

The plight of Thai workers in Israel

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29 November 2023

As Israel prepares to step up its genocidal war against Palestinians, tens of thousands of exploited foreign workers in Israel have been unable to leave. The largest national grouping among approximately 124,000 foreign workers prior to the conflict were around 30,000 Thai agricultural workers drawn from the impoverished north-east of Thailand.

Many were employed on Israeli farming communities or kibbutzes near the Gaza Strip where 75 percent of Israel's vegetables are grown. In the initial Palestinian uprising on October 7 by Hamas on the outskirts of Gaza, an estimated 240 hostages were seized, including at least 32 workers from Thailand. As of November 27, 17 Thai citizens have been freed while 15 remain hostages. In addition, another 32 Thais have been killed.

The responsibility for these deaths and hostages lies with Israel, which has oppressed the Palestinian people for 75 years. Since 2007, Gaza has been little more than an open-air prison. Under the fascistic Netanyahu regime, Israel carried out numerous provocations against the Palestinians and has now seized on the Palestinian uprising to launch a genocide in Gaza.

Since the Israeli destruction of Gaza began, at least 8,600 Thai workers employed in Israel have returned to Thailand. However, thousands more workers remain in Israel.

Determined to hang on to their cheap labour, Israeli employers have reportedly either increased wages to convince Thai workers to remain or delayed payment to prevent workers from leaving. The Israeli embassy in Bangkok denied that money was being withheld, after Thai Prime Minister Srettha Thavisin told reporters that it was “not acceptable that money is used by employers to lure them [to stay].”

The turn to exploiting cheap foreign labour is bound up with Israel's repressive policies towards Palestinians. A large influx of Thai workers followed the First Intifada, Palestinian uprising from 1987 to 1993 which cost the lives of nearly 2,000 Palestinian. In response, Israel sought to lessen its dependence on Palestinian workers by

turning to cheap foreign labour, particularly Thai farmers for the agricultural sector.

These workers face highly exploitative conditions. In 2013, following pressure from labor rights' organizations, the Thailand-Israel Cooperation on the Placement of Workers (TIC) project was implemented, based on the UN's International Organization for Migration (IOM), replacing the extortionate training and fees of labour brokers.

A 2015 report by the US-based Human Rights Watch interviewed ten groups of Thai workers in different parts of Israel and found they “were paid salaries significantly below the legal minimum wage, forced to work long hours in excess of the legal maximum, subjected to unsafe working conditions, and denied their right to change employers.”

The report explained: “A Thai man working in a farm in the north of the country told Human Rights Watch that he felt ‘like dead meat’ after a working day that typically began at 4:30 a.m. and ended at 7 p.m. A colleague of his described employers watching them working in his fields through binoculars and treating them ‘like slaves’...”

“At one farm, Thai workers showed Human Rights Watch researchers the makeshift accommodations they had constructed out of cardboard boxes, erected inside farm sheds. Workers at several farms listed a range of maladies, including headaches, respiratory problems, and burning sensations in their eyes, that they attributed to spraying pesticides without adequate protection; some workers said they had relatives in Thailand send them medicines on account of their inability to access medical care.”

A study in 2020 by Kav LaOved, an Israeli workers' rights nongovernmental organization, confirmed that 83 percent of Thai workers were paid below the legal minimum wage.

A report of the US State Department Trafficking in Persons Report in 2022 categorized some Thai agricultural workers as undergoing forced labor, highlighting the “lack of breaks or rest days, withheld

passports, poor living conditions and difficulty changing employers due to limitations on work permits.”

The report also drew attention to fraudulent “study programs” which contained no academic content and were merely a pretext for circumventing bilateral work agreements. Thousands of dollars in “tuition fees” placed workers into what amounted to debt bondage.

Successive Thai governments have facilitated this gross exploitation of Thai workers as their funds repatriated to their relatives form a significant source of foreign exchange. While Prime Minister Srettha Thavisin has promised to repatriate Thai workers who want to return home, thousands remain in Israel out of economic necessity. Those who have returned complain that the government’s promised financial assistance has failed to materialize.

Srettha has strenuously avoided any criticism of Israel or the imperialist countries backing its genocidal war. The government wants to keep open the export of cheap labour to Israel and at the same time avoid antagonizing the United States, which is a military ally of Thailand. As the brutality of Israel’s war has horrified the world’s population, the Thai foreign ministry, following other countries, has “condemned the killing of innocent civilians... by any group and for any reason,” drawing an equal sign between violence of the Israeli oppressors and oppressed Palestinians.

The Israeli government intends to expand the influx of foreign labor to eliminate the reliance on an estimated 100,000 Palestinian workers holding permits to work in Israel prior to the October 7 uprising. In April, the government announced plans to bring thousands of workers from India and China for employment as caregivers and in the construction industry. As its prepares to kill or drive all Palestinians out of Gaza, plans are undoubtedly being drawn up for a further expansion.



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