Workers' Alliance against Forced Labour and Trafficking

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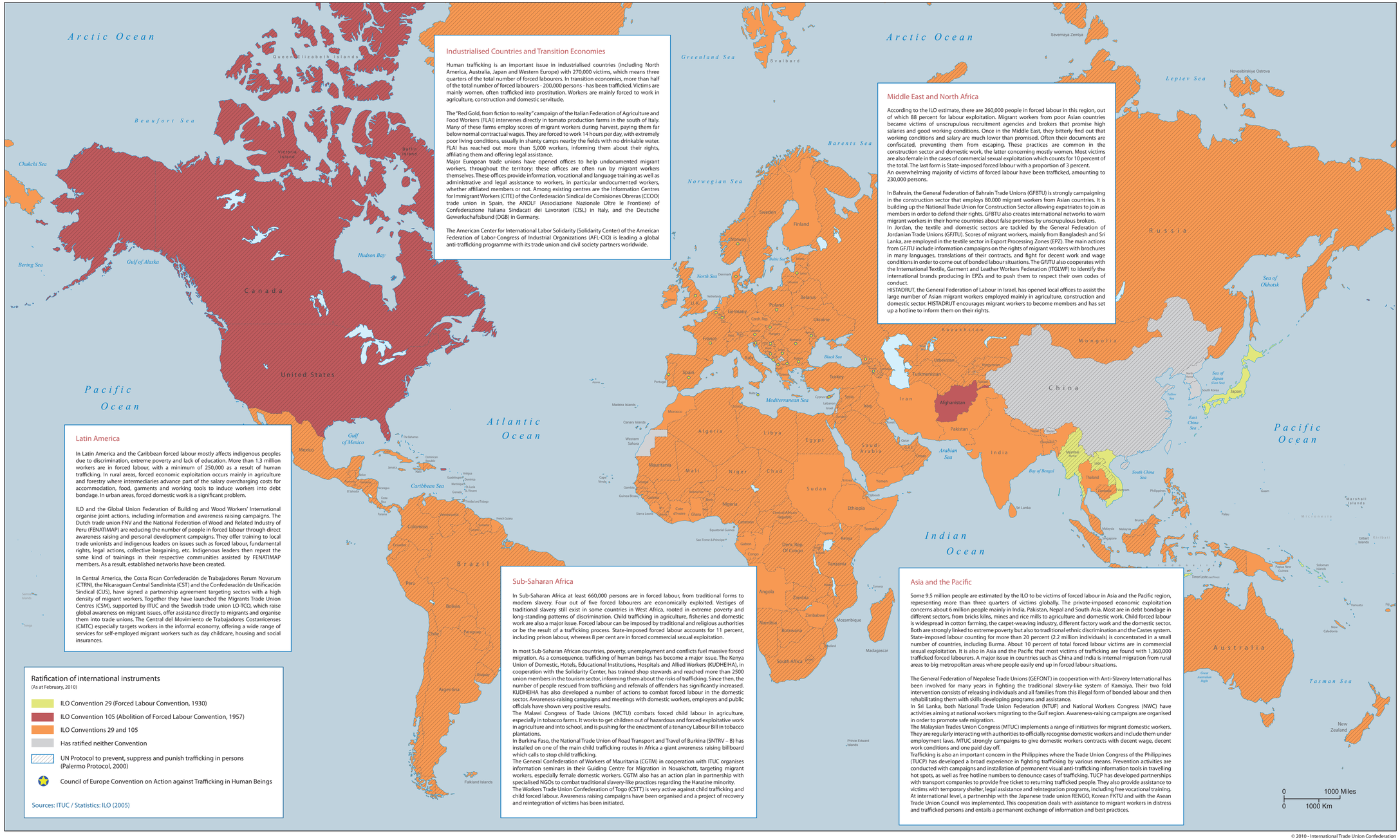
Trade Union Alliance to Combat Forced Labour and Trafficking



Industrialised Countries and Transition Economies

Human trafficking is an important issue in industrialised countries (including North America, Australia, Japan and Western Europe) with 270,000 victims, which means three quarters of the total number of forced labourers. In transition economies, more than half of the total number of forced labourers - 200,000 persons - has been trafficked. Victims are mainly women, often trafficked into prostitution. Workers are mainly forced to work in agriculture, construction and domestic servitude.

