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# Exploitation of migrant labor, unemployment in Arab villages... Who cares?

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The Nov. 28 session of the Knesset Committee on Foreign Workers was intended to debate putting an end to the import of migrant labor for construction and agriculture, and encouraging Israeli workers in these sectors. But instead, we were witness once again to a display of impotency in the face of the powerful farmers' lobby. The debate exposed the well-known fact that there is nobody in the political establishment who is able or willing to do what must clearly be done: stopping the import of migrant laborers and opening up jobs to local workers especially Arab women.

The purpose of the session, which was convened by the committee's chairperson MK Nitzan Horowitz, was to receive reports from government ministries on their preparations towards reducing migrant labor quotas in agriculture and construction, and replacing migrant laborers with Israeli workers. But this issue was not even addressed. The Finance Ministry, responsible for economic policy, didn't even bother sending a representative to the meeting. The Agricultural Ministry representative said she wasn't too familiar with the issue of Israeli workers. The representative from the Ministry of Industry, Trade and Labor preferred to talk about a project for training discharged soldiers for management positions in construction.

The representative from the Immigration Authority, however, came prepared. She explained that her office had made it easier to import migrant labor during the past year, and had made up the quota from the 22,000 migrant laborers then in agriculture to the 26,000 permitted. She finished by presenting her own opinion, that until the government decides to reduce the number of migrant laborers, there would be no change its policy. Between the lines, she revealed that the farmers' huge media campaign last year ended with an agreement that not only would the reduction of 1,500 in migrant laborer numbers be cancelled, but that the government had approved the import of thousands of additional laborers.

The Employment Services representative also addressed the issue only indirectly, saying that when he had been the Employment Services director in Kiryat Gat 25 years ago, he would send 700 workers each year to harvest grapes at Moshav Lachish. Since the Thai laborers began coming 15 years ago, he sent fewer and fewer workers, and today almost nobody from Kiryat Gat goes to harvest grapes. When he asked the farmers at Lachish why they preferred Thais, they said the Thai workers were available all the time and worked weekends too.

### **Strong farmers' lobby crossing party lines**

The farmers' organized power and political influence is conspicuous in the face of the government's weakness. Despite the government's equivocal position, it was represented by MK Shai Hermesh (Kadima), who heads the farmers' lobby in the Knesset, and former MK Avshalom Vilan from Meretz, currently chairperson of the Israel Farmers Federation, who set the tone. Farmers' representatives reiterated again and again that no local workers were to be found for this sector. Their claims were only to be expected. This is a group with a clear interest in continuing the present arrangement which allows them to import 26,000 migrant laborers from Thailand and Nepal and employ them under extremely exploitative terms.

However, the words of Shlomo Yifrah, representative of Histadrut construction workers, were surprising. Instead of presenting efforts to replace migrant labor with local workers in construction, he began with a number of racist

remarks about African refugees, whom he wants to deport. He then went on to describe the tribulations of the contractors, who didn't bother to send a representative either, and called on the government to increase the import of migrant labor for construction.

### **WAC stands alone**

The Workers Advice Center (WAC), which has been placing Arab women in agriculture for years, was clearly the exception in this forum. Nonetheless, the participants addressed WAC's unique experiences in this field. MK Dov Chenin, who spoke first, called on the government to support WAC's efforts. The farmers' representatives, on the other hand, claimed that their attempts to cooperate with WAC had failed.

Those present listened attentively to what I, as WAC representative, had to say. When I said that unemployment would increase in the coming months due to the deepening economic crisis, and that someone had to fight for Arab women who are unable to find work, nobody claimed otherwise. Mostly, I spoke out against the government's weakness, not against the farmers. Instead of creating jobs for its citizens, the government turns migrant laborers into a gift it grants the farmers after having denied them all other assistance such as export subsidies and natural disaster funds, and after having raised the costs of water.

The government's powerlessness is particularly conspicuous when we look at the project known as "the pilot for encouraging Israeli workers in agriculture." The pilot is a government program budgeted from 2009 to the tune of millions of shekels. However, it was never carried out - the farmers simply announced they didn't want to replace migrant laborers with Israelis. Instead of this toothless pilot program, the government should have informed the farmers in specific regions that they would not receive migrant labor and that they must seek local workers (according to WAC's proposal, it would be possible to start in the Sharon and Lower Galilee regions where there is a ready supply of workers in nearby Arab towns). Experience in the construction branch proves that when there is a clear government decision, employers realize the die is cast and start looking for local laborers.

Despite the goodwill of the new Committee chairperson, MK Horowitz, the simple and logical demand to create jobs for the Arab sector and the periphery cannot be implemented. Government representatives talk about the need to reduce the number of migrant laborers and create jobs, but in reality they do nothing to advance this aim. Thus the predatory farmers' lobby repeatedly succeeds in getting every planned reduction of migrant labor cancelled. Meanwhile, Arab women remain unemployed and in poverty, and the goal of stopping the shameful employment of Thai workers remains as distant as ever.