of projects. A further 150,000 workers in service industries will not have their permits renewed.

For years, Malaysian companies have exploited immigrants, employing them on low wages in the most onerous and dangerous jobs--on building sites, as domestic servants and in restaurants. The workers often pay huge fees to agents who arrange their visas, work permits and jobs.

Now the government is blaming immigrant workers for the rise in unemployment, poverty and crime rates. A growing number of immigrant workers are being held in detention under atrocious conditions.

A social welfare worker, Irene Fernandez, is on trial in Kuala Lumpur on allegations of spreading "false news" of assaults and other abuses of detainees. She faces a three-year jail term and a huge fine if found guilty. According to Fernandez, detained workers sleep on wooden floors in crowded dormitories without bedding, adequate sanitation or healthcare.

In Thailand, the government of Prime Minister Chuan Leekpai is planning the forced repatriation of more than a million immigrant workers, most of whom have fled from neighboring Burma. The first stage involves the expulsion of 300,000 over the next six months.

In South Korea, immigrant workers are already leaving at the rate of 120 a day. The government has indicated that it will not renew the work permits of the tens of thousands of "guest workers" in the country.



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