The "Red Gold, from fiction to reality" campaign of the Italian Federation of Agriculture and Food Workers (FLAI) intervenes directly in tomato production farms in the south of Italy. Many of these farms employ scores of migrant workers during harvest, paying them far below normal contractual wages. They are forced to work 14 hours per day, with extremely poor living conditions, usually in shanty camps nearby the fields with no drinkable water. FLAI has reached out more than 5,000 workers, informing them about their rights, affiliating them and offering legal assistance.
Major European trade unions have opened offices to help undocumented migrant workers, throughout the territory; these offices are often run by migrant workers themselves. These offices provide information, vocational and language training as well as administrative and legal assistance to workers, in particular undocumented workers, whether affiliated members or not. Among existing centres are the Information Centres for Immigrant Workers (CITE) of the Confederación Sindical de Comisiones Obreras (CCOO) trade union in Spain, the ANOLF (Associazione Nazionale Oltre le Frontiere) of Confederazione Italiana Sindacati dei Lavoratori (CISL) in Italy, and the Deutsche Gewerkschaftsbund (DGB) in Germany.

The American Center for International Labor Solidarity (Solidarity Center) of the American Federation of Labor-Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO) is leading a global anti-trafficking programme with its trade union and civil society partners worldwide.

Middle East and North Africa

According to the ILO estimate, there are 260,000 people in forced labour in this region, out of which 88 percent for labour exploitation. Migrant workers from poor Asian countries became victims of unscrupulous recruitment agencies and brokers that promise high salaries and good working conditions. Once in the Middle East, they bitterly find out that working conditions and salary are much lower than promised. Often their documents are confiscated, preventing them from escaping. These practices are common in the construction sector and domestic work, the latter concerning mostly women. Most victims are also female in the cases of commercial sexual exploitation which counts for 10 percent of the total. The last form is State-imposed forced labour with a proportion of 3 percent.
An overwhelming majority of victims of forced labour have been trafficked, amounting to 230,000 persons.

In Bahrain, the General Federation of Bahrain Trade Unions (GFBTU) is strongly campaigning in the construction sector that employs 80.000 migrant workers from Asian countries. It is building up the National Trade Union for Construction Sector allowing expatriates to join as members in order to defend their rights. GFBTU also creates international networks to warn migrant workers in their home countries about false promises by unscrupulous brokers.
In Jordan, the textile and domestic sectors are tackled by the General Federation of Jordanian Trade Unions (GFJTU). Scores of migrant workers, mainly from Bangladesh and Sri Lanka, are employed in the textile sector in Export Processing Zones (EPZ). The main actions from GFJTU include information campaigns on the rights of migrant workers with brochures in many languages, translations of their contracts, and fight for decent work and wage conditions in order to come out of bonded labour situations. The GFJTU also cooperates with the International Textile, Garment and Leather Workers Federation (ITGLWF) to identify the international brands producing in EPZs and to push them to respect their own codes of conduct.
HISTADRUT, the General Federation of Labour in Israel, has opened local offices to assist the large number of Asian migrant workers employed mainly in agriculture, construction and domestic sector. HISTADRUT encourages migrant workers to become members and has set up a hotline to inform them on their rights.

Latin America

In Latin America and the Caribbean forced labour mostly affects indigenous peoples due to discrimination, extreme poverty and lack of education. More than 1.3 million workers are in forced labour, with a minimum of 250,000 as a result of human trafficking. In rural areas, forced economic exploitation occurs mainly in agriculture and forestry where intermediaries advance part of the salary overcharging costs for accommodation, food, garments and working tools to induce workers into debt bondage. In urban areas, forced domestic work is a significant problem.

ILO and the Global Union Federation of Building and Wood Workers' International organise joint actions, including information and awareness raising campaigns. The Dutch trade union FNV and the National Federation of Wood and Related Industry of Peru (FENATIMAP) are reducing the number of people in forced labour through direct awareness raising and personal development campaigns. They offer training to local trade unionists and indigenous leaders on issues such as forced labour, fundamental rights, legal actions, collective bargaining, etc. Indigenous leaders then repeat the same kind of trainings in their respective communities assisted by FENATIMAP members. As a result, established networks have been created.

