

# The plight of the UAE's migrant workers: the flipside of a booming economy

Jean Shaoul

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Behind the hoopla about the high rate of economic growth, prestige construction sites and luxury hotels of Dubai, one of seven states that comprise the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and the emergence of Dubai as a major trading and investment hub lies the appalling financial and social misery facing millions of migrant workers.

While many countries rely on cheap foreign workers, nowhere else in the world is as dependent on them as the UAE, where there are 2.7 million foreign workers registered with the Ministry of Labour. The total number of the expatriate labour force is much higher as many, such as domestic workers, drivers and those working in the free-zones do not come under the Ministry of Labour. There are also many working without legal status on visit visas.

Last year, the ministry issued 835,000 work permits and expects to issue 1.2 million in 2007. In all, migrant workers constitute a massive 85 percent of the 5.3 million population and 90 percent of the workforce in the private sector, predominantly construction, hospitality and domestic service. A mere 800,000 people are UAE citizens.

These young immigrant workers, the majority of whom are from rural areas in India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and the Philippines, are forced to live for years without their families in labour camps. They work under the yoke of labour contracts that are little short of the slavery associated with a bygone era. Not a few are Chinese prisoners who can commute their sentences by working in the Gulf.

With immigration sponsorship laws that grant employers enormous powers over the lives of their workers, abuses against migrant workers are widespread. They include non-payment of wages, extended working hours without overtime rates of pay, unsafe working conditions resulting in deaths and injuries, squalid living conditions in the labour camps, the withholding of passports and travel documents, and tied contracts that make it illegal to change employers.

The burgeoning profits and balance sheets of the Gulf state that flow to just a handful of families are the direct result of the bonded labour and the ever increasing immiseration of young migrants. The conditions they face are the product of the neo-liberal agenda so much admired by big business and politicians everywhere. Indeed, in 2005, former US president Bill Clinton said, "Dubai is a role model of what could be achieved despite the other negative developments in the region. Look at Dubai, which has achieved enormous economic growth in such a short period of time."

Dubai thus constitutes the standard against which corporations and governments around the world must compete if they are to survive.

Prior to the discovery of oil in the 1950s, the Trucial States, as the UAE was then called, were under the control of Britain and had a

population of barely 100,000, dependent on seafaring and dates. To extract the oil and build a modern state, replete with the world's most luxurious hotels, apartments and shopping malls, the tribal rulers imported cheap labour from India and Pakistan that soon outnumbered UAE citizens. They embarked on massive land reclamation projects, the three Palm Islands and the World, and the world's tallest building, Burj Dubai.

Migrant workers are on slave labour rates of pay. While taxi drivers and hotel workers get a pittance—just 1,750 dirhams a month (about US\$600)—construction workers fare even worse. They typically get only 600 dirhams (about US\$200).

The expatriate workers slog six days a week at guarded sites. They are ferried to work in company buses, which are typically late, adding hours to their working day. Set far apart from the glitz of Dubai and with almost no public transport or sidewalks, they live in labour camps that stretch for miles in the desert sand.

Sonapur is by no means the worst labour camp. The wind fills the air with sand and dust that choke the lungs and sting the eyes. With few or no public sewers, the stench is vile.

Half an hour from Dubai, it houses more than 50,000 workers. All are male and most are young. The low rise buildings resemble prison camps, a far cry from the luxury hotels in which the hospitality workers serve. Workers are lucky if there are only two people to a room measuring 10 feet by 8 feet. Most have multiple bunks in a tiny space. Workers use communal bathrooms, showers and kitchens outside their rooms.

Many of the camps prohibit visitors. The occasional shop sells groceries, household goods and basic clothing. All day and all night, company buses ferry the migrants to and from their place of work where three shifts may be the norm, churning yet more dust into the air. Bulldozers moving earth for more camps and some sewers add to the turmoil.

Some workers get an allowance towards private accommodation in the city. But with landlords unwilling to let apartments to bachelors, this is expensive and means high occupancy levels.

There is absolutely nothing else to do other than eat, sleep and work. Workers told this reporter that even going to the cinema on their day off is out of the question. It costs more than a day's wages. There is little to do in Dubai without money, and loads of it.

Workers typically remit 75-80 percent of their wages back to their families. But the fall in the value of the dollar to which the dirham is linked has meant that the value of their remittances has fallen by 25-30 percent. At the same time prices—everything has to be imported—have risen by at least 9-10 percent according to official estimates although most analysts agree that the true figure is much

higher, making Dubai expensive even for Western visitors.

Construction work is notoriously unsafe even in the advanced capitalist countries. But building skyscrapers in the heat of the UAE is doubly so. Despite being required to do so, the government does not keep health and safety statistics. While Dubai Municipality recorded 34 construction deaths in 2004 and 39 in 2005, these are well below those compiled by private sources.

