

## **Without Unions Workers Continue to be Poor**

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By Martin Villar

Kav LaOved recently carried out an inquiry into the degree of application of the new law protecting contract workers and presented the findings to the Knesset Labor, Welfare and Health Committee. According to the survey, public institutions such as municipalities and health services are not implementing the law, or worse, they apply the law only for appearances.

In November, contract maintenance workers received a 'gift' from the state in the form of legislation to improve working conditions with a new "Law for the employment of workers by security and maintenance contractors in public institutions, 2013". The law provides the workers with a higher wage, a larger pension, a training fund and other benefits. This improvement was the result of the general strike by the Histadrut in 2012 and is an expression of public awareness to the adverse effect of hiring contract workers.

Since the days of the social protest, the public has clearly begun to internalize the factors that make workers lives difficult in Israel - the high cost of living, the privatization of social services, low pay, unemployment, and labor market insecurity - all causing the struggle for survival that is now an outstanding aspect of Israeli life.

The legislation seeks to improve the lives of such a large number of workers (some estimate the number of contract workers in the market place are in the hundreds of thousands, if not more) and is a welcomed step forward. In addition to enforcing the labor law, there is nothing more important than the statement made by the government that compensation for workers, whoever they are, must be increased, especially for vulnerable populations.

However, Kav LaOved recently carried out an inquiry into the degree of application of the new law protecting contract workers and presented the findings to the Knesset Labor, Welfare and Health Committee. According to the survey, public institutions such as municipalities and health services are not implementing the law, or worse, they apply the law only for appearances – in other words, there are employers who appear to have added the benefits but they do not show up in the calculation of the total salary.



Contract laborer cleaning the Knesset square

Photo by Olivia Pitusi

Although it seems that the Knesset finally understands the importance of legislation in establishing standards in the labor market, the legislation in recent years is no more than a mirage. These laws, implemented without extensive structural changes in the labor market, are no more than acts to mollify those in need of their protection.

Why? Because even when employers abide by the law and by collective agreements (if they exist), workers are unable to escape the cycle of poverty. In a free market with capitalistic labor-law abiding standards, even when protected by the law, the income is so low it does not change the workers situation. In Israel of 2014, an additional 200-300 ILS per month does not help the minimum wage worker.

Offensive employment practices such as hiring hourly or contract workers pull the labor market down. The solution to this problem will be found in far reaching changes that will give momentum to organized labor. Collective agreements will ensure a fair wage and job security. Budgets for government tenders must be increased. Seasonal workers such as teachers and security guards must be given tenure and social rights must be provided to long term freelancers.

Above all, dialogue and awareness are of the utmost importance to organizing labor. General unions, headed by the Histadrut and Koah LaOved, must continue in their efforts to protect the middle class and vulnerable populations through support of local unions so that labor laws will have an economic effect improving the status of the Israeli worker. Until then, all new labor laws, welcome as they are, are no more than an illusion.

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