

Azerbaijan: Life in The 'Slave Market'

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With unemployment running rife, the nation's intellectuals, craftsmen and refugees take to the streets in a thankless search for jobs

On a hot June day, several dozen men carrying construction tools gather at what is known by locals as the Slave Market, one of a number of spots in the capital where the desperate unemployed look for work.

Azerbaijan's unemployment crisis has reached a point where the jobless - many of whom are highly qualified - refer to themselves as slaves and hang out by Metro stations and major furniture and home improvement shops in an attempt to attract the attention of potential employers.

Most of the jobless are refugees who fled the bloody fighting in the mountainous Karabakh district, but many come from other disadvantaged parts of the country.

The ministry of employment and social security claims 45,590 Azerbaijanis were registered as out of work early this month. These statistics appear to be far from accurate, as local NGOs, international organisations and even government officials are only too ready to admit.

Schoolteachers, college professors and research associates rub shoulders with carpenters, plasterers and other construction workers in the search for a living wage. "I was unable to feed my family with the measly pay I was getting as a chemistry teacher," said self-confessed slave Samed Mamedov.

"My wife is a music teacher. I have two school-age children and my old mother also depends on me, so I had to find some kind of construction work even though I graduated with honours from a teaching college."

Hanlar Ismailov told IWPR that a slave can earn four to five US dollars on a good day. "But the work is really hard, such as digging ground at someone's dacha or hauling heavy things," he said.

"The odd-job market picks up in spring when the dacha season begins and people need a lot of cheap labour," said Rustam Veliev, who heads a group of intellectuals among the workers. "It goes into recession in autumn, and dies in winter."

Veliev said the people in his group started their careers with various construction jobs years ago before going to college. "Now they can use those skills," he said. "There are nine of us here, all with university degrees."

An expensive-looking imported car pulls up, and is instantly encircled by a group of sweating, anxious men standing two deep. Some try to elbow their way to the car, desperate to convince the prospective employer to choose them over their competitors. Someone trips and falls and his colleagues simply step over him. The lucky ones will spend the rest of the day digging ground at some construction site.

The slaves have to arrive very early to stake out a good place, and fighting for clients is not unknown. If a latecomer walks into a day's employment quicker than his peers, there is a chance that he will be beaten up later.

"It's getting harder to make money here," complained Tofik Kerimov, who holds a degree in linguistics. "There are hordes of people looking for odd jobs and clients are few and far between. Sometimes you hang around for a whole day and still bring nothing home."

Rasim Gasanov, deputy chief of the head department for employment, told IWPR that all efforts are being made to help those who are out of work. This year alone, Baku's public employment services found jobs for 4,624 people, provided retraining courses for 523 others and offered more than 1,000 paid seasonal community work.

However, unemployment is running so high that these figures are a drop in the ocean and the problem is aggravated by a lack of credible statistics.

So life goes on for Azerbaijan's slaves - standing in line, fighting for work, and trying to stay optimistic in the face of hardship. "There are worse things than an empty wallet - to lose your hope of a better life is far more terrible," said Veliev.

"My school friend was once a successful biologist. He couldn't find work for seven years and was forced to live off his wife and elder brother until I got him a job as a gardener for a businessman's family. He hanged himself two years ago. His note said, ' I can't live like this anymore'. He was 39 years old."

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