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Migrants in the Arab Gulf | Representative image

## INCLUSION

# Wage Theft & No Mechanism To Fight Leaves Indian Migrants In A Fix

*Unpaid wages and hurried repatriation leave workers with no choice but to forgo their hard earned money*



Rejimon Kuttappan

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in March and April, my colleagues and I worked for 30 days. But we were paid only for 15 days. Citing COVID-19 led market crisis, the company had put forward two options. Either we have to quit or have to adjust for new terms. A few people left. But a few like me agreed to work for slashed salary,” Anish said.

Anish’s case is not an isolated one. There are thousands of migrant workers in the Arab Gulf, subjected to “wage theft” during COVID-19 who are forced to work for new unwritten and unsigned “contracts” where salary, overtime, and other benefits are cut.

And if a worker is not ready to adjust to new “contracts”, then he is allowed to quit without dues and end of service benefits cleared. When the removed worker opts for repatriation, he is not given either a platform or enough time to file a legal remedy for his loss.

Talking to *The Lede* Shameer U, a migrant worker in Oman, said that he was getting a salary from his company since the middle of 2019. But he had to give up his unpaid wages and leave Oman through the repatriation process.

“I had some kidney issues. Since May 2019, the salary was not proper in my company. By the end of 2019, it worsened. In between, my company’s inaction turned me into an undocumented worker. In March, the COVID-19 outbreak happened. I was afraid that I would die. I finally, somehow managed to get the help of social workers and find an exit from Oman,” Shameer told *The Lede*.

Shameer had to pay a fine for overstaying in Oman. But at the same time, he had to give up his unpaid wages thinking that it was his fate. He did not have a platform to file a case to get justice.

Repatriation of migrant workers, especially from the Arab Gulf, is happening hastily so that workers do not get to claim their unpaid wages.

Countries of destination and origin have begun repatriation procedures of these workers, without giving thought to their predicament and presenting their return as inevitable.

Many migrant workers like Shameer had reconciled to the situation of wage theft in the form of unfair or unpaid wages for months and years before the COVID-19 pandemic.

They accepted it as their fate and refrained from complaining lest they lose their jobs, or worse still, live under the fear of being made undocumented.

According to Migrant Forum in Asia, a regional network that stands up for the rights and welfare of migrants said in a statement that “wage theft” is happening and a transitional justice mechanism should be set up immediately to address the repatriated workers’ grievances.

“Extraordinary times call for extraordinary measures,” said William Gois, Regional Coordinator of Migrant Forum in Asia. “Millions will suffer if this crime goes unnoticed. We cannot see this as collateral damage brought by the pandemic,” he added.

According to Gois, it should be a priority to guarantee that all repatriated workers with legitimate claims can access justice and some kind of compensation.

The appeal which, civil organisations and trade unions have launched together, calls on governments to urgently establish a transitional justice mechanism to address grievances, claims and labour disputes of repatriated workers who have lost their jobs as a result of the pandemic.

“The pandemic must not stifle our will, our spirit, and commitment for justice,” Gois said.

“If we are to ‘Build Back Better’, we cannot continue to turn a blind eye to the issue of wage theft that has been persistent across migration corridors for years, and will be unprecedented in the case of repatriated migrant workers in the COVID-19 pandemic,” Gois added.

According to the statement issued by the organisations, access to legal advice and support, facilitating power of attorney procedures, and easing requirements for in-

Globally, the International Labour Organization (ILO) estimates 195 million jobs will be wiped out as a result of the pandemic.

In the Middle East region alone, an estimated five million jobs will be lost, many of those jobs are held by migrant workers.

Since the start of the pandemic, more than 200,000 migrant workers have been repatriated to Asia from different parts of the world.

This number is expected to rise exponentially over the next few months.

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