

“Working in Russia”: a step towards decent work for migrant workers

According to the 2011 ILO Global Report on Discrimination, migrant workers encounter discrimination on a daily basis. While many of them are already at risk of all kinds of abuse, they also became the first victims of the financial and economic crisis, the report says. ILO Online reports from the Russian Federation which has been the biggest receiving, sending and transit country for migrant workers in Eastern Europe and Central Asia since the early 1990s.

5/16/2011

FTR/Migrants Workers Russia

MOSCOW (ILO Online) – Tursunoi Alimardonova’s mobile phone rang at midnight. The number was unknown to her. Tursunoi picked up the phone.

A man was almost crying: “Twelve people from Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Azerbaijan! They took their passports, they threaten to kill them! Please help!”

While working for the Trade Union of Migrant Workers, Tursunoi got used to this kind of emergency call. Very soon she found out what had happened: a group of migrants trusted false promises of a woman recruiter and came to Dagestan in the south of Russia.

Upon arrival their documents were taken away from them and they had to work on a farm under slave-like conditions. They lived under constant threat to be reported to the authorities and did not receive any money for their work.

By a miracle one of them managed to send an SMS to a relative... the man who had called Tursunoi.

She immediately alerted the Russian Ministry of the Interior and the consulates of the three countries of origin. As a result, all migrants were rescued and the illegal recruiter was arrested.

The Trade Union of Migrant Workers¹ is a partner of the European Union funded ILO project Increasing the Protection of Migrant Workers in the Russian Federation and Enhancing the Development Impact of Migration in Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia. The project aims at ensuring that migrant workers in Russia and their countries of origin receive information on admission rules and procedures, know their rights and can access to trade unions.

Lack of information and representation

“The underlying factor of exploitation and discrimination of migrant workers is the lack of information about their rights and potential risks in the destination countries”, explains Sandra Vermuijten, ILO project’s chief technical adviser.

According to the ILO Global Report, this is reflected in low wages, limited or no social security benefits, long working hours, unhealthy working conditions, no payment for overtime and harassment, among others. The recent economic crisis, as the report highlights, has served to worsen these already poor conditions of work and reduce employment and migration opportunities.

Moreover, in many countries, including the Russian Federation, violence and xenophobic attitudes have increased. The report warns that migrant’s lack of knowledge of their rights and legal channels of redress in the event of discrimination often impede any efforts at eliminating discrimination.

“Migrants in Russia face discrimination every day, and these risks are multiplied when unscrupulous employers align with corrupted policemen. A migrant worker alone has practically no chance to defend himself in case of discrimination and abuse”, says Tursunoi. “Today more and more migrants realize that trade unions are a powerful force to defend their interests”.

¹ Its full name is “Trade Union of Migrant Workers in Construction, Communal Services and Related Sectors”. This non-governmental organization aims to protect migrant workers’ rights and inform migrants on legal employment in Russia. It is not affiliated to any trade union organization, but has established relations with the Federation of Independent Trade Unions of Russia and other national trade unions.

The Trade Union of Migrant Workers implements its information and education programmes under the ILO project. The most recent publication is a series of information brochures under a common title – “Working in Russia”. The project’s special pride is a brochure in the series made in a cartoon style.²

The brochure presents complicated immigration and registration rules in a very simple and user friendly way, and immediately became very popular among migrants.

“It is important to note that these brochures were developed in collaboration with the Federal Migration Service (FMS) of Russia and FITUR (Federation of Independent Trade Unions of Russia). The FMS has already distributed a large portion of these brochures in its offices throughout Russia”, says Sandra Vermuijten.

“Russia is facing a demographic and economic challenge with its decreasing economically active population. Increases in labour productivity cannot make up for the loss of workforce each year. The country needs migrant workers. However, we have to make sure that they find decent work and are not discriminated against. The right response here includes legislation, awareness raising and, last but not least, giving migrants a voice through voluntary action by the social partners”, concludes Sergeyus_Glovackas, senior specialist for workers’ activities of the ILO Decent Work Technical Support Team and Country Office for Eastern Europe and Central Asia.

The International Labour Office is the permanent secretariat of the International Labour Organization.

² http://www.ilo.org/public/russian/region/eurpro/moscow/info/publ/workingin_russia.pdf