

Abuses and arbitrary deductions: The plight of Syrian workers in Jordanian factories

Report by Thaer Hussein



Archive photo of Syrian workers in a textile factory in Jordan - Source: BetterWork.org

In a Jordanian factory, Bahaa* (27) was doing his routine work when he became exhausted and tired, which cost him two fingers after they were caught in the production machine he was working on. His colleagues rushed him to the hospital, but one of the factory managers asked them to take him to a private clinic.

At the clinic, Bahaa underwent surgery to treat his hand after his fingers were amputated. As a result of the accident, he was unable to work for a whole month, during which time he had to visit doctors regularly to monitor his condition. This resulted in additional expenses and financial obligations that he was often unable to afford, especially since he had no savings and the factory refused to pay his salary for that month. This prompted him to ask the factory management for an advance. "At least give me an advance so I can go for my check-up. They won't be satisfied. Tell me when you pay and I'll bring the bill," Bahaa said.

Bahaa earns a basic salary of 290 dinars from his work at the factory, which, with compulsory overtime, amounts to 400 dinars, which he spends on his family of six.

At the end of the month, under the weight of his financial obligations, he returned to work at the factory despite needing more rest. Upon his return, Baha expected to be assigned tasks appropriate to his health condition, but the factory management returned him to work on the same machine that severed his fingers. "Currently, I am doing work that is difficult for me to do. There are four machines on the line, and I can't do the whole line like I used to." He asked to be given other tasks and refused to work mandatory overtime at night, but his supervisors threatened him with pay cuts and dismissal. "They told me they would deduct a week's pay from my salary."

The factory management forces Syrian and Egyptian migrant workers to work every day until 8 p.m. "If you don't want to work overtime, you won't have a job," says his colleague, Fadi, 24.

He adds that weekly leave is prohibited, as management prevents them from taking their leave with promises to give it to them at the end of the year. As a result, Fadi and his colleagues spend long months without a single day off. "Even on holidays, we don't get a break," he says. Even on his wedding day, he was absent from work for three days. "They deducted it from my salary," Fadi says.

The factory does not compensate these workers for their unpaid leave, threatening them with dismissal. They are promised that they will receive it at the end of the year, but the factory management does not fulfill these promises at the end of the year as long as there is demand for their products, arguing that "those who did not take their leave have lost it."

Fadi has been working at the factory for more than five years, and during that time he has not received any promotions, raises, or bonuses, "even if you keep your job and don't have any violations, complaints, or warnings," says Fadi, who earns the minimum wage. Since he started working, "the salary has risen from 220 dinars to 240 dinars, and is currently 290 dinars."

Salaries do not remain the same due to arbitrary deductions at times. In this context, Fadi recalls one day when management punished ten employees working on the same production line because the product logo was slightly crooked, says Bahaa, adding, "They deducted five dinars from each person. Everyone is prone to mistakes, especially when you work long hours without breaks."

The factory management gives workers one break during the day, lasting between 5 and 15 minutes, for lunch and prayer, which is not enough time, according to Fadi. "Every week there is a problem because of the break. We work without finishing our meals."

Bahaa is waiting for the social security decision regarding his compensation and continues to work reluctantly, as he says, to fulfill his family's living expenses and his commitment to his brothers to rebuild their house, which was destroyed by the war. "As soon as the house is finished, we will all return to Syria." But he realizes that job opportunities there are almost non-existent. As for Fadi, he does not see a return to his country anytime soon due to the deteriorating conditions. He plans to learn how to repair electronic devices, while Bahaa is thinking of moving into the sewing sector, which he has always loved working in.

The testimonies of Bahaa and Fadi reveal the harsh reality faced by a number of Syrian workers in some factories in Jordan, where labor violations intersect with weak official oversight and the absence of effective complaint mechanisms. Forcing workers to work overtime without fair pay, denying them leave, and threatening them with dismissal are all practices that violate Jordanian labor law, which guarantees workers a minimum wage and working hours not exceeding eight hours per day with adequate rest periods.

** This report was produced as part of the project "Promoting Migrant Workers' Rights and Combating Human Trafficking," implemented by the King Hussein Foundation's Information and Research Center in collaboration with the Heinrich Böll Foundation's Palestine and Jordan Office. The views expressed in this report do not necessarily reflect those of the Heinrich Böll Foundation.*