In Central America, the Costa Rican Confederación de Trabajadores Rerum Novarum (CTRN), the Nicaraguan Central Sandinista (CST) and the Confederación de Unificación Sindical (CUS), have signed a partnership agreement targeting sectors with a high density of migrant workers. Together they have launched the Migrants Trade Union Centres (CSM), supported by ITUC and the Swedish trade union LO-TCO, which raise global awareness on migrant issues, offer assistance directly to migrants and organise them into trade unions. The Central del Movimiento de Trabajadores Costarricenses (CMTC) especially targets workers in the informal economy, offering a wide range of services for self-employed migrant workers such as day childcare, housing and social insurances.

Sub-Saharan Africa

In Sub-Saharan Africa at least 660,000 persons are in forced labour, from traditional forms to modern slavery. Four out of five forced labourers are economically exploited. Vestiges of traditional slavery still exist in some countries in West Africa, rooted in extreme poverty and long-standing patterns of discrimination. Child trafficking in agriculture, fisheries and domestic work are also a major issue. Forced labour can be imposed by traditional and religious authorities or be the result of a trafficking process. State-imposed forced labour accounts for 11 percent, including prison labour, whereas 8 per cent are in forced commercial sexual exploitation.

In most Sub-Saharan African countries, poverty, unemployment and conflicts fuel massive forced migration. As a consequence, trafficking of human beings has become a major issue. The Kenya Union of Domestic, Hotels, Educational Institutions, Hospitals and Allied Workers (KUDHEIHA), in cooperation with the Solidarity Center, has trained shop stewards and reached more than 2500 union members in the tourism sector, informing them about the risks of trafficking. Since then, the number of people rescued from trafficking and referrals of offenders has significantly increased. KUDHEIHA has also developed a number of actions to combat forced labour in the domestic sector. Awareness-raising campaigns and meetings with domestic workers, employers and public officials have shown very positive results.
The Malawi Congress of Trade Unions (MCTU) combats forced child labour in agriculture, especially in tobacco farms. It works to get children out of hazardous and forced exploitative work in agriculture and into school, and is pushing for the enactment of a tenancy Labour Bill in tobacco plantations.
In Burkina Faso, the National Trade Union of Road Transport and Travel of Burkina (SNTRV – B) has installed on one of the main child trafficking routes in Africa a giant awareness raising billboard which calls to stop child trafficking.
The General Confederation of Workers of Mauritania (CGTM) in cooperation with ITUC organises information seminars in their Guiding Centre for Migration in Nouakchott, targeting migrant workers, especially female domestic workers. CGTM also has an action plan in partnership with specialised NGOs to combat traditional slavery-like practices regarding the Haratine minority.
The Workers Trade Union Confederation of Togo (CSTT) is very active against child trafficking and child forced labour. Awareness raising campaigns have been organised and a project of recovery and reintegration of victims has been initiated.

Asia and the Pacific

Some 9.5 million people are estimated by the ILO to be victims of forced labour in Asia and the Pacific region, representing more than three quarters of victims globally. The private-imposed economic exploitation concerns about 6 million people mainly in India, Pakistan, Nepal and South Asia. Most are in debt bondage in different sectors, from bricks kilns, mines and rice mills to agriculture and domestic work. Child forced labour is widespread in cotton farming, the carpet-weaving industry, different factory work and the domestic sector. Both are strongly linked to extreme poverty but also to traditional ethnic discrimination and the Castes system. State-imposed labour counting for more than 20 percent (2.2 million individuals) is concentrated in a small number of countries, including Burma. About 10 percent of total forced labour victims are in commercial sexual exploitation. It is also in Asia and the Pacific that most victims of trafficking are found with 1,360,000 trafficked forced labourers. A major issue in countries such as China and India is internal migration from rural areas to big metropolitan areas where people easily end up in forced labour situations.

