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Bringing Chinese Workers Into Israel Is Akin to Human Trafficking

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Chinese construction workers in Israel.

Chinese construction workers building the Carmel Tunnel in Haifa, Israel, December 2007. Doron Golan

Israel brings in Chinese workers at the expense of everybody

Cabinet approves plan to bring in 20,000 more construction workers from China to Israel

The cabinet on Sunday approved Finance Minister Moshe Kahlon's proposal to import 20,000 Chinese construction workers, even though no agreement on the matter was reached with China. The reason for bringing them here, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said Saturday night, is to expedite construction in an effort to bring down home prices.

His announcement, issued 12 hours before the cabinet deliberations, made it clear how things work: The cabinet debate was futile, because the proposal had been approved in advance by Netanyahu and Kahlon, and all the important professional objections were worthless. Depriving the cabinet debate of any meaning was particularly objectionable in this case, since four government ministries strongly opposed the proposal to import Chinese workers.

Since 2011, the government has resisted all the pressures brought to bear on it to resume importing Chinese laborers. Government policy was firm, and it was strengthened by accumulated testimonies that made it clear Chinese workers are forced to bribe those elements involved in bringing them to Israel in order to come and work.

The bribes these workers are forced to pay turn them into virtual slaves here, tied to their jobs because they must pay the debts they accumulated en route to Israel. Thus the worker-import trade may be the biggest bribery racket in Israel.

What's more, Bank of Israel analysts have demonstrated that the continued import of foreign workers harms Israel's economy. The central bank has shown that imported workers replace Israelis, primarily Arabs, in construction, which has always been one of the highest-paying jobs available to workers lacking higher education. The Bank of Israel also found that relying on foreign workers reduces productivity in the building trades. Israel's construction industry is one of the most backward in the world because it relies on cheap foreign labor, rather than using advanced construction technologies.

For all these reasons, the government in 2011 decided to stop importing Chinese construction workers. The validity of this reasoning hasn't changed. All that has changed is that there is a new finance minister,

Kahlon, a new head of the housing administration, Avigdor Yitzhaki, and a prime minister whose stance is weak and shaky, so that the two could hasten to show that they were the ones making decisions. It doesn't seem to matter that the decisions were made without any professional debate, in stark opposition to the opinion of most of the government ministries, and contrary to the legal opinion of the Justice Ministry, which warned that this would give Israel the status of a country trafficking in human beings.

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