
Armenians Complain of Labour Exploitation.

By Lilit Harutiunian in Yerevan
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Employees consent to illegal working conditions for fear of losing their jobs.

Zara, 20, a resident of Yerevan knows that she is being exploited by her employers - but also says that there is nothing she can do about it.

"I work from nine in the morning till nine in the evening," said Zara (not her real name), a shop assistant. "We do not have an official lunch break or chance to relax. We eat in the small room where we change our clothes and we get ten minutes to do so. I get terribly tired - but it's still better than sitting at home without money."

A high unemployment rate in Armenia - officially less than ten per cent but generally agreed to be much higher - means that unscrupulous employers pay scant regard to labour regulations. The country's labour code stipulates an eight-hours day, but in practice most people work much longer hours.

According to Article 139 of the code, a normal working week should last no more than 40 hours; and employees should be given breaks to eat and rest and be paid overtime if they work more than the set number of hours.

The reality of Zara's life is very different. She found it very difficult to get a job, as there were few vacancies and she had no work experience. She had wanted to go to university but her parents were unable to pay for her studies.

Now Zara works in a cut-price shop on the outskirts of Yerevan that sells clothes, food, and household goods. She earns 1,500 drams (4.50 US dollars) a day for her 12-hour shift; she has only one day off a week; and has never had any holiday leave while she has worked there.

The director of the shop where Zara works refused to comment on the working conditions of his employees and his failure to pay them any overtime.

Boris Kharatian, deputy chairman of the Armenian Confederation of Trade Unions, says that cases like this are extremely prevalent.

"Employers make up for deficits by taking the money from their employees' salaries but, of course, shop owners deny this," Kharatian told IWPR. "In the meantime, citizens come to us for legal advice on being forced to work longer hours, but no one wants to resolve their problems with our help or in courts.

"They do not trust the courts or they do not want to waste time, preferring to solve their problems with the help of their own relatives and acquaintances or just find another job."

Karine (also not her real name) is 19. She works for more than ten hours a day in a Yerevan shop and is given only one day off a week. She said she had no idea that she works more hours than are legal and that she should have signed an employment contract setting out her rights and obligations when she was hired.

The manager of the shop where Karine works denied the allegation that his employees work long hours and insisted the working conditions were in compliance with the law.

Karine herself is not complaining. "I earn 1,300 drams (four dollars) a day and I do not want to lose this job," she told IWPR. "I do not care much about the contract and the fact that I will not be receiving a pension when I am old. My grandfather's pension isn't enough to buy bread."

Karine said that she spent a long time unemployed and that many of her friends are unable to find even a job like hers.

"In a situation of unemployment people agree to any conditions to earn money," said Hermine Avetisian, a lawyer with the public organisation Against Legal Abuse. "Many people do not care about their own health, if they manage to find a job. They are content that they can earn the money to satisfy at least their basic needs."

Donara Nazarian, 46, says she is distressed that her two daughters spend all day working in a shop - but concedes that she can't see any alternative. She has been unemployed for many years, her husband earns only 20,000 drams (55 dollars) a month and the money the two young women bring in is vital for the family.

"For two years now, they have come back from work so tired that the only thing they are able to do is to sleep," said Donara.

Officials targeting exploitation by employers concede that the sanctions they have at their disposal at the moment are quite weak.

Satenik Dabaghian, spokesperson for Armenia's state labour inspectorate, said they had exposed 2,300 cases of illegal employment practices last year and fined all the employees concerned.

"Unfortunately, punishment for this violation is not very strict, a fine of only 100,000 drams (290 dollars)," said Gurgen Malkhasian, deputy head of the inspectorate. "I think it is impossible to fully eliminate this in the near future due to social and economic problems. However, I think that the creation of the state labour inspectorate is a major step towards resolving the problem."

The state labour inspectorate was set up 18 months ago by the labour ministry to protect workers' rights and provide free consultation for employees.

Gagik Bleian, head of the labour department in Armenia's labour and social affairs ministry, said that his department has recently submitted a new draft law to the government proposing tougher fines of 1,000 dollars for employers who break the law.

However, opposition parliamentary deputy and former prime minister Vazgen Manukian believes legislation is not the answer.

"Our legislation is not bad but the problem is that it does not work," he said. "People are afraid of losing jobs, as half of the people who are able to work cannot find jobs; the courts are corrupt; and trade unions are idle. That's why people agree to work like this and keep silent or else they emigrate."

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