

3.12 Sporting mega-events, corruption and rights: the case of the 2022 Qatar World Cup

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The concentration of wealth, corporate interests and unregulated international bodies in sport has grown to unprecedented levels. Sporting mega-events jostle for space each year, and with them comes a growing body of evidence around abuse of power, abuse of workers' rights and corruption. The investigations by the Swiss and US authorities into corruption allegations linked to the Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) have put the global spotlight on this issue as never before.

The international trade union movement, not least the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC), began to take a close interest in sporting mega-events during the 1990s, when it documented the scandal of child labour being used in the production of footballs with "FIFA Approved" emblems in Sialkot, Pakistan, to be sold during the 2002 FIFA World Cup.² The child labour was linked to violations of other international labour standards, with adult workers in Sialkot effectively being denied the right to organise unions and bargain for decent wages.³

In September 1996 FIFA eventually agreed that a 'Code of Labour Practice' would incorporate, in its commercial contracts, respect for a package of core labour rights based on International Labour Organization (ILO) conventions on freedom of association, collective bargaining, non-discrimination and protection from child labour and forced labour.⁴ A cornerstone of the agreement was transparency: factory owners would need to declare their 'hidden' workforce – the large numbers of football stitchers, many of them women and children, working long hours at home to supply footballs to the factories in return for poverty-level wages.⁵ FIFA subsequently transferred

responsibility for the Code to the World Federation of the Sporting Goods Industry, an employer body.⁶

Some progress was made on tackling child labour, but, when measured against the objectives of ensuring respect for core ILO standards on freedom of association, collective bargaining, non-discrimination and protection from forced labour and child labour, the Code became yet another failed example of voluntary ‘corporate social responsibility’. Moreover, although the Code was brought in specifically in connection with merchandise, the violation of labour rights is also a concern for sporting events, in particular relating to the construction and renovation of infrastructure for World Cups and other major events.⁷

Sialkot and the inadequate FIFA Code are just two examples of how today’s ‘supply chain’ or ‘value chain’ business model, after three decades of globalisation, is still failing to ensure decent lives and decent jobs for millions of people. Lax or absent regulation in many countries in which production is based, combined with the multiple tiers of contractual relationships between producer factories, intermediaries and the global brand names, frequently leave workers without protection or rights.

The compromising of human rights for the 2022 World Cup

These fault lines are evident in the organisation and marketing of sporting mega-events. The relentless quest for profit, through merchandise deals and in building stadiums and other infrastructural elements for high-profile events, continues to outweigh public concern over the exploitation of the workers who deliver them.

One of the most disturbing features of the labour market today is the prevalence of modern slavery in global value chains. Here again, major sports events are part of the problem. Although workers facing ‘slave-like conditions’ in the building of World Cup infrastructure in Brazil were freed through government action,⁸ the opposite is the case for the US\$140 billion World Cup infrastructure programme in Qatar.⁹ There, the government itself is responsible for modern slavery, through the ‘kafala’ system, used widely across the Middle East, which ties impoverished migrant workers to their employer.¹⁰

Under kafala, workers cannot change jobs without the permission of their employer. Their freedom of movement is heavily restricted, and they cannot leave Qatar without an exit visa signed by the employer. The ITUC has dealt with many cases of construction workers, company executives¹¹ and even professional football players¹² who have been stuck in Qatar for months – even years – because their employer refuses, or simply doesn’t bother, to give them an exit visa. Qatar even refused to suspend kafala to allow grieving Nepalese workers to return home for the funerals of their loved ones after the massive earthquake in May 2015 that killed thousands in Nepal.¹³

As many as 1.75 million workers in the construction, domestic service and other sectors are trapped in this system of modern slavery.¹⁴ Unregulated migration agencies promise young people from Nepal, India, the Philippines and elsewhere the chance to work in Qatar for a good wage in a decent job.¹⁵ The practice of ‘contract substitution’, whereby workers are informed prior to departure that they will work in a particular job for a particular wage, only to find things very different when they arrive in Qatar, remains common.¹⁶ This practice is made possible - in addition to kafala law and the absence of ILO-compliant labour laws - by the failure of Qatar and country-of-origin governments alike to ensure proper regulation of migration agencies.¹⁷ Despite efforts by some government agencies in workers’ countries of origin, as well as pre-departure outreach programmes

by non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and trade unions, many migrant workers do not know about the kafala system.¹⁸

Once the workers have set foot in Qatar the reality hits, as they find themselves entrapped in a wage system that pays them according to their race or nationality rather than the nature of their job.¹⁹

After work days of 12 hours or more, on construction sites in temperatures that regularly exceed 40° Celsius, the workers return to sprawling labour camps on the outskirts of Doha, with unsanitary and filthy conditions.²⁰ Dissent is not tolerated, however: workers who join together to complain are detained and deported, while foreign journalists who look too deeply behind Qatar's public relations façade may receive the same treatment.²¹

Hundreds of thousands of workers have been and continue to be enlisted to build the infrastructure for the 2022 World Cup. Qatar asserts that the only infrastructure construction currently under way in the country that is relevant to the World Cup relates to the stadiums themselves, maintaining that the construction of roads, public transport infrastructure, accommodation and all the other facilities and services required to host the 2022 event are instead for more general purposes.²² This is at odds with the announcements made during and immediately after the World Cup bidding process, in 2010, which placed the World Cup at the centre of Qatar's infrastructure-building programme.²³

