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Australia should not proceed with trade agreement negotiations with UAE until widespread workers' rights abuses are addressed

The ACTU is deeply concerned with the announcement that the Albanese Government will commence negotiations with the United Arab Emirates (UAE) on a trade agreement in the new year.

The International Trade Union Confederation's (ITUC) annual Global Rights Index sets the UAE as one of the worst countries in the world for working people, with no guarantee of rights for workers. The ACTU is also concerned that UAE enforces a system of discrimination against women and criminalises and discriminates against LGBTQIA+ people. The Emirati Government imposes severe restrictions on the rights to freedom of expression, association and peaceful assembly, and prohibits workers from collectively organising, bargaining or striking.

The UAE operates the kafala system of labour sponsorship, which bonds migrant workers to their employer and gives companies and private citizens almost total control over migrant workers' employment and immigration status. Under the kafala system, any attempt at leaving an employer is punishable by law. Escaped workers are imprisoned, deported, and face significant financial costs, including paying back their employer's sponsorship fees without receiving their salaries.

Wage theft and exorbitant recruitment fees are widespread. Migrant workers work in sectors such as construction, cleaning, agriculture and security and expose them to the UAE's extreme heat with little protection.

There is no minimum wage in the private sector, and domestic workers can be legally made to work for up to 72 hours a week.

Quotes attributable to ACTU Assistant Secretary Liam O'Brien:

"The working conditions in the UAE are directly opposed to Australia social values. It's unacceptable that the government should be seen to placate a system that exploits workers in such an obvious and significant way.

"The Emirati Government must allow independent trade unions to operate so that workers can achieve rights and protections, organise and collectively bargain.

"The Government should not contemplate commencing negotiations for a trade agreement with the UAE until it has addressed its shocking record on labor and human rights including having ratified and implemented ILO core labour conventions, demonstrated concrete steps towards abolishing the Kafala system of labour migration, paid reparations to all migrant workers who have worked under conditions of abuse and forced labour."

ENDS

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