North Korean workers in Poland earn less than €120 a month, claims Willy Fautré.

For years, Pyongyang has exploited North Korean workers in Poland with the blessings of the political authorities in Warsaw, who have generously granted working visas while turning a blind eye to the inhumane conditions that these modern slaves suffer from.

In Poland, North Korean labourers work 12 to 16 hours per day for an average monthly wage of less than €120. No standardised contracts exist and salaries are filtered through North Korean officials instead of being directly awarded to labourers, resulting in workers' incomes reflecting only 10 to 20 per cent of their actual labour value. The workers are under constant surveillance by Korean 'supervisors', who deny them freedom of movement and communication with local populations.

It is estimated that over 50,000 North Koreans are working in approximately 20 countries. They collectively earn between €1-2bn in revenue for the North Korean regime. Experts fear that these
hard currencies are used to develop Pyongyang's nuclear programme.

Human Rights Without Frontiers (HRWF) first raised this issue in the European Parliament in 2007. At their event, a former staff member of the North Korean embassy in Prague revealed that, before his defection, he was 'supervising' North Korean seamstresses in the Czech Republic. When their exploitation was publicised by the media, the Czech government stopped the hiring of North Korean labourers.

At this time it was also known that North Koreans were being recruited by Gdansk shipyards and by orchards in Poland. Despite regular coverage by Polish media, especially by Gazeta Wyborcza, and HRWF's awareness raising campaigns, this illegal employment never ceased.

From 2014 to 2017, several conferences on the exploitation of North Korean workers in Polish shipyards, Dutch restaurants, and in the Maltese textile industry have been organised at the European Parliament by MEPs and HRWF.

Parliamentary questions have also highlighted the breaches in EU labour laws and ILO standards, and have proposed an infringement procedure against Poland. The answers have been disappointing and have not lead to concrete corrective EU measures.

On 22 September 2016, HRWF raised the issue of exploited North Korean workers in Poland at the OSCE/ODIHR conference in Warsaw and initiated a dialogue with the OSCE delegation of Poland. A week later, the delegation announced to HRWF that "there are not more than 550 North Korean workers in Poland... [and that] the existing cooperation is based on private companies' independent agreements". Regardless of whether the companies are public or private, the visas and work permits are issued by the Polish authorities.

In a letter dated 19 May 2017, the Polish delegation told HRWF that as of 1 January 2017, there were approximately 400 North Koreans in Poland, and that no visas had been issued to North Koreans since 2016. However, the latest official statistics available on the website of the Polish government indicate that 180 work permits were granted to North Korean citizens in 2016.

HRWF will continue to closely monitor developments related to this issue.

About the author

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