Over the past several years an annual average of around 200 migrant workers from each of India and Nepal have died as a result of the appalling working and living conditions²⁴ (figures for other countries of origin are often suppressed by the local embassies in Doha, pressured by the Qatari authorities). The cause of death is rarely established, as there are no post-mortems, and usually there is no compensation for the families left destitute by the loss of remitted income. The death rate of migrant workers from India actually increased from 2013 to 2014 by 16 per cent.²⁵

The role of external influencers

The ITUC initiated new discussions with FIFA after their awarding of the 2022 World Cup hosting rights to Qatar, which was tainted by allegations of corruption. The ITUC and FIFA met at the latter's Zurich headquarters in 2011, with the ITUC insisting that the event should go ahead in Qatar only if the country changed its medieval labour laws. Despite some public statements,²⁶ FIFA has nevertheless failed to put the necessary pressure on Qatar, with serious consequences for the huge and growing migrant workforce as it races against time to deliver the vast World Cup infrastructure programme.

The International Labour Organization's supervisory bodies have made strident criticism of Qatar's labour laws and called on the authorities to bring them into line with ILO standards.²⁷ These standards are widely adhered to around the world, yet Qatar and its fellow Gulf states Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates refuse to respect them.²⁸ In March 2014 the ILO reported that the kafala system in Qatar constituted a violation of its Convention 29, the Forced Labour Convention,²⁹ which was adopted nearly a century ago but strengthened in 2014 because of the persistence of trafficking in forced labour worldwide. In the same month the ILO urged Qatar to address the absence of freedom of association for migrant workers – and, indeed, for the limited rights afforded even to Qatari workers.³⁰ Regrettably, Qatar has not acted on the ILO's calls for reform; rather, it has used its economic power to bully other governments in an attempt to stall plans for an ILO Commission of Inquiry into its system of forced labour, or even to allow an ILO mission of government, employer and worker representatives into the country.³¹

The ongoing tragedy for Qatar's migrant workforce is not a government responsibility alone.

Multinational construction companies, which are generating huge profits from their joint ventures in

Qatar, should also be held responsible. These companies are now under the spotlight. Litigation has been launched in France against construction giant Vinci,³² and the main World Cup contractor, CH2M Hill, is under heavy public pressure.³³ Further legal action against other companies involved in World Cup construction is understood by the ITUC to be in progress. Global brands that sponsor FIFA are also feeling the pressure.³⁴ The international trade union movement is in talks with several of the major companies, demanding that they ensure that international labour standards be respected in every part of their Qatar operations.³⁵ Another important stakeholder is the Sports and Rights Alliance of NGOs,³⁶ which is pressing for reform of FIFA and has demonstrated its impact, with progress now being made at the International Olympic Committee (IOC) with its Agenda 2020.

The interdependence of transparency and labour rights: Qatar and beyond

Qatar today is a prime example of the link between corruption and the repression of workers' rights in global value chains, though it is far from alone in this respect. The absence of respect for international labour standards, and in particular the kafala system, leave workers exposed to corrupt practices in relation to their recruitment, including through the contract substitution described above, as well as their actual work in Qatar. Time and again the absence of transparency and the rule of law is a key factor in industrial tragedies, such as the Rana Plaza building collapse in Bangladesh in 2013, in which over 1,000 workers were killed. One of the key achievements of the union-endorsed Bangladesh Accord for Fire and Building Safety was to secure the disclosure of the supply chains of roughly 200 companies sourcing from the country, which has finally allowed them to be inspected by competent, honest inspectors.³⁷ The Bangladesh example shows how, on labour rights issues, constructive engagement by the private sector with trade unions increases protection and fairness for workers and contributes to ethical production, with consequent benefits for companies' reputations as well as returns to local communities. Such opportunities for engagement

are why the ITUC places such a high value on cooperation between labour rights and anti-corruption groups, as demonstrated by the Sports and Rights Alliance.

International pressure on FIFA and Qatar, and on other sporting mega-event host countries, including from governments, international sporting bodies and corporate sponsors, must be stepped up. Many lives are at stake, and failure on the part of the international community on these issues would further entrench corruption and the exploitation of workers as accepted ways of doing business. The same challenge is faced by the IOC, to turn its Agenda 2020 into a real vehicle for change.

Notes

¹ Sharan Burrow is the General Secretary of the International Trade Union Confederation.

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³ See International Labor Rights Forum, *Missed the Goal for Workers: The Reality of Soccer Ball Stitches in Pakistan, India, China and Thailand* (Washington, DC: International Labor Rights Forum, 2010), <http://www.cleanclothes.org/resources/recommended-reading/ilrf-soccerball-report.pdf>, and see also the letter sent to FIFA by the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions, the International Textile, Garment and Leather Workers' Federation and the Union Network International on 6 July 2000, which is available at www.indianet.nl/ivvvbr.html.

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⁵ 'Code of Labour Practice for the Production of Goods Licensed by the International Federation of Association Football (FIFA)', available at <https://www1.umn.edu/humanrts/links/fifa.html>.

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¹⁰ *Ibid.*

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¹² *Ibid.*; Euronews (France), "'Desperate" French footballer trapped in Qatar', 14 November 2013, www.euronews.com/2013/11/14/desperate-french-footballer-trapped-in-qatar

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