

Sri Lankan government refuses to protect migrant workers who lose their jobs in Oman

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Job losses have increased in Oman, a Middle Eastern country where many workers from South Asian countries, including Sri Lanka, go in search of work. Those affected include domestic and skilled laborers.

A group of Sri Lankan workers who have lost their jobs and could not find alternative employment started a protest near the Sri Lankan embassy in Muscat demanding that the government of President Ranil Wickremesinghe make arrangements to bring them home.

The Sri Lankan embassy has turned down the request, saying that its government has no responsibility for these workers as they had come to Oman on tourist visas.

A statement issued by the embassy on January 10 declares: “The embassy also advises, once again, that Sri Lankan migrants who are on expired tourist visas or work visas not to gather in front of the embassy, and that Sri Lankans seeking future employment in the Sultanate to leave the country before their visas expire. If the visa has expired, it is advised to notify the relevant Omani authorities and make the relevant payment for the expired period and leave.”

According to the above announcement, on January 2, Oman police removed the Sri Lankan workers who were in front of the embassy.

Aruna, a Sri Lankan worker who came to the aid of the protesting workers, told the *World Socialist Web Site* (WSWS) that about 80 workers were arrested including 30 women. After the arrest and removal of the workers who had gathered earlier, another group of workers gathered in front of the office. Another worker informed the WSWS that the group was not present when she visited the site on January 23.

According to the announcement, the safe house (Suraksha’ Safe Houses) attached to the embassy,

established by embassy authorities purportedly for the protection of women, has also been closed to them.

The condition of these stranded workers waiting on the pavement near the highway is extremely unsafe. They live on the help of fellow workers. They have no toilets or sanitary facilities. They are exposed to extreme heat during the day and extreme cold at night. They have to sleep on disposable cardboard boxes.

At the beginning of last year, when the workers’ unrest arose following reports of trafficking of Sri Lankan migrant women workers in Oman, the Sri Lankan government announced that it would investigate the issue. Instead of providing assistance, in mid-year the embassy authorities forced about 80 workers, including the women who were protesting in front of the Embassy and those who were at the Suraksha’ Safe House, into the custody of Oman police.

Since the increase of the number of Sri Lankan migrant workers seeking protection due to visa expiry, job losses and harassment by employers, the number of people staying at the Suraksha Safe House increased to five or six times its capacity, and consequently the admission of jobs seekers coming on tourist visas has been stopped.

Harshani Pradipika Ratnayake, who was arrested by the police and then came to Sri Lanka under the general amnesty of the Oman government, told the WSWS that even though she got an air ticket and came to Sri Lanka with the help of a friend, she is facing an unsolvable crisis on how to maintain her child and sick mother. The Sri Lankan government has refused to give air tickets to anyone who came to Sri Lanka on a general amnesty offered by the Oman government.

The Oman government has suspended the conversion of all types of tourist visas to work visas for foreigners

since November, and it has made the situation of foreign workers in Oman even more difficult. Oman police arrest foreign workers en masse and keep them in detention camps without basic facilities. Subsequently, there are no records of what happened to some of those detained workers. In such a situation, the indifference of the Sri Lankan government towards the fate of these migrant workers is akin to leaving them to their deaths.

The workers face police brutality as well as draconian rules and regulations. One cannot stay in the country for more than 30 days after the expiry of a visa. The workers have to pay 10 Omani riyals per day for such overstaying, and they are subjected to a maximum fine of 500 riyals. That amount is a huge and intolerable figure exceeding 400,000 Sri Lankan rupees.

Mobs have also been deployed against workers. The workers involved in the protest told the WSWS that on January 18, a group of thugs wielding iron rods attacked them several times during the night and day, and were trying to drag women workers away by force.

Sithum, a worker who lost his job there, stated that to return to Sri Lanka, he needed about 600,000 rupees including the cost of the air ticket. He is a mechanic who went to Oman last year because he could not bear the hardships he had experienced as a contract worker in Sri Lanka. Though he had expected a job with a good salary, the employer provided him only meals.

“I had to pay 550,000 rupees to the foreign job agency to come here. They said that if I wanted to go for a foreign job registering under the *Bureau of Foreign Employment* in Sri Lanka I had to pay about 1.2 million rupees. Thus, since I can't afford that I reluctantly decided to go abroad on a tourist visa,” he said.

Another worker waiting on the payment mentioned that the embassy supports gangs to evict them and to forcibly exploit workers. He also gave the number of a vehicle in which a gang came.

There are around 1.5 million foreign workers in Oman. They have come from very poor countries in Asia and Africa, and they all face the same situation.

Due to the deepening global capitalist crisis, the exploitation of workers and trampling of their democratic rights has intensified in country after country. This situation has worsened due to imperialist-backed Israel's genocidal war against Palestinians in

Gaza which has threatened a wider eruption in the Middle East.

The governments in Asian and African countries like Sri Lanka are strongly encouraging workers to work abroad as their remittances provide desperately needed foreign currency. Under these conditions workers who find jobs are trying to escape from miserable conditions that successive governments have subjected them to. Since they cannot spend the often substantial amounts of money required to get a work visa, they are, naturally, compelled to travel abroad through tourist visas.

The capitalist governments, who are only interested in foreign currency remittances from these migrant workers, cynically wash their hands of them when they face problems abroad.



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