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SPARE PARTS

Supply and Exploitation of
Migrant Workers in Israel
During Wartime

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A. Introduction

Labour migration to Israel has profoundly changed over the last year and a half. This change is the result of a policy shift the government adopted to respond to the shock experienced by the secondary labour market since 7 October 2023, and the severe shortage of manual workers which followed.

Until the outbreak of the war, Israel's government was committed, at least formally, to encouraging the employment of Israelis in the secondary labour market, and to regulation protecting migrant workers in their recruitment and work in Israel. Since the outbreak of the war, however, the government has changed its policy and is now focusing its efforts on bringing as many migrants as possible, to as many employment sectors as possible, while reducing as much regulation on employers as possible, including regulation intended to protect migrants and Israeli workers alike.

Although it is difficult to say if these changes have eased the burden on employers or reduced the cost of living in Israel, they have certainly adversely affected the rights of migrant workers in Israel, whose number increased from 110,000 on the eve of the war to 146,000 as of September 2024 (a more updated figure has not yet been published). Tens of thousands of workers have arrived in Israel since the outbreak of the war, to sectors where migrant workers from the global south had never been employed before; to employers new to the field of migrant labour employment; through open recruitment channels characterized by deception and illegal collection of huge fees; and speaking a variety of languages, often not including English. These changes have deepened worker exploitation, modified drastically the sectors to which workers were brought, and led to an increasing number of workers being labelled by employers as "not good."

This report is the result of about a year and a half of handling inquiries from migrant workers who came to Israel during the war to work in the agriculture, construction, and industry sectors. These three sectors – which until the war relied on the work of Palestinians, Israelis, asylum seekers, and a limited number of migrant workers from specific countries arriving under the auspices of bilateral agreements – have undergone

significant changes since the Hamas attack in October 2023. Although violations of workers' rights, especially migrant workers, have always existed in Israel, the last year and a half has intensified pre-existing problems and has led to the development of new phenomena, in all three sectors. This report will address the change in government's policy since the outbreak of the war, the reasons for it, and the way in which (no) long-term thinking was undertaken before deciding these changes, as well as the phenomena that have developed or intensified since 7 October 2023, affecting migrant workers in the agriculture, construction, and industry sectors.

B. The War's Impact on Labour Migration

One of the consequences of the prolonged war that began on 7 October 2023, was a sharp and rapid change in the political approach to labour migration in Israel¹. If until the outbreak of the war Israeli governments tried to limit labour migration to domestic caregiving, agriculture and construction jobs², and at least officially, aimed to gradually and over time reduce the number of migrant workers in these sectors³, since the war the approach has completely changed and the new trend is to bring as many migrant workers as possible to as many sectors as possible.

Thus, according to a government decision made in May 2024 (Decision No. 1752) and subsequent decisions made by a Committee of Directors-General established for this

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- 1 Israel is not an immigration country, but it allows citizens of foreign countries to transfer their lives to Israel for a period of 63 months or more to meet the needs of the local economy. This is done through circular migration programs system, where a worker is expected to leave Israel at the end of the period, otherwise s/he will be exposed to sanctions, and a new worker is expected to arrive in their place – in line with Israel's immigration policy and fear of workers settling in the country. Under this policy, personal restrictions are also imposed on workers, such as a prohibition on forming romantic relationships with other workers; their pension funds are held by the Population and Immigration Authority as a deposit to ensure their departure from the country; and their stay in Israel is subject to strict regulation that reduces their existence to a pair of working hands and nothing more, which, as we will see, weakens and even nullifies their bargaining power with their employers.
 - 2 In addition, there are several thousand "foreign experts" invited to Israel not for specific sectoral work but for specific expert work with a particular employer, in the absence of such experts in Israel. In recent years, the employment of a few thousand licensed migrant workers in the industry sector has also been allowed, provided they come from countries with a GDP per capita equal to or higher than that of Israel; in nursing homes, due to the labour shortage during the COVID-19 crisis; and in hotels hospitality (apparently as a result of the negotiations to regulate the recruitment of workers for the home caregiving sector with the Philippine government).
 - 3 In practice, government decisions made over the years have ordered a gradual reduction of the quotas set for migrant workers, but these were always subsequently amended, and quotas increased, against the backdrop of employers' pressure. For more on this dynamic, see Sharon Assiskovitz, "The Political Economy of Labour Migration to Israel and Immigration Policy Towards Foreign Workers in the 1990s," *Labour, Society, and Law*, Vol. 10 (2004), pp. 85-88; Adriana Kemp and Rebekah Raichman, "Workers and Foreigners – The Political Economy of Labour Migration in Israel," Van Leer Institute Jerusalem, Kibbutz Meuchad Publishing (2008), p. 119; and the Knesset Research and Information Center, "Issues Related to the Employment of Foreign Workers in Agriculture," 3 February 2010.

purpose⁴, the government's current objective is to **triple the number of migrant workers in Israel, from about 110,000 workers on the eve of the war to about 330,000 workers.**

This is a rapid and significant change in a long-standing policy shared by all Israeli governments and based on professional reports from committees and teams established on this issue that examined the implications of labour migration to Israel⁵. Their findings

indicated that labour migration to Israel leads to reliance on easily exploitable labour, often employed in violation of labour laws, a situation which in turn also harms Israeli workers and pushes them out of the labour sectors to which migrant workers come; therefore, labour migration was perceived as a benefit to specific employers in few fields, at the expense of the weaker workers in Israeli society.

