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Migrant workers employed by waste-treatment company RAMCO in Lebanon face off with security forces during a strike action at a main company depot outside the capital, Beirut [Courtesy, RAMCO striker/Al Jazeera]

By Timour Azhari

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Beirut, Lebanon – Rafi, a migrant worker in Lebanon’s waste sector, has a wife and two young daughters back home in Bangladesh who depend on his monthly remittances to pay for school, food and other needs.

But for the past five months, Rafi says he has been unable to send any money back home, because the private waste-management company for which he works, RAMCO, violated his work contract by effectively slashing his wages from \$300 a month to just over \$100.

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“It’s a very big problem, I can’t send my baby to school,” said Rafi, who asked Al Jazeera to refer to him by a pseudonym because he fears retribution.

Rafi is not alone in his hardships, or his anger. Faced with a similarly untenable position, some 400 RAMCO employees – mostly from Bangladesh and India – took the unprecedented decision last month to walk off the job until the company pays them what they are owed.

Though initially overshadowed by the coronavirus pandemic, the labour strike seeped into the headlines on May 12 when employees blocked roads outside RAMCO’s main housing and storage site on the outskirts of Beirut and prevented garbage trucks from leaving.

Riot police were called in. Videos and images that strikers shot at the scene and shared with Al Jazeera showed security forces deploying tear gas and beating strikers – a small contingent of whom vandalised company property. Some of the images showed cuts to workers’ arms and hands. One showed a man with severe bruises to his face.

An employee was arrested during the incident and remains in custody.

While some of the strikers have crossed the picket line and returned to work since the strike was called on April 3, at least 250 are standing their ground and refusing to go

back on the job until their demands are met.

“In the history of Lebanon, I don’t think that migrant workers made a weeks-long strike and protested in such a way,” said Lea Bou Khater, a labour movement specialist and researcher at the Consultation and Research Institute.

Bou Khater sees the RAMCO strike as a potential watershed for one of Lebanon’s most marginalised communities.

Denied basic labour protections, migrant workers are frequently exploited by employers who pay below minimum wage and can deport those who step out of line.

“Their accommodation and food depends on their employer,” Bou Khater told Al Jazeera. “They can be deported, they are protesting and striking in very difficult conditions.”



Waves of tear gas waft over a parking lot at a main depot of waste treatment company RAMCO during a crackdown on striking employees (Photo courtesy RAMCO striker/Al Jazeera)

The exchange rate pay cut

The roots of the RAMCO pay dispute can be traced to Lebanon’s [rapidly depreciating](#) currency.

Rafi says that in November, RAMCO stopped paying him and other workers in US dollars and started compensating them in Lebanese pounds.

But rather than use the parallel market exchange rate – which currently values the Lebanese pound at 4,000 to \$1 – RAMCO is pegging the conversion to the 23-year-old but now wildly unrealistic official exchange rate of 1,500 Lebanese pounds to the dollar.

“Pay us in dollars, or pay us in Lebanese pounds at the market rate,” said Rafi. “I want a solution. No solution? No work.”

Walid Bou Saad, director of RAMCO, told Al Jazeera that while it is clear that the company is “violating” its contracts with its workers, it cannot pay them in dollars or at the prevailing market rate because the Lebanese state – its biggest customer – started paying for the company’s services in Lebanese pounds at the official exchange rate.

“The workers have the right to ask for their rights, but how can I give them their rights if I can’t get mine?” he asked.

He also said the Lebanese government owes RAMCO \$8.7m for work done over the past nine months.

The worst-hit rise up

There is plenty of financial misery to go around in Lebanon. Last summer, the economy [started to buckle](#) under the weight of decades of unfettered corruption, unsustainable fiscal policies, the war next door in Syria and a slump in vital remittances from abroad.

Tens of thousands of Lebanese have since lost their jobs while hundreds of businesses have closed – and that was before a nationwide COVID-19 lockdown delivered yet another crippling blow to an economy already on life support.

Nearly everyone in Lebanon has been hit with a de facto wage cut as the currency has depreciated, but few have been worse affected by the currency crunch than migrants, most of whom labour abroad to send money home to their relatives.

Migrant workers are employed under the notorious kafala system that ties their residency status directly to their employer, limiting their ability to amend or end

contracts.

Moreover, Lebanon's labour laws do not extend to them, meaning they are often denied basic protections such as minimum wage guarantees and paid time off.

“There is no economic or social justice at all,” says Bou Khater, who sees the RAMCO strike as a long overdue reckoning. “This strike shows we are at a point where this is no longer acceptable. It shows how bad the system is.”

As the country's economy has spiralled further into crisis, thousands of migrant workers have applied to leave Lebanon, mainly citizens of the Philippines, Ethiopia and Bangladesh.

Abdullah Al Mamun, Charge d'affaires at the Bangladesh Embassy in Beirut, told Al Jazeera that some 7,600 Bangladeshi nationals living and working in Lebanon have already registered for repatriation with the embassy.

He estimates that of the roughly 150,000 Bangladeshi expatriates in the country, at least 10 percent would seek to return home due to the economic crisis.

But getting home has been complicated by coronavirus containment measures. Lebanon's only international airport in Beirut has been closed to civilian traffic for two months to stem the spread of COVID-19.

Abuse allegations investigated

Mamun said the Bangladeshi embassy has negotiated better terms – including a slight raise – for its nationals who are contracted work for RAMCO but who can't get home yet.

But beyond the pay dispute, workers have alleged more serious abuse.

Some RAMCO workers circulated a joint statement on their personal social media accounts claiming that a mentally ill coworker had been denied treatment and “locked up in a dark room in the underground for three days and physically and mentally tortured by RAMCO company security” in mid-April.

A video of the alleged victim with ropes tied around his legs was shared on social media by employees as well as labour activists.

RAMCO's director, Saad, vehemently denies any allegations of torture. He told Al Jazeera that the worker in question had been offered treatment at a number of hospitals, and that doctors had advised he be returned to Bangladesh. Pending his repatriation, Saad said the company had placed the worker in a specialised "medical isolation room" for one night before releasing him to the care of his fellow workers.

Mamun said that the Bangladeshi embassy had investigated the allegations and interviewed the man and found no signs of abuse.

An advisor to Lebanon's labour minister told Al Jazeera the ministry is also investigating the RAMCO case.

SOURCE : AL JAZEERA

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