

PRESS RELEASE

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Workers in the Employment Permit System Deserve the Right to Change Employer

Today the Migrant Rights Centre Ireland (MRCI) launched a national campaign calling on the Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Innovation, Batt O’Keeffe, TD, to give workers in the employment permit system the right to change employer.

Currently there are approximately 25,000 non-EEA workers in the employment permit system in Ireland. Workers are only allowed to work for the employer stated on the permit and cannot freely change employer. Between 2006 and 2009, the MRCI lodged over 250 formal complaints for violations of workers’ employment rights and received €1.3 million for workers in awards and settlements. 80% of these cases involved workers in the employment permit system.

“It doesn’t take an expert to realise that when you bind workers to their employer and deny them the right to freely change jobs it leads to exploitation. Denying the right to change employer is also a major cause of workers becoming undocumented,” says Siobhán O’Donoghue, Director of the MRCI. “It puts workers in a powerless situation, completely dependent on the employer for their permit and legal status.”

Surinder Singh was one of four workers who spoke at the launch. Mr. Singh, who was employed for six years in the work permit system, detailed his experience of working 16-hour days, with no days off for €100 per month. According to Mr. Singh, “When I asked for a day off my employer told me that if I want a day off I could go back to India. He would say to me, ‘You are on *my* work permit!’ It is not fair that we cannot freely change employer. If I had that right, I would not have stayed so long in that bad situation.”

The MRCI launch also featured a recorded conversation between a domestic worker from the Philippines and her employers who threatened her with deportation if she left her job. According one of her employers, “If you leave this house you are going deported back home. You are going back in shackles back to Manila, in chains.”

Currently the employment permits system requires that a worker stay a minimum of 12 months with an employer, and then submit an entirely new permit application, pay another permit fee (€1,000) and wait several months, during which time they are not allowed to work. These restrictions completely hinder workers from freely changing employers and discourage most employers from considering them for a position.

According to Ms. O’Donoghue, “There is a better and fairer way for the 25,000 migrant workers still in the employment permit system in Ireland. Employment permit holders deserve the basic right to freely change employer within their job category. It would provide a real and fair chance to move from bad situations and to get back into employment quickly. We need to give workers a real chance to leave exploitative situations and also protect compliant employers who are being undermined by employers who take advantage of workers in this situation.”

ENDS.

Note for Editors: Audio recordings of speakers at today’s launch are available at: http://www.mrci.ie/news_events/index.htm#MobilityCampaign

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