

# Media hypocrisy over fate of migrant labour in Qatar

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The intense campaign to overturn FIFA's decisions in December 2010 to hold the World Cup in Russia in 2018 and Qatar in 2022 has spawned a slew of articles expressing outrage over the atrocious conditions facing migrant workers building the World Cup site in Qatar face.

Coming as many such statements do from representatives of US and British imperialism and a compliant corporate media, the denunciations are entirely self-serving.

The fate of migrant workers in Qatar, the other Gulf petro-monarchies and throughout the Middle East is horrendous and has long been documented. They all rely on migrant workers from South Asia, employed on low pay and in slave-labour conditions, to maintain their wealth and power, and keep their own restive populations at bay.

Insofar as conditions in Qatar depart from the Gulf norms, it is because of the vast scale of the \$260 billion infrastructure and stadiums required for the World Cup, and the time scale in which it must be completed. The number of workers involved is expected to rise to at least a million in a few years' time, when work starts on the 12 Stadiums.

As numerous reports have revealed, the move by South Asian workers to Qatar in search of money to send back to their families has brought untold suffering and death, as they are forced to toil in temperatures that regularly exceed 50 degrees centigrade for as little as 87 cents an hour.

The most frequently cited statistic is that 1,200 migrant workers, or roughly one a day, have died since Qatar won the bid at the end of 2010 to host the 2022 World Cup—although not all on the World Cup sites. If correct—Qatar rejects the figure and the methodology used to estimate it—then the 2022 World Cup has

already claimed more lives than that of the 2013 Rana Plaza disaster in Bangladesh. The Rana Plaza garment factory collapsed in the Bangladesh capital, Dhaka in 2013, killing more than 1,130 workers who were crushed under eight stories of concrete.

By far the greatest number of victims are Indian and Nepalese workers. According to government statistics in India and Nepal, some 279 Indians and 162 Nepalese died in Qatar from cardiac arrest due to mandatory long shifts in searing temperatures, and unsafe working conditions in 2014 alone.

A report by the International Trade Union Confederation published in March 2014 estimated that at this rate 4,000 workers could die in the run up to the World Cup.

Last month, Amnesty International published a briefing entitled *Promising Little, Delivering Less: Qatar and Migrant Abuse ahead of the 2022 Football World Cup* that said that more than a year after the government promised reforms to improve migrant labour rights, little had been done. An earlier report had identified nine fundamental migrant labour rights issues, but there had been only limited progress on five of these. In four other areas—exit permits, the restriction on changing employers under Qatar's kafala system, the protection of domestic workers, and the freedom to form or join trade unions—authorities had made no improvements at all.

Amnesty highlighted the case of Ranjith, a Sri Lankan national who had been working in Qatar for five months. Ranjith explained, "I was promised 1600 Qatari Riyals (\$US370), but when I arrived my boss said I would only get paid 800. Until now, though, I have not been paid anything.

"I haven't been given an ID or any contract. I wake up at 4am every morning, have my shower and small

breakfast then leave my home in the Industrial Area for work at 5am and arrive an hour later at 6am.

“To come to Qatar, I had to take a loan of 130,000 Sri Lankan Rupees [approximately \$1,000] at an interest rate of 36 percent. I just want to work and earn some money for my wife and children, but because of my sponsor I cannot change jobs. If I go to the police they will arrest and deport me because I do not have an ID.”

Gana Prasad said, “My Company has never given me my ID so at any time the police can arrest me and I will be stuck in jail. Because of this I rarely leave my camp. My life is just the construction site and this dirty room. If I could I would change jobs, but I can’t because my sponsor has my passport and won’t let me work for another company.”

In order to work in Qatar legally, each migrant worker must pay up to \$1,570 and work under the kafala (sponsorship) system that ties workers to their employers, who take complete control of their legal and employment status while in the country. In many cases employers withhold passports and even wages to prevent workers leaving or quitting their jobs. The kafala system is nothing short of a modern day form of slavery imposed on hundreds of thousands of workers.

As a result of the kafala system, employers refused to allow Nepalese workers compassionate leave to return home after the April 25 earthquake. Speaking on the issue to the *Guardian*, Tek Bahadur Gurung, Nepal’s labour minister, explained, “They have lost relatives and their homes and are enduring very difficult conditions in Qatar. This is adding to their suffering.”

Gurung added, “We are a small, poor country and these powerful organisations are not interested in listening to us.”

This is in fact a lie, as most of the South Asian governments have given the nod to the Gulf States’ atrocious treatment of migrant workers because their remittances provide a crucial safety net for the impoverished masses, thereby deflecting popular anger.

Several undercover investigations have revealed countless human rights abuses inflicted upon Qatar’s migrant work force. For example, one Nepalese carpenter, speaking under conditions of anonymity, told *The Mirror* newspaper last year, “We’re treated like slaves. They don’t see us as human and our deaths are cheap. They have our passports so we cannot go home. We are trapped.” *The Mirror*’s 2014 investigation

went on to uncover evidence of workers who had been beaten by gang masters after their passports were confiscated.

Just last week, the BBC reported that its reporters, invited to Qatar as part of an international delegation, had been detained for several days as a matter of “national security” and interrogated for attempting to gather material on migrants’ housing and working conditions.

Qatar is a key ally of the US, Britain and the other imperialist powers in their endless wars for domination of the region’s energy resources and the suppression of the working class. Despite some tactical differences with the US and its regional allies over its support for the Muslim Brotherhood and Hamas in Gaza, Qatar has played a crucial role in the US-led wars on Libya and Syria. It has sponsored and financed right-wing Islamist militias whom the pseudo left parties have called “revolutionaries,” evidently impervious to the fact that Qatar, which imposes a slavocracy at home, is not supporting democracy or progress abroad.

The media are now wringing their hands over the fate of migrant workers in Qatar, citing it as a potential reason for reconsidering the location of the 2022 World Cup. But this will not change these relations fundamentally. Rather, such mock outrage provides a useful stick to beat FIFA into submission, after the US bid for the 2022 World Cup was turned down, while helping to discredit the awarding of the 2018 cup to Russia.



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