

## **Azerbaijan: Oil Workers Allege Foreign Discrimination**

A growing litany of complaints from Azerbaijanis employed by international companies in Baku.

The new Azerbaijani oil boom has brought a flood of foreign investment to Baku, but many local Azerbaijani employees are complaining they are working hard in poor conditions and reaping none of the rewards.

Twenty-four international companies are now exploiting the huge wealth of the oil and gas fields of the Caspian Sea and forging ahead with the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan, BTC, oil pipeline, currently the largest construction project in the world, due for completion later this year.

Most of the workforce in these companies consists of local Azerbaijanis. Eighty per cent of the 15,000 people employed by the Azerbaijan International Operating Company's so-called "Early Oil" project, which sends oil to the Georgian Black Sea coast, for example are locals.

However, many of the employees say they are being exploited as cheap labour and denied elementary rights.

"After we complained some of our problems were solved. But six or seven of us are still living in a two-bed room. Forty-five people use one toilet and one bathroom. They make us work like horses and pay us 100 times less than the foreigners," said a 43-year-old employee of the Consolidated Contractors International Corporation, CCIC, the main contractor in the construction of BTC, who preferred not to be named.

Mirvari Gahramanly, chairman of the Committee of Oil Industry Workers' Rights Protection, told IWPR that contracts signed by CCIC were not in keeping with Azerbaijani employment practices.

Under the contracts, said Gahramanly, workers could be required to do any work asked of them - although the working week is formally fixed at 40 hours, the company has the right to ask workers to complete their work in non-working time.

Sahib Suleimanov, CICC public affairs officer, refused to comment on these allegations, referring IWPR to British Petroleum, BP, the company that contracted out the work to CCIC.

Tamam Bayatly, head of BP's press service in Baku, did not deny the points Gahramanly raised, but said the contracts had been drawn up in consultation with lawyers from the Azerbaijani state oil company SOCAR. She countered, "In the first place, if they did not like these conditions, they should not have signed the contract. Secondly, overtime is well paid. If our employees work 10 hours a day they receive twice as much as usual."

Another complaint of Azerbaijani employees is that they are made to work on public and religious holidays and days of mourning. But Bayatly rejected these claims, "In BP and its contractors, our employees can decide for themselves whether to work on holidays or days of mourning. If someone wants to earn more money they come to work. If they don't, they don't."

Akif Alizade, an independent lawyer, said that BP was technically in the right. "The employees signed these contracts voluntarily and they are obliged to honour the terms."

“Maybe many of them did not even read what they signed,” said economist Gubad Ibagogly. “And that’s not surprising in a country where there is massive unemployment and minuscule salaries. Who will think twice, when they are being offered [several hundred] dollars a month?”

Local CCIC workers receive salaries of between 200 and 1500 dollars a month, which are higher than the local average. However, there is a big discrepancy between what locals are paid and what foreigners receive for the same work.

According to Gahramanly, BOS Shelf - another contractor working for BP on offshore construction projects - has a four-tier pay scale with locals placed at the bottom, irrespective of their skill-levels.

Aliniyaz Mamiev, who formerly worked as a mechanic for BOS Shelf, told IWPR he was a victim of pay discrimination. He said he had been paid 328 dollars a month for his labour, while his colleague from the Philippines had received between 2500 and 3000 dollars for doing the same job.

Speaking on BOS Shelf’s behalf, BP’s spokeswoman Bayatly said that salary levels had been discussed in detail with the Azerbaijani national oil company SOCAR. Defending the pay arrangements, she said, “If you raise the salaries of employees then the operational costs of the project go up. And as a result oil revenues go down. Remember that the salary which foreign companies pay to local workers is later deducted from general oil revenues.”

Economist Ibadogly believes the government has little interest in its citizens getting better salaries as this might cause social tensions. “If part of the population gets for example 3,000 dollars a month in a country where the minimum wage is 125,000 manats (around 25 dollars), then of course a lot of people will be unhappy,” he said.

Last year, a group of 205 workers at CCIC wrote a letter of complaint to the director of the corporation Ghazi Anouti alleging that they were suffering discrimination. They said they and the foreign workers ate in separate canteens and were fed poor-quality food; lived in crowded accommodation with few toilets and were poorly treated by foreign staff. The workers say some of their problems were addressed, but many persist.

Aladdin Bakhshiev, a former CCIC employee, said that oil workers had begun to work towards forming a trade union, but the corporation sought to frustrate their efforts.

“Active members were sent off to work in other places. And I was detained by the police for 10 hours on false charges. Even though I was innocent, I was sacked,” he said.

Allahyar Eyubov, who formerly served as interpreter to three Azerbaijani presidents before joining BOS Shelf in 2001, claimed he was also dismissed for trying to set up a union.

“We had several preliminary conversations with workers and fixed a date for a founding meeting. But someone told the president of the company and I was fired straightaway under the pretext of not fulfilling my professional duties,” he said.

Eyubov said that 50 of his colleagues staged a brief protest strike and around 500 of them signed a letter protesting his sacking. His case is being considered by Azerbaijan’s appeal court.

David Woodward, president of BP Azerbaijan, said last month that his company would take action if one of its contractors was blocking the formation of a trade union, saying that this was the right of all its employees.

Bayatly told the Baku Khaber newspaper that Bakhshiev's allegations were untrue. He had not been sacked, she said, simply his contract had not been renewed because his work had not been up to standard.

She insisted that Eyubov had also been dismissed for professional reasons. But she said her company would respect any decision reached by the courts.

Samira Ahmedbeili is a freelance journalist in Baku.

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