The policy change, made within a short period, was not based on a systematic examination of the issue or an orderly public discussion,

B., a construction worker from India who arrived in Israel through private recruitment, came to Kav LaOved's offices in the summer of 2024, frightened and anxious: he arrived in Israel about a month or two earlier, and now the manpower company employing him bought him a plane ticket to his country for the next day, after he was injured in a work accident. B. said he could not return to his country and had to continue working, he paid \$5,000 to come to Israel, and requested Kav LaOved's help to help him stay in Israel and work. Following Kav LaOved's intervention the manpower corporate announced it would allow him to continue working for them subject to presenting medical documents about his condition and would cancel the plane ticket.

4 Government Decision 1752 set for the first time a general quota for "foreign workers" in Israel, 330,000, to be divided later by a Committee of Directors-General established for this purpose among various sectors of the economy. In the months following its establishment, the Committee allocated a significant portion of the quota to various sectors, including agriculture, construction, infrastructure, caregiving institutions, hotels, restaurants, industrial plants, infrastructure projects, transportation companies, garages, event halls, cleaning companies, retail chains, antiquities, and more. For the home caregiving sector and foreign experts, it was determined that no sectoral quotas would be set, although workers in these fields are included in the general quota of 330,000.

5 For example, see the Eckstein Committee Report on Shaping Policy Regarding Non-Israeli Workers, 2007; and the Eckstein Report on the Employment of Foreign Workers, 2010.

and there was no examination of its long-term implications for the labour market in Israel. The policy was created as a political compromise between different government ministries, within the framework of internal government discussions, in the first months of the war. The change was reactive, without systematic thinking or medium- long-term vision. It came as a response to the increasing demands for more and more "foreign workers" from various business sectors, fully supported by the government ministries responsible for these sectors (the Ministry of Construction and Housing regarding the construction sector, the Ministry of Agriculture regarding agriculture, the Ministry of Health regarding geriatric institutions, the Ministry of Economy regarding the industry and commerce sectors, and more).

Employers' claims in various sectors for "foreign workers" were based on the difficulty of filling positions in the secondary labour market (which, as of the writing of this report, is indeed characterized by low levels of unemployment and high demand for workers, mainly at low wage levels). In the absence of a thorough and transparent examination by the government of the difficulty in recruiting workers, and the reasons for it –in some sectors such claims had been raised for years – it is difficult to assess the extent and way in which the current war has affected these difficulties. It seems that, at least partially, the lack of available workers stemmed from the massive recruitment of Israelis to reserve duty for a prolonged period, and the evacuation of hundreds of thousands of Israelis from the north and south of the country, which led to their exit (whether temporarily or for a long time) from the labour market; as well as the government's decision to ban the entry of over 100,000 Palestinian workers who until the war entered Israel daily with permits to work in various sectors, their employment being based among other things on a security perception that links the employment of Palestinians to security calm in the territories⁶.

6 Regarding the connection between the employment of Palestinians in Israel and security considerations, see Kemp and Raichman, note 2 above. To illustrate the point and the inherent lack of connection between the employment of Palestinians in Israel and the need to fill positions, it should be noted that in 2021, the employment of Palestinian workers even was permitted in the Israeli high-tech sector.

The Committee of Directors-General's decisions increasing migrant workers' quotas were then made by simply converting arithmetically the number of Palestinian workers into migrant workers – despite the significant differences in their employment structures, employment costs, motives for employment, and more, and without stopping to examine the implications of the decision on the labour market in the medium and long term, or the ability of employers and authorities to integrate the new migrant workers and employ them over time.

As the policy change was made without an orderly discussion or a comprehensive examination of all factors, the response given – tripling the number of migrant workers expected to come to Israel – was made accordingly. **The new policy, which was shaped on the fly, under time pressure and employers' distress, was characterized by the state's lack of preparation for the reception of hundreds of thousands poor men and women expected to move their lives to Israel for a period of about 5 years⁷.** For example, no one in the government held an orderly discussion on the question of where 200,000 new migrant workers would live. No one held a discussion on the question of how these workers will manage during their 5 years in Israel if the employer who brought them to Israel decided to terminate their employment and they had to quickly and independently find another legal employer in the sector to which they were assigned. No consideration was given to the fact that most of them do not speak English at a sufficient level and will require translation into their language in various daily situations, including seeking medical services, especially given the high-risk sectors in which they work. Apparently, no one conducted a systematic examination based on data about the ability of employers who employed Palestinian workers daily in a certain format, to switch to employing

7 The Entry into Israel Law, 1952, stipulates that the general period of work for a “foreign worker” will be 63 months, after which the worker will have to leave Israel. In certain cases the period can be extended, but what was supposed to be an exception has become a familiar phenomenon over the years, particularly in the caregiving and construction sectors, where the state extended the workers' visas far beyond 5 years due to the needs of patients and employers.

migrant workers in a completely different format⁸. In fact, all the committee's decisions were made without public participation, **excluding workers' organizations, workers' committees, and human rights organizations from the process**⁹, but in ongoing dialogue with employers¹⁰. Even more than a year and a half after the start of the war, significant decisions continue to be made without substantive debate, and apparently without considering their medium- and long-term implications.

