

# **Qatar: the plight of migrant workers and the World Cup of Shame**

**Why it is a trade union and human rights issue for UNISON**

## **Introduction**

- In 2010 Qatar was awarded the 2022 World Cup by the football world governing body, FIFA.
- An unprecedented construction project commenced once the venue was confirmed involving up to 1.5 million migrant workers building the infrastructure for the World Cup as well as other construction and engineering projects.
- Many of the migrant workers fall foul of Qatar's poor safety regulation and employment laws. A worker dies every day on construction sites which means more than 4,000 people will die before the tournament even starts.
- Migrant workers in other sectors, including education and domestic service in private homes, have also been subjected to conditions that are tantamount to forced labour.
- This briefing sets out why the plight of migrant workers in Qatar is an issue for UNISON, and what UNISON members can do to engage in the campaign to improve conditions for workers in the emirate.

## **Background to treatment of migrant workers in Qatar**

FIFA awarded Qatar the World Cup in 2010, amidst allegations of fraud and disbelief at holding a tournament in a country that experiences temperatures of over 40°C during the summer months which is when the World Cup is traditionally played.

Once the venue was announced, the emirate embarked on one of the biggest construction projects ever to take place in Qatar. Alongside the construction of the football stadiums other major architectural and engineering projects, including building a new city to host the final of the tournament in 2022, are taking place.

Qatar has increased the number of migrant workers coming into the country, mostly in construction, but also in education, the service sector and as domestic workers. Many are employed by international companies who have been given lucrative contracts by the Qatari authorities.

The International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) and human rights groups, among others, have been monitoring the plight of migrant workers since Qatar was announced as the host nation.

Using statistics provided by two of the sending countries, Nepal and India, the ITUC estimates that as many as 4,000 people will die building the World Cup infrastructure and other architectural and engineering projects.

FIFA has been lukewarm in pressing for Qatar to improve working conditions for migrant workers involved in the World Cup building programme. In response to negative publicity, Qatar has made 'paper' changes to some of its draconian employment legislation, including the Kafala or sponsorship system, but the death count continues unabated as the changes, including a system of site inspections, are not implemented.

## **Kafala system of sponsorship**

Kafala is a system whereby migrant workers require the sponsorship of a prospective employer to obtain work in Qatar. Once there their passports are confiscated and they are prohibited from changing employers, irrespective of how abusive the employer becomes.

Migrant workers are not allowed to join a trade union. Many suffer at the hands of their employers: cases of rapes and beatings have been reported by domestic workers. The ITUC has reported alleged cases of forced labour of education support workers in Hamad bin Khalifa University in Doha, where University College London (UCL) and other international universities have campuses.

When workers who have been assaulted by their employer complain, they have found it next to impossible to leave the country as the employer must agree for them to receive an exit visa. When workers have been fired or have left their employment because they haven't been paid or the employer has ceased to operate, they end up becoming destitute and effectively stuck in the country without authorised papers.

In addition to the horrific number of deaths taking place, other abuses suffered by migrant workers in Qatar include:

Ujjwal Thapa, a worker from Nepal, who said he had not been paid for several months despite working 11 hours a day, six days a week, on building sites for an Indian contractor. He could not leave Qatar because his employer had taken his passport and he could not change jobs because he could get approval to do so only from his employer (source: Guardian newspaper);

Two construction workers were forced to work 60 hours a week without overtime payment. When the company closed they were unable to go home immediately as their passports had been confiscated. It took 13 months and all of their savings to finally get an exit visa (source: ITUC);

Julie (not her real name) is from the Philippines and has worked as a cleaner in the hospitality sector. She is forced to share a bedroom with 7 other people, work 6 days a week and work double shifts. When asked if she could obtain a certificate to change employer, she said she was subjected to an angry response from her manager (source: ITUC);

Two of the most high profile cases are that of the international footballers, Zahir Belounis and Abdeslam Ouaddou, both of whom fell foul of the Kafala system. In the case of Zahir Belounis, his club refused to sign his exit visa after a dispute over his contract. It took an international campaign involving human rights groups, trade unions and others, including FIFPro (the international body representing footballers), for Qatar to finally allow him to leave the country.

The cases are symptomatic of an abusive system which treats workers as dispensable commodities. It is this system that the international trade union wishes to see outlawed.

### **What is UNISON's position?**

UNISON is calling on Qatar to overhaul its employment system, including the Kafala system of sponsorship. We are also calling for Qatar, and other Gulf states that rely heavily on migrant labour, to respect workers' rights, including the right to freedom of association and the right to collective bargaining as laid down in international treaties.

UNISON will work with others, including the TUC and human rights organisations, to raise awareness of the plight of migrant workers across the Gulf States, especially in Qatar as it prepares to host the World Athletics Championship in 2019 and the World Cup in 2022.

## What you can do to support migrant workers in Qatar

Do you work in a higher educational institution with an overseas campus? If so, you could consider starting (or joining) a campaign with other unions and human rights groups at your workplace, including the Universities and Colleges Union (UCU), the National Union of Students (NUS) and Amnesty International, calling on your employer to ensure that contracts providing services on overseas' campuses include clauses that respect workers' rights.

With your friends and family, take a photo in your football club's colours, holding up a 'PlayFair Qatar' poster (can be downloaded from the website), and send it to the PlayFair campaign.

Ask your branch or region to affiliate to Anti Slavery International, Amnesty International UK and other human right groups that are campaigning for workers' rights in Qatar.

Liaise with branch reps, including the H&S rep, to mark International Workers' Memorial Day (28 April). Activities could include: holding a minute's silence in the branch for those who have died in Qatar (and elsewhere), wearing a purple ribbon, signing online and paper petitions.

## Staying in touch/keeping informed

Amnesty International UK  
[www.amnesty.org.uk/qatar-grim-reality-behind-world-cup-2022](http://www.amnesty.org.uk/qatar-grim-reality-behind-world-cup-2022)

Anti Slavery International  
[www.antislavery.org](http://www.antislavery.org)

ITUC [www.ituc-csi.org](http://www.ituc-csi.org)

ITUC Publication: The case against Qatar  
[www.ituc-csi.org/IMG/pdf/the\\_case\\_against\\_qatar](http://www.ituc-csi.org/IMG/pdf/the_case_against_qatar)

Labour Start online campaigns [www.labourstart.org/2013/country.php?country=Qatar](http://www.labourstart.org/2013/country.php?country=Qatar)

TUC Play Fair Qatar campaign  
<http://playfairqatar.org.uk>

The Guardian and Independent newspapers are good sources of information on Qatar in relation to the World Cup and the rights of migrant workers.

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