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# Employers owe whopping Rs 1,200 crore to Keralites who returned from Gulf

*Shocking revelation by 'Kerala Wage Theft' study. Says access to justice mechanisms difficult*





**By Rajesh Abraham**

**Express News Service**



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KOCHI: Employers owe at least Rs 1,200 crore to the expatriates who have returned to Kerala from the Gulf countries following termination from work — in the aftermath of the Covid outbreak — without receiving service benefits or wages. unpaid leaves, deduction of month by a new survey.

The repatriation survey, chronicled in ‘Kerala Wage Theft Report’ by the Centre for Indian Migrant Studies (CIMS), an Aluva-based non-profit, found that access to justice mechanisms was very difficult even though respondents knew about their rights. The CIMS report comes after Norka, the department handling non-resident Keralites’ affairs, had earlier said nearly 12 lakh -- out of 15.4 lakh NRIs who returned to the state -- have cited job loss as the reason for their return.

“Many of the migrant workers who participated in our survey were sent back to India in a hurry, sent home with the promise that their pending dues will be credited to Indian accounts or abandoned in destination countries by their employees. This has prevented a majority of them from accessing justice mechanisms available at countries of destination,” said the report.

Rafeek Ravuther, executive director, CIMS, said the ‘wage theft’ survey was conducted among 3,345 migrant workers who are largely returnees and those stranded abroad after being abandoned by employers. Out of the total respondents, 11 % (397) migrant workers from Kerala reported wage theft along with supporting documents. Among them, 90% belong to the construction sector, 2% each to manufacturing and transportation, and 2.5% comprise other sectors like domestic work, retail and medical sector. The report has also named the companies that have reported group and individual thefts. For instance, seven companies — three from Kuwait, two from the UAE, and one each from Saudi Arabia and Qatar — owe over Rs 61.69 crore to Kerala migrant workers.

“A construction company in Saudi Arabia named Nassar S Al Hajri Corporation (NSH) accounts for the maximum number of wage theft cases reported by the workers in a group,” the CIMS report said. As far as individual cases are concerned, the total wage theft amount estimated among the returnees surveyed comes to the tune of Rs 89.71 lakh.

“It is estimated that 1,20,816 Gulf returnees are yet to receive their salary arrears/benefits etc. Even if we take a conservative number of Rs 1 lakh to be paid to each of the 1.2 lakh people who have returned, the wage theft will amount to Rs 1,200 crore,” said Ravuther.Rejimon Kuttappan, a migrant-rights researcher, said the Kerala government should immediately join hands with other states such as Uttar Pradesh, Punjab and Tamil Nadu, which too have seen large numbers of Gulf returnees, and put pressure on the central government to help the migrant workers get their money back.

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