Concurrently, and contrary to the previous policy aimed at prioritizing Israeli labour in various sectors, the government acted to reduce the cost of employing migrant workers,

- 8 For example, in the agriculture sector, a significant portion of Palestinian workers were employed on a seasonal basis, which is much more flexible than the fixed employment format in the sector and the full-time employment required of farmers to employ migrant workers. In the construction sector, Palestinian workers were employed directly by Israeli contractors, while for migrant workers, for 20 years, contractors have been prohibited from directly employing migrant workers, and they can only employ them through dedicated manpower corporates established for this purpose, which increases the cost of employment for contractors.
- 9 In July 2024, Kav LaOved together with the Ma'an Workers' Organization, the Association for Civil Rights in Israel, and the Workers' Rights Clinic at Tel Aviv University petitioned against the work of the committee established with the government decision, (HCJ 5879/24, the petition was dismissed on 9 March 2025). As part of the petition, the committee was requested to, at a minimum, publish its discussions protocols (in the preliminary hearing held on 23 December 2024, the committee stated that it does not actually keep protocols); and at least publish an agenda that would allow entities like Kav LaOved or the General Federation of Labour to address the committee on issues on the agenda before it makes its decisions, and express an opinion on them, a request the committee refused. The committee announced that instead of publishing an agenda, it would send individual notification letters to entities it deems relevant to the discussion, like Kav LaOved, in appropriate cases. Based on this announcement and the presumption that the state would act accordingly, the petition was dismissed. To date, not a single request notification letter has been received by Kav LaOved, including regarding numerous discussions held by the state while the petition was pending, and after it had informed the court as mentioned. The court ruled that the fact that the state did not act this way does not mean it will not do it in the future.
- 10 For example, in the discussion of the special Knesset Committee on Workers' Affairs on 17 July 2024, the founder of the Restaurants Forum described the nature of the interaction with the committee chairman with the words: "I am after him all the time and call him late at night" (page 19 of the protocol); In the discussion held on 12 November 2024, in the Knesset Finance Committee, he also said that he was updated on the details of the committee's decision before its discussion, through direct communication with government representatives. In the Foreign Workers Committee discussion of 17 July 2024, the representative of the Manufacturers Association thanked the committee representatives for their attention and described how she receives daily quick responses from government representatives. In the Knesset Interior Committee discussion on December 2, 2024, it was clarified that there is direct contact between the committee and the representative of the Builders of the Land Association. In the Knesset Labour and Welfare Committee meeting on 4 August 2024, the chairman of the employers' organizations in the cleaning and event hall sectors praised the speed of decision-making in the committee and the attention they receive.

to encourage employers to hire them and "ease" their transition from employing Israeli or Palestinian workers to employing migrant workers. Representatives of various sectors who sought permission to employ migrant workers complain that employing them is not cheaper than employing local labour, and often even more expensive. Indeed, not only are migrant workers entitled to the same rights as Israeli workers, and cogent Israeli labour laws apply to them equally regardless of their status, but their employer must also provide them with housing, purchase health insurance for them, pay fees for their employment, and more¹¹. This to protect local labour, and also because the State of Israel is a signatory to international conventions that ensure equality in working conditions between local and migrant workers.

Nevertheless, during 2024, the government decided to support private bills directed at repealing migrant caregivers' pension rights¹², and to cancel or significantly reduce in various fields the fees employers pay for hiring migrant workers. An inter-ministerial team established in 2023 recommended to the Minister of Labour at the beginning of 2025 to increase the permissible deductions for housing from migrant workers' wages, to save on employment costs and ease the cost of living in Israel. If its recommendations are accepted, a legislative process will probably begin on the matter.

The government also acted to remove any perceived "barrier" to the rapid supply of new migrant workers. As the government was interested in quickly tripling the migrant labour force, but several countries of origin (including those that signed agreements with Israel on the matter) were refusing to send workers due to the war, the government permitted the recruitment of workers from as many countries and through as many channels as possible. Workers' screenings, intended to ensure professionalism and suitability for the job, were carried out under the pressure to bring "quickly" as many workers as possible to Israel, and requirements for basic knowledge of English were converted to recommendations at best. Agricultural farms that until the war relied

11 See the Foreign Workers Law, 1991.

12 See the statements of the Minister of Labour on behalf of the government in the Knesset plenary session on 26 July 2024.

solely on the work of migrant workers from Thailand, and construction sites where mainly Palestinians and a minority of Chinese or Russian speakers were employed before the war, became Babel towers of workers from disparate countries speaking a variety of languages (Thai, Hindi, Malayalam, Sinhala, and more), without the ability to communicate with each other or with their employer. In both sectors, however, employers' representatives complained about the unsuitability of the new workers, and many employers categorically refused to employ workers who came from specific countries.