*Construction Week* found that 880 migrant construction workers died in the UAE in 2004. Given that Dubai employs more construction workers than the rest of the UAE put together, it is difficult to reconcile this with the official number of 34 for Dubai. The Indian consulate in Dubai told Human Rights Watch, the New York based human rights group, that it had registered 971 deaths in 2005, of which 61 were registered as site accidents, against Dubai's official number of 39.

With sweltering heat and humidity for six months of the year and temperatures well above 32 degrees Centigrade (100 degrees Fahrenheit) in July and August and humidity levels of more than 90 percent, heat related illnesses, heat stroke and dehydration, are the most important health issue affecting construction workers. Dr. G.Y. Naroo, acting head of the Accident and Emergency department of the Rashid hospital in Dubai, told *Construction Week* that 5,000 construction workers were brought into A and E during July and August 2004.

While the Ministry of Labour issued a decree in June 2005 banning outdoor work between 12:30 p.m. and 4:30 p.m. during July and August, 60 percent of companies did not obey the law. None were prosecuted. The following year, the Ministry curtailed this break to 3 p.m.

According to the Human Rights Watch report, *Building Towers, Cheating Workers*, recruitment agencies openly flout the law prohibiting them from charging workers for visa fees (\$55), visa insurance fees (\$273) and airline tickets, which employers should pay. Those workers that can do so borrow the money, which can take two years to pay back, from friends and family. Others are forced to take loans from the recruitment agencies at exorbitant rates of interest. It is not unknown for the agencies to deduct money from workers' salaries to cover expenses such as visa renewal, work permit card or health card costs, that the employers should pay.

The report says that employers routinely withhold workers' wages, with disastrous consequences: they fall into arrears on the debt they owe the recruiting agencies; they incur extra interest; they are unable to remit money back home to their wives and young children who are dependent on the money earned in the UAE for their survival; and they are even forced to borrow to pay for food and basic needs.

Such withholding of wages is particularly prevalent in the myriad of small companies that are subcontractors to and squeezed by the prime contractors. But it goes far beyond even the "customary" withholding of six to eight weeks wages as "security" to prevent workers from "running away". In effect, all these companies, including the largest, are using their workers as a source of interest free credit as well as cheap labour.

Some companies save money by failing to pay for electricity and garbage and sewage collection in the labour camps. When they go bust, they simply abscond. Workers are left with little effective recourse for their unpaid wages even though all companies must by law have a local director. The government refuses to implement court orders forcing employers to pay their wages and utility bills. Without an employer, workers become illegal, with no means of getting

another job or returning home without becoming even more indebted.

It is impossible to get another job unless the employer releases the worker and/or the worker leaves and re-enters the UAE. But often this too is impossible, as employers illegally hold onto their passports. By way of contrast, employers can switch their contracts to lower rates of pay. There is no minimum wage. Trade unions are illegal. Strikers face the threat of deportation.

Despite tight control of the media, the local papers cannot avoid reporting the dreadful conditions and abuse of migrant workers. In just the last week:

- \* Five workers from India, Pakistan and Bangladesh were killed and a further five are critically ill in hospital when a fire gutted an oil company in Sharjah, Dubai's neighbouring city state.

- \* Many of the 280,000 illegal migrants granted an amnesty in June could not afford the flight home.

- \* New regulations for tenancy deposits in Sharjah will hit the multiple occupancy bachelor apartments.

- \* A cargo ship that sank with 14 crew members from Tanzania, Myanmar, India and Pakistan shortly after leaving Dubai in June was officially declared lost. But as the ship was registered in St Vincent, little if any compensation will be paid.

These conditions have provoked public protests and strikes. According to government statistics, at least eight major strikes took place in 2005 in support of unpaid wages, better working conditions and higher wages. On March 21, 2006, thousands of construction workers rioted in Dubai and on May 16, 2006, thousands of workers working the Brussels-based company Besix went on strike.

Last July, a four day strike at a gas processing plant ended when the government sent in the armed forces.

Several strikes broke out in Dubai over the last weekend in October. Thousands of foreign construction workers, including those from one of Dubai's largest engineering companies, at Al Ghusais, Al Mamzar and Jebel Ali industrial areas, ignored the threat of deportation and took to the streets to demand higher pay, more allowances for overtime work, and better living conditions and transport to their place of work.

Riot police were immediately deployed and a helicopter from Dubai police circled overhead to monitor the strikers' movements. More than 4,000 workers were jailed and were only released last Wednesday after Indian embassy officials negotiated the release of those who were not involved in violence. 800 remain in jail while 159 face deportation.



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