The General Federation of Nepalese Trade Unions (GEFONT) in cooperation with Anti-Slavery International has been involved for many years in fighting the traditional slavery-like system of Kamaiya. Their two fold intervention consists of releasing individuals and all families from this illegal form of bonded labour and then rehabilitating them with skills developing programs and assistance.
In Sri Lanka, both National Trade Union Federation (NTUF) and National Workers Congress (NWC) have activities aiming at national workers migrating to the Gulf region. Awareness-raising campaigns are organised in order to promote safe migration.
The Malaysian Trades Union Congress (MTUC) implements a range of initiatives for migrant domestic workers. They are regularly interacting with authorities to officially recognise domestic workers and include them under employment laws. MTUC strongly campaigns to give domestic workers contracts with decent wage, decent work conditions and one paid day off.
Trafficking is also an important concern in the Philippines where the Trade Union Congress of the Philippines (TUCP) has developed a broad experience in fighting trafficking by various means. Prevention activities are conducted with campaigns and installation of permanent visual anti-trafficking information tools in travelling hot spots, as well as free hotline numbers to denounce cases of trafficking. TUCP has developed partnerships with transport companies to provide free ticket to returning trafficked people. They also provide assistance to victims with temporary shelter, legal assistance and reintegration programs, including free vocational training. At international level, a partnership with the Japanese trade union RENGO, Korean FKTU and with the Asean Trade Union Council was implemented. This cooperation deals with assistance to migrant workers in distress and trafficked persons and entails a permanent exchange of information and best practices.

Ratification of international instruments

(As at February, 2010)

- ILO Convention 29 (Forced Labour Convention, 1930)
- ILO Convention 105 (Abolition of Forced Labour Convention, 1957)
- ILO Conventions 29 and 105
- Has ratified neither Convention
- UN Protocol to prevent, suppress and punish trafficking in persons (Palermo Protocol, 2000)
- Council of Europe Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings

Sources: ITUC / Statistics: ILO (2005)

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Designed by Jessica Peton

What is forced labour?

Forced labour is « All work or service that is exacted from any person under the menace of any penalty and for which the said person has not offered himself voluntarily » ILO Forced Labour Convention, 1930 (No. 29).
In practice, forced labour is a situation where a person is not free to leave his or her work because of threats, debts, or other forms of physical or psychological coercion.

Forced labour is a global problem, affecting almost all countries of the world.
There are at least 12.3 million persons in forced labour nowadays, including 2.45 million victims of trafficking. Most victims are poverty-stricken people in Asia, Latin America and Africa, whose vulnerability is exploited by others for profit.

Yet over 350,000 women and men are also in forced labour in industrialized countries, trafficked for either labour or sexual exploitation. Half of forced labourers are children.

In 2009, the ILO estimated that the total cost of coercion to the victims of forced labour - excluding those in commercial sexual exploitation - amounts to US$ 21 billion. This represents underpayment of wages to them (including wage deductions made for food and other essentials, unpaid excessive overtime) and recruitment fees.

For more information on forced labour and trafficking, visit the website of the
ILO Special Action Programme to combat Forced Labour
www.ilo.org/forcedlabour

Global Trade Union Alliance against Forced Labour and Trafficking

Trade unions have been instrumental in fighting slavery and forced labour since the 19th century and need to continue to do so in the 21st.
While some forced labour is exacted by State authorities, such as that imposed in Burma or in China, most victims of forced labour are found in the private economy.

Modern forms of forced labour are suffered by informal and migrant workers, in construction, domestic work, agriculture or forestry, through more subtle forms of coercion such as debt manipulation, withholding of wages or identity documents, threats of violence or denunciation.

These demand innovative approaches of the trade union movement to appropriately reach out to and extend workers' solidarity to these modern slaves.

Increasing numbers of trade unions are joining the global alliance, together with a range of expert NGOs, by stepping up their activism and increasing cooperation to combat and prevent new forms of forced labour, including human trafficking, while promoting traditional trade union organising of target group workers for their sustainable empowerment.

Join the alliance! Check out the website www.ituc-csi.org/forcedlabour or send an email to forcedlabour@ituc-csi.org.

Produced with the financial and technical support of the ILO's Programme to promote the ILO Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work