

Brutal exploitation of immigrant labor in Russia

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The human rights organization Human Rights Watch released a report in early February documenting the criminal exploitation of immigrant workers employed in the preparations for the 2014 Olympic Winter Games.

Russia has been preparing the Winter Olympics in Sochi on the Black Sea for years. Tens of thousands of workers, including about 16,000 immigrant workers, are building luxury hotels and the infrastructure required for the games. Most of the funding is flowing into the pockets of corrupt bureaucrats and businessmen, making the games the most expensive ever. In February the Kremlin admitted that the total cost of the Games would be around \$50 billion, almost five times more than the sum originally planned.

As the report by Human Rights Watch makes clear, the workers who are building the hotels and sports facilities will receive virtually none of this money. The entire operation is based on the ruthless exploitation of tens of thousands of workers who are denied all rights.

The organization interviewed 66 workers from Eastern Europe, the countries of the former Soviet Union, and poor regions in Russia who came to Sochi to earn money. Most of the workers interviewed were lumberjacks, welders and locksmiths. The average salary for such jobs for immigrant workers ranges from 55 to 80 rubles (\$1.80 to \$2.60) per hour, i.e., about 14,000 to 19,000 rubles (\$450 to \$600) per month.

None of the workers interviewed received their contractual salary. Many had received no money for months; some were working for nothing. One group of workers had had no pay for six months. The norm is for workers to receive their salaries irregularly, and even then they rarely receive the full amount.

Human Rights Watch quoted a worker from Uzbekistan, who had agreed a monthly salary of 24,000

rubles (\$700), but without a contract from his employer, "The employer occasionally gave us small amounts: 200 rubles or 500 rubles [\$6, \$15], one time 1,400 rubles [\$42], for cigarettes, the phone, incidental things. I worked for almost three months, others worked for five months, for nothing. Nothing but promises, promises from them."

Several workers also reported that they had not received work permits and that their employer had confiscated their passports. They were forced to work with an "illegal" status, could not leave, and had to work in the hope that at some point they would receive money and once again see their documents.

Two construction workers from Ukraine, Maxim and Yaroslav, had come to Sochi in March 2012 and worked constructing premises for media representatives. Maxim said: "We have no contracts and no work permits. They've taken away our passports. They promised to help us with the work permits, but we got nothing. All I have in the way of an official document is a pass to enter the construction site. We came here from over 2,000 kilometers away and ended up in a complete mess."

Two workers from Serbia also reported that their passports were taken away from them for several months, during which time they received no wages. Radmilo Petrovic said: "The situation was bad because they weren't paying regular wages or any real money at all. But I couldn't do anything because they had my passport and I had no money. I had no choice but to just keep working."

Almost all the workers interviewed said they have been working twelve hours a day, seven days a week. They received one day off at most every 14 days. Some had worked for months without a day off. On their free days, workers slept most of the time because they were

completely exhausted from work.

“The work is really very difficult,” said Salimjon, a 22-year-old worker from Uzbekistan. “There isn’t any rest. It’s really hard. The pay is miserly, but what can you do? We’re all just trying to get by somehow. They don’t even give you a minute to have a cigarette, or rest for a minute.”

According to the workers, their food provision was very poor. They were given mainly rice, a little meat and almost no vegetables or fruit. The food was insufficient, they said, particularly bearing in mind the heavy physical work they were expected to carry out.

The accommodation for workers is overcrowded and unsanitary. Up to 200 are crammed into a single house with about a dozen workers, sometimes more, sharing one room. A worker from Tajikistan reported living with 200 other workers in a house with just one toilet. Sixteen people were crowded into one room. Some workers were also housed in factories.

When a group of eleven Serbian workers went on strike because of the intolerable working and living conditions they were told they would get no food. Radmilo Petrovic from Serbia reported: "They threatened that we would be denied access to the mess hall and denied vouchers for getting meals there. Since we weren't getting much money at all, this was a serious threat to us. "When the workers complained to the Labour Inspectorate in Sochi, they were told: 'You can go home if you want!'"

The conditions described in the Human Rights Watch states report are by no means exceptional.

The criminal exploitation of immigrant workers is only the most blatant expression of the social and economic crisis created by the collapse of the Soviet Union and the restoration of capitalism. The world economic crisis has severely hit all these countries thereby exacerbating their economic and social crisis.

The catastrophic conditions compel millions of workers to earn their money in countries such as Russia, Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan, which experienced a relative economic boom based on their raw material and energy exports in the first decade of 2000. The money sent by workers abroad to their families at home constitutes around 16.3 percent of gross domestic product in Uzbekistan and 47 percent in Tajikistan.

Russia has an estimated 15 million immigrants, ranking second place in the world only after the United

States. According to the OECD, more illegal immigrants live in Russia than anywhere else in the world, constituting nearly 7 percent of the working population. As the report by Human Rights Watch makes clear, many of them are deliberately driven underground by their employers.

The immigrant workers are the weakest and most oppressed part of the post-Soviet working class. They have no social rights and are completely at the mercy of their employers.

Factory accidents and fires occur on a regular basis in Russia, claiming particularly often the lives of immigrants. Earlier this year, ten construction workers from Tajikistan died in a fire at their accommodation in Moscow. Seven others were injured. In Tajikistan, three coffins arrive on a daily basis from Russia containing workers who have died as a result of disastrous working and living conditions or were killed in racist attacks. Overall, last year 1,055 Tajik workers died in Russia - nearly 180 more than in 2011.

Given the increasing social tensions, the Kremlin has intensified its racist propaganda in the media. (See: “Russian government intensifies witch-hunt of migrant workers”) Fascist militias such as "Svyetlaya Rus" (Bright Rus') cooperate with the police and government authorities. The Stalinist KPRF, the main opposition party in the Duma, provided positive media coverage for this group. In February the city of Moscow, home to an estimated 2 million immigrant workers, announced it was establishing a militia of more than 300 men to regularly patrol all districts and hunt down "illegal" immigrants.



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