As part of "removing barriers", Israel for the first time in a decade also waived one of the critical requirements that developed in relation to the recruitment of migrant workers – supervised recruitment of workers in their countries of origin, to exclude brokers (private intermediaries) and workers paying huge illegal fees for their recruitment. Indeed, labour migration is a fertile ground for illegal and astronomical profits. Workers pay local brokers in their countries huge brokerage fees to obtain their work visa. According to findings by Israeli authorities, a significant portion of these fees finds its way to brokerage entities in Israel¹³. The illegal brokerage fees, according to the state's own findings, have led to several negative phenomena – debt bondage of workers for huge amounts due as they start their employment; black capital; fake demands for hiring workers for illegal profit considerations; fraud in the recruitment process regarding what is promised to the worker in Israel; and more¹⁴. To combat this phenomenon, since the beginning of the previous decade, Israel's government allowed the recruitment of migrant workers to the agriculture, construction, and industry sectors **only** from countries with which

13 For example, see the statements of the Ministry of Industry, Trade, and Labour representatives in Knesset committee meetings on 31 January 2007, and 10 May 2010; and the statements of the Population and Immigration Authority representatives in the aforementioned discussion on 31 January 2007, and in the Knesset Interior Committee discussion on 27 July 2015.

14 For the significance of bilateral agreements to prevent brokerage fees, and the development of labour migration programs that allowed their circumvention in the agriculture and construction sectors even before the war, see Kav LaOved's March 2022 report, "By Tricks You Shall Make Slaves: Israel's Undermining of Its Efforts to Prevent Slavery and Human Trafficking."

it had signed an agreement establishing a supervised recruitment process¹⁵, including a lottery element, thus eliminating the illegal brokerage fees' phenomenon. Since the outbreak of the war Israel has however allowed the recruitment of tens of thousands of workers to these sectors (and recently also to the "commerce and services sector," which includes retail, transportation, garages, cleaning, and more) outside of bilateral agreements and without supervision¹⁶. At the same time Israel has also signed new bilateral agreements, whose content in most cases it refuses to disclose¹⁷, signed under the cover of the war and implemented under the pressure to quickly bring workers.

The cumulative result of these developments was that migrant workers who arrived starting from November 2023, and amid a war, in the construction, agriculture, and industry sectors, were weaker and from poorer countries. Consequently, they were also more exposed to violations of labour rights and at increased risk of human trafficking, forced labour, and employment under slavery conditions.

A year and a half after the war's outbreak, it seems that the government's efforts have not helped employers. In many sectors workers have not arrived at all or have arrived in

15 In the agriculture sector an agreement was signed with Thailand, and in the construction sector agreements were signed with China, Moldova, and Ukraine (earlier also with Romania and Bulgaria, from where workers stopped arriving even before the war). In the industry sector, no such agreements were signed, and therefore the recruitment of workers without agreements was allowed – but only if they came from countries with a GDP per capita equal to or higher than that of Israel, to eliminate the concern that illegal payments would be made to come to work in Israel.

16 As mentioned, in the industry sector the recruitment of migrant workers outside bilateral agreements was allowed also before the war – but only from countries with a GDP per capita equal to or higher than that of Israel, to prevent exploitation and the collection of brokerage fees from poor workers. During 2024 the state removed this condition and allowed for the first time the recruitment of poor manual workers to the sector, outside of bilateral agreements, initially through a decision made by the Director-General of the Population and Immigration Authority, without authority. Kav LaOved filed a petition on this matter together with the Workers' Rights Clinic at Tel Aviv University (Administrative Petition, Jerusalem, 5865-03-24, Kav LaOved v. Government of Israel). Following the petition the decision was annulled, but was later re-established by Government Decision 1752, and private recruitment in the sector was later allowed by the Committee of Directors-General.

17 Israel signed an agreement with India to bring workers to the construction sector, we will expand on its results later. With Sri Lanka, Israel signed new agreements in various sectors, including construction, agriculture, restaurants, and hotels, and refuses to disclose them. Additionally, a few months ago, an agreement with Malawi in the agriculture sector began to be implemented, and it appears that an agreement with Ecuador was also signed.

relatively low numbers and after significant delays. In sectors where tens of thousands of migrants arrived – agriculture and construction – employers complain about their unsuitability and lack of professionalism. Construction contractors refuse to employ workers from India, especially those arrived under a new bilateral agreement for the construction sector signed after the start of the war, with a sweeping claim that they are unsuitable for the job and lack experience in the sector; in the agriculture sector, farmers refuse to employ workers from India and Sri Lanka, claiming they are not good workers. The fate of these workers, who moved their lives to Israel, sometimes after paying thousands of dollars for it, is addressed in this report.

In October 2024, a group of construction workers from India, who arrived from the southern part of the country through private recruitment, contacted Kav LaOved for help after their manpower corporation did not provide them with work or wages. They feared complaining about the corporation and requested guidance regarding their right and ability to move to another corporation. Kav LaOved had to inform them that it could not and was not authorized to assist them in job placement, that there was no legal entity supposed to do so, but that they could contact the Population and Immigration Authority's Complaint Center, which could provide them with information about corporations looking for workers. In response the workers reported trying to contact the Center but, as they speak Malayalam and not Hindi, they could not communicate with the Centre's translator who spoke Hindi. Kav LaOved sent a formal letter to the Population and Immigration Authority asking how these workers could find an alternative corporation – no answer has been received to this day. The workers chose to continue waiting at the manpower corporation for work; the last time we spoke with them, two reported that they still had not found any work.

