

Indian government abets repression of workers in Saudi Arabia

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In a series of hostile statements issued in late March, the Indian government has joined Saudi authorities in threatening eleven Indian female cleaning workers at a Saudi hospital who stopped work because they have not been paid for nine months.

When the workers initially contacted the Indian embassy in Riyadh for help in getting their back wages, Indian authorities did nothing other than issue a series of perfunctory, pro-forma statements about how they were seeking to contact the employer and the Saudi government to “resolve the issue.”

With no aid forthcoming from this quarter, the workers, who all hail from the southern state of Kerala, decided to go on strike until their Saudi employer paid them their full nine months’ back wages.

After the workers took this action, the Indian embassy turned decidedly hostile. It issued a series of stridently intimidating statements, warning the strikers that they would be subject to prosecution, imprisonment and deportation by the Saudi absolutist monarchy if they did not immediately end their job action.

“Anyone who is found to be in violation of Saudi laws and indulg[ing] in strike-related activities would face penalty, imprisonment and deportation by Saudi authorities,” declared an Indian embassy statement. “The embassy,” continued the statement, “has a mechanism in place to take up all issues related to the welfare of Indians in Saudi Arabia with the concerned authorities.”

This statement is unprecedented even for a government that has long been indifferent to the plight of the 2.8 million migrant Indian workers in Saudi Arabia—most of whom work under barbaric conditions and all of whom are denied basic democratic and collective bargaining rights.

The Indian embassy statement went on to accuse unnamed social workers and “illegal agents” of encouraging the hospital cleaners to take job action.

“It has come to the notice of the embassy that some self-styled social workers and illegal agents have been instigating some Indian female workers in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia to go on strike. These illegal agents have also [been] found to have circulated reports on the strike through social media trying to get it” publicized, according to embassy.

By issuing these statements the Indian government is inviting the Saudi autocracy to suppress these workers and their supporters and to make of them an example so as to intimidate all foreign workers in Saudi Arabia.

One of the female cleaners involved in the agitation, Maniyamma Vilasini, complained to the *Indo-Asian News Service* (IANS) that the Indian Embassy has done nothing to help them. She then gave an inkling of the harrowing conditions the workers face, noting that their employer had denied them any vacations and refused to allow them to leave at the end of their two-year contracts. “They are discriminating against Indian workers,” said Maniyamma Vilasini. “All the other workers have received payment. We have had many problems because of this.”

India’s corporate media has largely blacked out the worker protest in Saudi Arabia. One of the few if not the only prominent daily to report on the dispute—the *Wall Street Journal*-affiliated *Live Mint* —carried a single article. That article gave great prominence to the brazenly hostile statement issued by the Indian Embassy.

It is well-documented that the working and living conditions of the millions of Asian workers who have flocked to Saudi Arabia and the other Gulf countries to escape unemployment and destitution at home are deplorable. Lacking any legal rights, they are liable to suffer severe punishment from their employers and the state, including, fines, severe beatings, imprisonment and deportation for even small infractions, such as not having a requisite stamp on their passport.

In January of this year the Saudi regime, which does not

even have a written criminal code, thus allowing it to act with complete impunity, beheaded an Indian worker after convicting him in its kangaroo courts of killing a Saudi citizen. Similarly 40 Indonesian workers have been convicted of “sorcery and witchcraft,” a not too infrequent charge, for practicing their own religion, and are languishing in jail. Five of these workers, having exhausted their appeals, are now facing possible execution.

Late last year the Saudi regime waged a concerted nationwide campaign to enforce a “Saudi-ization” labor law named *Nitaqat*, aimed at limiting the number of foreign workers and further intimidating them (see: “Migrant workers clash with Saudi police amid mass deportation raids”). In January the Saud regime announced in a brief statement that in just three months it had deported over 250,000 foreign workers, of whom 134,000 were Indians. While several other governments have asked for a reprieve for their nationals, the Indian government has voiced no objection, in effect endorsing the mass deportation of its own citizens.

What explains the transformation of the Indian government’s attitude toward expat Indian workers in Saudi Arabia from indifference to open hostility?

Unquestionably, the Indian government and elite are anxious that worker agitation not disturb the annual inflow of \$30 billion from the 7 million Indian workers in the Middle East. This sum is equal to fully 10 percent of India’s foreign currency reserves.

Another major reason is the increasingly close relations between India’s government and the medieval Saudi monarchy. During the past decade in which the Congress Party-led United Progressive Alliance has formed India’s government, New Delhi has courted the Saudi royal family.

By cozying up to Riyadh, the Indian elite hopes to temper the longstanding support the Saudi regime has extended to India’s arch-rival, Pakistan. Even more importantly, Saudi Arabia is providing India with an increasing share of its oil imports. India relies on imports for close to three-quarters of its oil consumption.

This reorientation of India’s foreign policy toward ever-closer ties with Riyadh was heralded by the four-day visit King Abdullah made to India in 2006. His was the first visit by a Saudi monarch to India since 1955.

The Saudi leader was accompanied by a huge entourage of businessmen and other senior officials. Ironically, this medieval despot was given the high honor of being the chief guest at India’s Republic Day parade, an annual

commemoration of the formal adoption of a written republican constitution by the Indian elite on January 26, 1950.

In 2010, UPA Prime Minister Manmohan Singh made a return visit to the Saudi Kingdom. The visit concluded with the two sides issuing the “Riyadh Declaration,” which set forth the framework for much closer political, military and economic collaboration between the two countries.

Over the past decade India has dramatically increased its oil imports from Saudi Arabia. A key reason for this is US pressure on India—backed by the threat of economic sanctions—to dramatically reduce its imports of Iranian oil. Saudi Arabia now accounts for fully 20 percent of India’s annual crude oil imports, and Iran less than 10 percent.

Bilateral Indo-Saudi trade for 2011-2012 amounted to \$37 billion dollars, although \$31 billion of this was Indian oil imports.

As a part of its growing partnership with the Saudi regime, New Delhi has started to share intelligence information with Riyadh to combat “terrorism,” despite the long-history of the Saudi regime financing, arming and bankrolling Islamic fundamentalist terrorists.

Relations between the two countries reached a new high point this February with the visit of Crown Prince and Saudi Defense Minister Salman al Saud. The highest-level visit of a Saudi official since that of King Abdullah in 2006, it concluded with an unprecedented MOU (Memorandum of Understanding) on Defense Cooperation. Indian External Affairs Minister Salman Khurshid has stressed this defence cooperation marks a new departure: “I would stress that it should not be merely buyer-seller, but rather go beyond this to see the two sides working on training, joint production and military exercises.”

Given the reactionary foreign policy trajectory of the Indian ruling elite, the open hostility displayed by the Indian embassy toward the brutally exploited and repressed migrant Indian workers in Saudi Arabia should come as no surprise.



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