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# The Histadrut Construction Union works for the construction companies, not the workers

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**The Israeli building contractors got what they wanted when the government decided in July to increase migrant laborer quotas for the construction sector.**

The Knesset Committee on Foreign Workers has recently been talking about replacing migrant laborers in construction and agriculture with Israeli workers. Histadrut representatives, who mostly keep away from the committee, showed up this time. When representative of Histadrut construction workers Shlomo Yifrah took a seat beside me, I imagined we could form a common front against the exploitation of workers. However, when Yifrah was given the floor, he called on the government to meet contractors' demands and increase the number of migrant laborers in construction.

In other words, a Histadrut representative acted as the spokesperson of the contractors, who didn't even bother to come. They already got what they wanted in July this year, when the government decided to increase the quotas of migrant laborers in construction. The government gave in to enormous pressure from the contractors' lobby and approved the renewal of trade in human beings and exploitation of workers, after three years in which the import of migrant labor for construction had been halted. The reason given for the decision was the lack of workers for "wet" work (molding, plastering and flooring) which has delayed housing starts.

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Ofer Eini. Photo: Appelbaum Tomer

This reason is groundless. During the government debate, the Bank of Israel representative opposed increasing the quota, and rejected claims that there was a lack of workers. According to the Bank's data, in 2010 some 13,800 Israeli workers joined the construction branch, including 6,000 for "wet" work. Moreover, the supply of weak migrant labor is a major factor in the technological backwardness of Israel's construction industry. The lack of skilled labor, exploitative employment terms and the lack of supervision cause safety to be neglected and an increase in work accidents. Why would contractors invest in the development of the industry when they have a ready supply of workers in binding arrangements?

The construction industry constitutes about 10% of economic activity in Israel, and provides livelihoods for some 200,000 people. But despite the importance of construction, the labor force in this branch has lost all status. Most workers (about 150,000) are Arabs. According to Israel's distorted system of values, this work is considered inferior, which is why the government permits the import of labor.

The problem of importing migrant laborers who have no bargaining power and thus undermining organized labor is not unique to Israel. In Germany, for example, the unions are struggling against the regulations of the EU which enables workers to be identified as East European and thus to exclude them from collective agreements. In Israel, legislation does not make exceptions of any workers. The law requires equal rights for all workers, Israeli or otherwise. But unlike unions in Germany, the Histadrut has completely given up in its task of warning against rights violations and struggling for the enforcement of the law, and has become the servant of the contractors.

All this is happening while Histadrut chief Ofer Eini is waging a loud struggle under the eye of the media and threatening to strike - ostensibly to fight against the exploitation of manpower agency workers. However, the Histadrut's behavior on the issue of construction workers shows that Eini's declarations are all hot air. The migrant laborers are also manpower agency workers, and are in fact the most exploited and weakened workers of all. If Eini abandons them to satisfy the contractors, he is not really defending the rights of workers. The construction workers

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will have to escape their situation on their own - via organization and setting up their own union from the ashes of destruction left behind by the Histadrut. The end of labor import under binding arrangements is the first condition to establishing such a union.

*Post-scriptum :*

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