C. The Situation of Migrant Workers in Israel

Over the past year and a half, dozens of migrant workers who arrived in Israel after 7 October 2023 to work in agriculture, construction and industry, have contacted Kav LaOved¹⁸. Some of them reached out on behalf of groups of dozens or even hundreds

A construction worker from Sri Lanka contacted Kav LaOved in the spring of 2024 requesting advice: he arrived in Israel to work in the construction sector through private recruitment and paid \$12,000 in brokerage fees before his arrival but was injured shortly after. He contacted Kav LaOved requesting help in finding a doctor who could treat him as he feared sharing the information with his manpower corporate would leave him without work or get him deported to his country. When asked about his condition, he said he was in pain but continued to work. He kept in touch with Kav LaOved about his condition for months afterward, during which he continued to work while in pain, until he was overwhelmed and requested to rest and recover and was subsequently fired.

of workers in the same situation, providing us with information on the stories of hundreds, if not more, workers. Over the year we spoke with agricultural workers from Thailand, India, Sri Lanka, Malawi, and Nepal; construction workers from India and Sri Lanka; and a small number of industrial workers from Eastern Europe, South America, and East Asia. The vast majority did not speak English (and certainly not Hebrew), and communication with them was assisted by interpreters or translation apps.

18 We do not have complete and updated data, but according to various publications, since the beginning of the war, several thousand workers from Sri Lanka arrived for agricultural work in Israel through the new agreement signed since the war, alongside slightly less than 3,000 agricultural workers recruited from various countries (the prominent ones being Malawi, India, Sri Lanka, Nepal, and Thailand) through unsupervised recruitment channels, and thousands of workers from Thailand who continued to arrive under the bilateral agreement with Thailand (which was frozen at the beginning of the war and resumed in the summer of 2024). In the construction sector, about 15,000 workers arrived in Israel, two-thirds of them through the new agreements with India and Sri Lanka, one-third through unsupervised recruitment (mainly from India, Sri Lanka, Uzbekistan, Thailand, and China), and a few from Moldova under an old agreement. Additionally, it appears that about 2,000 industry workers arrived, all outside bilateral agreements that do not exist in the sector (mainly from Thailand, Sri Lanka, India, and Uzbekistan).

Some of the workers with whom we spoke sought information about their rights and entitlements. Others complained about their employers or the private agencies responsible for handling them, requesting help with rights violations or problems related to their work, or seeking advice on how to proceed. Some workers authorized Kav LaOved to pass on their details, along with evidence supporting their stories, to enforcement bodies. Others, fearing retaliation from their employers, requested to file anonymous complaints; some asked not to disclose their stories to the authorities at all due to this fear.

These inquiries reflect the significant changes experienced by the agriculture, construction, and industry sectors in this short period of about a year and a half, as well as their impact on workers. Many of these workers arrived in Israel during wartime, sometimes without understanding what awaited them, and after paying a fortune to do so. The experiences described below indicate a worrying trend in the employment of migrant workers in Israel, exposing them to human rights violations, lack of supervision and enforcement of their rights, inadequate living conditions, and in extreme cases – criminal offenses, as well as detention and deportation. There is a real concern that all the problems and negative phenomena described here for the three sectors will also affect soon all the new sectors the government approved for labour migration.

1. Debt Bondage

Workers who arrived in Israel through "private recruitment" (i.e. unsupervised, outside bilateral agreements¹⁹) reported paying thousands of dollars to obtain their work visa

19 Various parties in the construction sector claimed throughout the year that the bilateral agreement with India for the construction sector is open to brokerage fees, although it is important to note that Kav LaOved did not encounter workers who arrived this way and claimed illegal payments. Claims regarding illegal payments under bilateral agreements also arose concerning workers from Sri Lanka, although we struggled to understand from some of the workers who arrived from Sri Lanka and contacted us whether they arrived through the bilateral route or not; and we did not encounter direct evidence of payment in the bilateral route. As mentioned, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs refuses to disclose the agreements with Sri Lanka, so we cannot know if they provide guarantees to prevent illegal payments.

to Israel, with a significant portion of the amount being illegal brokerage fees²⁰. Workers from India reported payments ranging from \$6,000 to \$9,000 in the agriculture sector, and from \$4,000 to \$7,000 in the construction sector. Workers from Sri Lanka in the construction and industry sectors reported amounts ranging from \$12,000 to \$16,000. Agricultural workers from Nepal reported amounts of about \$9,000 to \$9,500, and workers from Thailand who arrived outside the bilateral agreement reported amounts of \$4,000 to \$5,000 in agriculture and \$7,000 in construction.

In most cases these amounts, equivalent to dozens of months of work in their countries of origin, are beyond the workers' reach. Most finance their arrival in Israel through loans – from friends and relatives, banks, or grey market, often at high interest rates (some workers reported double-digit interest rates). They begin to work in Israel under significant debt, and their immediate wages will not be dedicated to making profits but to repaying debts, with any delay in payment, month without income, or even minor rights violations, being highly significant.

