

Sri Lankan migrant workers speak out over worsening social conditions

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The Sri Lanka Foreign Employment Bureau (SLFEB) recently reported that 226,000 people had officially registered for foreign jobs by the end of August, and that the total this year was expected to exceed 300,000.

However, the actual number of people leaving in search of work abroad in response to intolerable social conditions is much higher. Hundreds of thousands do not bother to register with the SLFEB.

Last year alone at least 500,000 jobs were destroyed by the country's unprecedented economic crisis. The closure of free trade zone factories, sharp falls in agricultural production due to droughts and fertilizer shortages, welfare cuts and hyperinflation have increased the numbers seeking foreign employment.

While the Sri Lankan government is encouraging people to seek work abroad to boost the country's foreign exchange earnings, it has not taken any steps to protect workers from ruthless exploitation and harassment, particularly in the Middle East.

World Socialist Web Site reporters recently spoke to Sri Lankan migrant workers about the disastrous conditions they face.

Priyantha, a former resident of Negombo, was given refugee status in Italy because of the economic crisis and collapse of the Sri Lanka's tourist industry, following the 2019 Easter terrorist bomb attacks in 2019.

"I came to Italy just two years ago and am currently working for a cleaning company owned by a Sri Lankan. I'm working very hard and must clean about seven large five-storied housing complexes per day. My working hours exceed 16 hours per day but am only paid €6 per hour," he said.

Priyantha explained that this work is not available every day and he must find temporary work in the countryside. Even though a legally approved employment contract is required, many employers exploit the low-cost labour and provide only temporary work in defiance of the law.

Prime Minister Georgia Meloni's government, he said, was slashing migrant workers' rights as well as cutting

welfare to the unemployed.

On August 1, the Italian government ended all welfare to 169,000 poor families, claiming that they were "fit for work." Meloni has warned that these cuts are just the beginning and that there will be more social attacks. This means there will be another migrant worker employment crisis in the future.

Priyantha explained that his wife and children were living in Sri Lanka but the hard-earned money he sent back was eroded by inflation and not sufficient for his family's needs, including his children's education.

A migrant worker living in Canada explained: "I came to Canada with higher educational qualifications from Sri Lanka but have yet to get the life I wanted."

Thousands of young people and migrant workers with specific skills or educational qualifications come to work or settle in Canada, seeing it as a country with a high standard of living. This country is considered "an attractive destination for Sri Lankan immigrants," he added.

"But now Canadian workers are facing the consequences of the global economic crisis. The price of essential foods, insurance, monthly water and electricity, house rent, bank premiums, university and vocational training fees and recreational activities, have increased exorbitantly. Job cuts, stagnant wages and slashing welfare services have also been accelerated," he said.

To get a license for a job in Canada requires a lot of money and experts providing advice for this can charge up to 35,000 Canadian dollars for the service, he continued.

"A large percentage of those coming to Canada with work permits are employed as unskilled laborers and receive wages that are insufficient to live on. In many cases, they've been forced to take a second job to find the money they've spent getting into Canada. In many cases the second job is unregistered and for cash.

"International students attending vocational colleges in big cities like Toronto and Vancouver must work illegally to make ends meet," he said, explaining that rents and other expenses are very high in these cities.

“Course fees for international students are usually three times that of local students,” he explained. To secure legal employment at the end of their studies, students had to undertake a minimum two-year course.

According to Article 2 of Convention No. 97 of the International Labor Organization (ILO), all services related to migrant workers must be provided free of charge. The Sri Lanka government, however, charges heavily for the services provided through the SLFEB, and willfully ignores the low pay and harsh conditions endured by domestic workers in the Middle East.

In Oman, scores of Sri Lankan workers are being held in detention camps run by the Omani government following the arrest of 75 Sri Lankan domestic workers, with Sri Lankan embassy support, on May 22. The workers maintained a 24-hour protest near the embassy in 50 degree heat to demand their immediate return to Sri Lanka.

Embassy officials allowed the protest to continue for weeks, hoping that the domestic workers would give up and return to a so-called safehouse maintained by the embassy.

The protesting workers, however, were supported by other Sri Lankan migrant workers as well as those from India and Bangladesh. Many provided food and protection, while others conducted an intense social media campaign to expose the tragic situation facing the domestic workers.

Harshani Pradeepika, who participated in the protest and spent months in the “safehouse,” spoke with *World Socialist Web Site* reporters. She recently returned to Sri Lanka with the help of a sympathetic person, who has also assisted other victimised workers.

“I decided to work abroad because I wasn’t paid an adequate wage in Sri Lanka. I was promised a job in the employment agency but had to work as a domestic worker. Even then, I wasn’t paid and was brutally assaulted by my employer. That’s why I decided to return to Sri Lanka,” she said.

Pradeepika previously lived in a remote Sri Lankan village. It bordered the war-torn Northern Province where successive Colombo governments conducted a ferocious 26-year civil war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam.

“It was difficult to get a job and we depended on farming, which was very strenuous. We were afraid because of the war, and every night we wondered whether we would see the dawn. Our nights were always spent in darkness without being seen by anyone. Somehow, we tolerated all these difficulties,” she said.

Pradeepika was married in 2003 and has a daughter who lives with her sick mother. Following her marriage she worked in various jobs, including at a studio and in a salon, before getting work in Oman.

Another migrant worker who returned to Sri Lanka but wanted to remain anonymous, spoke about the harsh and overcrowded conditions at the Sri Lankan embassy’s “safe house” in Oman. Domestic workers and others staying there were escaping intolerable situations, including over-work, physical harassment and non-payment of wages. She said that hundreds were sleeping cramped on the floor and were provided inadequate portions of vegetables, dhal, rice and flour.

Sri Lankan embassies, particularly those in Oman and Jordan, have a notorious history of conniving with state repression.

On July 29, 2020, the Sri Lankan embassy in Jordan called the police to crush a protest outside its premises. The workers were demanding unpaid wages and to be allowed to return to their families in Sri Lanka so as to escape the escalating COVID-19 pandemic.

Many of the migrant workers arrested in Middle Eastern countries are often charged with visa violations and falsely accused of crimes by their employers, who are legally allowed to impose slave-like conditions on domestic workers.

The Sri Lanka government is heavily dependent on migrant workers’ remittances. As the Central Bank of Sri Lanka’s website notes, “[B]eing a major source of foreign exchange earnings, workers’ remittances have covered around 80 percent of the annual trade deficit, on average, over the past two decades.”

While the website proclaims that the government wants to reduce poverty and income inequality through overseas employment, the opposite is the case.

The days when foreign employment for a Sri Lankan worker could provide a decent life for themselves and their families are long gone. Confronted with an escalating crisis of global capitalism, governments, corporate big business, and wealthy employers everywhere are imposing the most brutal forms of labour exploitation.



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