

# ILO's workers' group optimistic about labour law changes in Qatar

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Qatar's treatment of its migrant workers has for long been the subject of international scrutiny. Global trade unions, human rights organisations and NGOs have collectively criticized the gulf nation for allegedly failing to ensure welfare of workers.

But as Qatar spends billions of dollars on building new infrastructure in the run-up to the 2022 FIFA World Cup, the Government has introduced a new labour law which it says will provide concrete benefits to migrant workers in the country.

Migrant workers dominate Qatar's labor force, comprising 94 per cent of all workers and 86 per cent of the country's total population of nearly 2

million - the world's highest ratio of migrants to citizens.

## Winds of change

Keen to be seen as a labour-friendly nation, Qatar's first move has been towards abolishing the 'Kafala' system. His Highness the Emir has signed into new law reforms, introducing a modernized contract-based system with radical changes.

Freedom of movement is explicitly guaranteed. Expatriates have the right to leave the country after notifying the employer. They also have the right to permanently leave the country before or after completing the duration of their contract after notifying the employer. If the employer rejects a leave request, the migrant worker can appeal to the Exit Permit Grievances

Committee, which has to respond to all requests within three days.

Expats will no longer need approval from their existing employer to change jobs if they complete the length of a fixed-term contract. Employers found to have confiscated passports can be fined up to QR25, 000 per worker. This will be the toughest financial penalty against passport confiscation within the region.

Of course, a lot more needs to be done for Qatar to change international perception and it appears to be doing so.

While the human rights activists and trade unions should continue to voice their concern regarding labour welfare, it is equally important to acknowledge the reform measures that have begun to take place. To consider it only as an exercise on paper could be disruptive, ultimately hurting the very workforce they are claiming to protect.

R Chandrasekharan, leader INTUC and India's worker representative at ILO, believes "Qatar is a friendly nation and we all want it to succeed in its effort to improve working conditions. We do acknowledge their endeavour and are closely monitoring the progress."

G Sanjeeva Reddy, national president of INTUC and vice-president at Belgium-based global trade union leader, ITUC, said: "We will table the progress report at the ILO's governing body meet from March 9-23 and appeal for consensus."

Mr Zach, of the Confederation of German Trade Union, which represents Germany's workers at ILO, said: "We want change. We do not really want any commission of enquiry to be set up against Qatar but majority rules. We are keeping an eye on the changes made and will decide accordingly."

Ghana is also a representative at ILO workers group and Mr. Paapa, head of administration, Ghana trade union, feels, "We are willing to consider the 'reforms' progress report and make a point of view.

These are voices from across the board with varied, independent opinion. Whether they support Qatar in its effort and allow it to continue making more reforms or follow ITUC's directive, only time will tell.