Since Israel began over a decade ago to insist on recruiting migrant workers through bilateral agreements in the three sectors, the payment of illegal brokerage fees has disappeared entirely in these sectors. Due to the opening of unsupervised recruitment channels under the war's cover, these phenomena have now returned, bringing with them a range of issues not seen in years. Kav LaOved was approached by workers who reported continuing to work despite severe injuries at work, fearing their employers would send them back to their countries under debt (in one case, a worker's employer indeed tried to send him back to his country due to a work accident); workers who took loans at usurious interest rates to come to Israel found that their employer was not prepared to employ them, and eventually sent them back to their countries in debt;

20 Some of the costs of arriving in Israel are borne by the worker according to the law, including flight expenses, medical examinations for arriving in Israel, travel within the country of origin as part of visa processing, and in the agriculture sector, expenses of up to \$2,000 as legal handling fees for intermediaries (\$1,000 allowed for collection by the local placement agency, and another \$1,000 as legal handling fees for private agencies in Israel). The workers we spoke with did not always know how to distinguish between the legal payments they made and those that are not allowed, and in our estimation, in many cases, the amounts include legal payments.

workers who feared leaving their employers and being left without work, even when housed in a warehouse, without a bed, without a rockets' shelter, working 13 hours a day for less than the minimum wage, or under rocket fire (more on this later).

In some cases, unsupervised recruitment in the country of origin was accompanied by deception regarding the workers' rights and obligations and what awaited them in Israel. In India, for example, a whole industry developed promising workers fake work permits for various sectors, and high wages – in stark contrast to what awaited them in Israel when they found out that they were bound to a specific sector with lower wages than promised. Additionally, many workers – in agriculture, for example – left their employers a few months after arriving to work for them as they did not receive the minimum wage promised to them, but significantly lower hourly wages. Some of these workers moved to other employers in the sector, but others ended up, partly due to the sword of debt, in undocumented work in other sectors (more on this later), where their work is prohibited.

A., a Sri Lankan citizen contacted Kav LaOved in the fall of 2024 requesting help. She arrived in Israel about two months earlier after being invited to work in a factory that employed Palestinian workers until the war and was now looking to employ migrant workers through "private recruitment." She paid \$15,000 in her country as brokerage fees (she showed receipts to Kav LaOved), which she financed through high-interest loans. After her arrival she was sent to live in the home of the company's CEO and work there as a cleaner, after being told there was a "problem" with workers' housing at the factory. A. worked for two months as a housekeeper, contrary to the conditions of her visa, and for a wage lower than what she paid \$15,000 for. When she complained and requested to work in the job she paid for, she was sent – effectively deported – by the employer back to her country, without the legal ability to return to Israel. She contacted Kav LaOved to help her return to work in Israel so she could earn a wage that would allow her to repay her debts. Ultimately, due to illness, she had to withdraw her request and remained in her country, in debt.

In the winter of 2024, a group of agricultural workers from India contacted Kav LaOved, after arriving through private recruitment paying about \$7,000 to \$8,000 for their work visa. The workers were sent to a farm in the Gaza envelope, which was regularly under rocket fire. They reported that dozens of workers were housed in a large warehouse, without protection from rockets, without receiving an explanation of what to do and how to protect themselves during rocket fire; they worked about 12-13 hours a day, in open areas without protection, and received wages 30% lower than the Israeli minimum wage. Their private placement agency, which was supposed to help them find another employer, refused to help them, and they contacted Kav LaOved for assistance. Following a complaint filed by Kav LaOved to the authorities there was an improvement in wages, and the employer began building suitable housing on site. However, a significant number of workers from India had already left the employer due to the conditions.

2. Non-Payment of Wages

Although non-payment of wages is not a new phenomenon, during 2024 it became almost a collective issue for entire groups of migrant workers in agriculture, construction, and industry – each for different reasons²¹.

In the **construction** sector, this phenomenon affected mainly workers from India, especially those who arrived under the new bilateral agreement signed under the war's pressure, but not only them. Kav LaOved received numerous complaints from workers from India and Sri Lanka, some recruited through a supervised system and others privately, reporting that their manpower corporation did not provide them with work with contractors, and that they sat all day in their rooms – idle and unpaid, sometimes even without money to buy food. In one case we even encountered a pay slip where the net salary was negative after deductions. This took place despite contractors' claims of labour shortages and construction freezes affecting the economy. Indeed, many manpower corporations claimed that they could not send workers to contractors – either because contractors refused to accept workers from

21 It should be noted that in Kav LaOved's workers' reception hours and hotline calls, we encounter a significant increase in non-payment of wages and wage delays also affecting Israeli workers earning low wages, as well as asylum seekers.

At the beginning of 2025, two construction workers from Sri Lanka contacted Kav LaOved for help. Neither spoke English, and communication with them was difficult. From what we could understand, the manpower corporation that brought them to Israel stopped providing them with work in the fall, and they moved to another corporation, which also stopped giving them work about a month before contacting us. They continued to stay in the corporation's accommodations and wait for work, while the corporation apparently reported them as "deserters." They eventually left the accommodation following a violent incident with the corporation, which erupted after one of the workers requested work after two months without pay. According to them, they had already been without pay for a month and a half after paying \$15,000 to come to Israel.

