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Unions oppose UAE trade deal without enforceable labour rights

The ACTU has spoken out against Australia's new trade deal with the United Arab Emirates as one of the worst countries Australia has ever negotiated a bilateral free trade agreement with.

The UAE is a country notorious for serious human rights and labour rights violations, including modern slavery under the kafala system, with migrant workers bonded to their employer-sponsor.

The system enables employers to routinely confiscate the passports of migrant workers and exposes those who leave their employer to punishments, deportation, and detention.

Wage theft, poor working conditions, extreme heat exposure and abuse are among routine hazards for mostly typically south-east Asian migrant workers who are employed in construction, cleaning, agriculture, and security.

Migrant workers make up over 90 per cent of the UAE's workforce and are subject to exorbitant recruitment fees and long-term debt bondage to bosses.

Quotes attributable to ACTU President, Michele O'Neil:

"Australian Unions support trade expansion when it is both free and fair. The UAE ranks among the worst countries in the world for workers' rights and would be one of the most repressive countries any Australian Government has ever done a bilateral trade agreement with: trade unions, political organisations and political parties are illegal.

"We have expressed our opposition to Australia doing a deal with the UAE without strong and enforceable labour rights. The text of the agreement has not been released and we are concerned that the Government has announced its intention to sign the agreement without any public scrutiny of the commitments it contains.

"The UAE is an absolute monarchy, with a notorious record on human rights, including modern slavery under the kafala system of labour migration.

"In the UAE migrant workers in particular are vulnerable to exploitation, for instance, no punishment for sponsors who confiscate workers' passports and withhold wages, and domestic workers frequently work more than 12 hours a day, seven days a week, with few or no holidays, and are subject to widely documented psychological, physical and sexual abuse.

"We do not support the Government entering into this trade agreement while labour standards are not enforceable, while workers have no right to join independent trade unions and collectively bargain, and while the fundamental architecture of the kafala system remains in place."

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