India, claiming they were unskilled in construction work; or because there were not enough workers to open the construction site; or because the company received more workers than expected and did not have work for them; and so on. This phenomenon is well known to the Population and Immigration Authority which published an exceptional temporary guideline in the summer of 2024 for manpower corporations in construction that employed workers who arrived under the bilateral agreement from India, allowing them to refer workers to other jobs than those for which their visa was issued.²²

It should be noted that foreign manpower corporations in construction are **required to pay workers' wages even if they do not provide them with work**. Apparently, to circumvent this obligation in the absence of work, many corporations report their workers as having "deserted" the corporation (which supposedly exempts the company from the obligation to pay wages and rights), even though they did not

22 According to "Implementation Instructions Regarding the Employment of New Foreign Workers from India Who Arrived in Israel Under a Bilateral Agreement" published by the authority in July 2024, it was possible to place workers with contractors in non-wet construction jobs with fewer hours than usual (renovation work, infrastructure work, and work in essential factories). Additionally, the instructions allowed transferring these workers, until a certain date, to employers with a permit to employ foreign workers in the industry sector.

"desert" at all, but waited in their accommodations for employment, or were transferred by the manpower corporation itself, sometimes over their heads and without their knowledge, to other entities (both legal and illegal). Kav LaOved filed several complaints in the past year about such conduct by corporations. Thus, not only did the workers not receive wages, but were also wrongly reported as having "deserted" the corporations and exposed to various risks during this period.

Two construction workers from India contacted Kav LaOved in the winter of 2024 after not receiving their October wages. They had worked for the same corporation for months when the contractor they worked for informed them at the end of September that their work with him was over. From then until mid-November they waited in their accommodations for work while contacting the manpower corporation requesting work. The corporation, it turned out later, reported them as "deserters," thus avoiding paying their wages for October; in November, it resumed providing them with work for a few days, for which they were paid; then it stopped, and they left it. Kav LaOved filed a complaint with the authorities about the false report of "desertion" and requested to ensure that the workers receive their due wages for the period they waited in the corporation's accommodations for work.

D. arrived in Israel in the spring of 2024 to work in construction. Upon arrival he was sent to his manpower corporations' accommodations without being provided work, stayed there for a few days, and then was taken to a construction site. It appeared later that the manpower corporation reported him as "deserter," transferred him to another manpower corporation without registering him and without informing him, and that for two months he worked for a manpower corporation he did not know, who paid him only partially, so he effectively did not receive wages for a month of work. During this entire period he contacted the corporation he thought employed him, inquired about additional work and wages, and the company, which had reported him as "deserting," continued to correspond with him and promise him payment. Kav LaOved filed a complaint with the authorities about the corporation and the chain of employers who employed him afterward.

In the **agriculture** sector, especially in the first months after their arrival, many workers from India (and from Sri Lanka) moved multiple times between employers. Sometimes the transfer was carried out by a private placement agency in the sector, if workers arrived at an employer

T. came from India to work in construction in Israel. He contacted Kav LaOved because his wage for November was very low – he did not receive payment for the days the manpower corporation did not find him work. After Kav LaOved's intervention, the matter was resolved, but in January, he was again not provided work, and he left the company mid-month. Not only was he not paid for the half-month he was with the corporation, but his wages appeared on the payslip as "negative" (after the company deductions for a full month's work from his meagre wages). After Kav LaOved's intervention, the company paid the worker what he was owed.

"out of season" when fewer workers were needed; sometimes workers left independently, due to the significant gap between the wages and conditions promised and reality. In the latter cases, workers were often not registered by successive employers for whom they worked for short periods, and no contracts were signed, resulting in many employers not paying wages for periods that could reach up to a month of work. Without proper registration and documentation of their work with these employers, workers struggled to prove their employment and receive their wages.

Another unpaid wages phenomenon occurred at the beginning of 2024 affecting agricultural workers from Malawi who arrived in Israel through private recruitment, without supervision. According to testimonies received by Kav LaOved, they were not required to pay high brokerage fees for their Israeli work visas, but intermediaries in their country forced them to open dedicated bank accounts where their wages would be transferred, to repay a supposed "loan" they received to finance their arrival in Israel, channeling foreign currency to

the poor country. In the first months in Israel the workers did not receive their wages as their employers transferred them directly to their bank accounts in Malawi (workers were given only small amounts in cash to buy food). According to Israeli law, a migrant worker's employer must pay the worker's salary into a bank account in Israel. Following Kav LaOved's

intervention, the Population and Immigration Authority issued a clarification to employers and agencies in the sector²³, and accounts were opened for the workers in Israel.

We repeatedly received complaints from groups of South American workers in the **industry** sector, employed under contractor companies as part of a specific framework launched before the war²⁴. These workers reported unpaid wages, months after finishing work, when they had already returned to their countries due to the end of their employment (sometimes because they complained about non-payment of wages).

G. arrived in Israel from Malawi in December 2023 through private recruitment, with a visa for the agricultural sector. He contacted Kav LaOved in January 2024 after his entire salary was transferred to a bank account in Malawi, where it was used to repay his debts for his recruitment to Israel, except for a few hundred shekels the employer paid him in cash as an advance on his salary, for buying food. According to him, this was the case for all his friends who came to the sector from Malawi, and no one asked them about their preferences regarding their salaries' payment method before transferring the wages directly to Malawi.

H. arrived in Israel to work in industrial jobs from a Latin American country. He was employed by a contractor that sent him to a large technology company in Israel to perform hard machinery work. He contacted Kav LaOved after he and his friends complained to the company about not receiving wages for several months, and in response the company told them they had to return to their country immediately, from one day to the next. They contacted Kav LaOved during the Sukkot holiday in 2024, when Kav LaOved could not assist them. H. returned to his country and contacted Kav LaOved again a month later because he still had not received his wages, but was updated shortly afterward that the payment was transferred, and therefore requested not to complain about the employer.

23 Population and Immigration Authority announcement of 1 February 2024, “Deposit of Wages for Foreign Agricultural Workers in Bank Accounts in Israel.”

24 Procedure for employing foreign workers in unique technology and machinery jobs, which allows the employment of workers in specific projects with specific employers, in infrastructure and industry work, under foreign expert visas.

In the winter of 2024, workers from several Latin American countries contacted Kav LaOved. They were employed in Israel for several months in hard machinery work through licensed contractors, in a large Israeli company. They returned to their countries in the summer of 2024 without receiving their last salary. According to them, there were about 200 workers in the same situation. They contacted Kav LaOved requesting help in receiving their last salary, months after finishing their work. Following Kav LaOved's contact with the authorities, the workers updated that the wages were paid to them.

3. Migrant Workers Accommodations

Migrant workers do not have own housing in Israel. The Foreign Workers Law, 1991, stipulates that employers must provide migrant workers with suitable housing that meets required conditions, deducting an amount from their workers' monthly salary for housing, up to the amount authorised by law.

Over the years, we encountered many migrant workers, especially in the **agriculture** sector, complaining about being housed in structures unfit for human living²⁵. This phenomenon has worsened significantly since the war, with the arrival of over 10,000 new workers, without adapting existing accommodations to ensure their suitability for hosting such a high number of workers. We heard from workers who were accommodated in cramped rooms with insufficient beds, without wardrobes and storage space, storing until now their belongings in their suitcases. In other complaints, workers reported insufficient kitchen equipment, refrigerators, and/or washing machines. In other cases, workers complained that due to the large number of workers sharing the same showers there was not enough hot water for everyone.

Similar complaints were received by construction workers. For example, at the beginning of 2025 a worker who arrived in 2024 contacted us sending also photos showing him and

25 For example, see Kav LaOved's 2020 report, "Here Live...: Violation of Migrant Workers' Rights to Suitable Housing in Agriculture."

In the spring of 2024, a group of agricultural workers contacted Kav LaOved. They had arrived in Israel a few months earlier, and reported poor living conditions. Accommodation facilities were neglected and not suitable for the actual number of workers. They complained about severe overcrowding in shared bedrooms, lack of privacy, and above all, insufficient kitchen equipment and stoves for all workers. They shared housing with workers from two other countries (a total of 3 nationalities) but there was only one functioning gas stove in the kitchen. Therefore, they had to cook in "shifts," with each group of workers cooking their own food, and due to this the waiting time for dinner was very long, even affecting their sleep hours.

his friends being housed in the construction site and using improvised stoves on top of concrete blocks, in an open and uncovered area near their room.

During 2024, the question of where such large numbers of migrant workers would live began to arise. The Knesset Foreign Workers Committee held several debates on the matter during the year, particularly about housing agricultural and construction workers, and also suggested to the authorities to consider establishing "migrants cities", away from urban areas, to "ease" the burden on Israeli residents and "prevent" workers from settling in. Private companies involved in planning similar cities worldwide were invited to participate on 4 March 2024 in a committee debate and one of their representatives explained how this solution could help reduce worker "desertion." This position has since been echoed by others including some local authorities' heads.

As part of the state's efforts to ease the burden on migrant workers' employers, in January 2025, an inter-ministerial team established in the summer of 2023, before the war, published its recommendations on the maximum allowed

deductions from migrant workers' wages for providing accommodation. According to the recommendations submitted to the Minister of Labour, deductions from migrant workers' wages should be significantly increased, particularly in the construction and

caregiving sectors. Ostensibly the intention is to reduce the cost of living in Israel, in practice it is another way to reduce the net wages employers pay their migrant workers²⁶. According to statements made by representatives of the Ministry of Labour at a Knesset Foreign Workers Committee meeting, the ministry intends to quickly promote regulatory changes that will be decided upon after reviewing the recommendations.

P. contacted Kav LaOved and reported being sent by his placement agency to work on an agricultural farm and when he arrived he saw there were not enough beds for all workers. To avoid sleeping on the floor he had to sleep on a wooden door that had been removed from its place, with a thin mattress placed on it. The next morning, he requested to find an employer prepared to accommodate him and provide suitable housing according to the law.

4. Employment Under Rocket Fire

Since 7 October 2023, large parts of Israel have been subjected to massive rocket fire, particularly in the south and north of the country, areas with vast agricultural lands. Despite the residents' evacuation from these areas, the Home Front Command did allow some essential work, including in places so close to the border that when the siren goes off there is no extra time for taking shelter. Essential work included agriculture and construction – that is work in open areas, without the possibility to take cover in real-time, and with a high proportion of non-Israeli workers.

As a result, agriculture and construction workers, most of whom are non-Israeli, continued to be employed (and sometimes even housed) under rocket fire, in settlements evacuated of their Israeli residents. Many of these workers had never experienced war before, and Kav LaOved received inquiries from workers who reported not knowing the meaning of the siren and how to behave during a siren; others reported not having a shelter or not knowing where it was. Agriculture workers, working in open areas far from the settlement,

26 See comments by Kav LaOved, Adva Center, and the Workers' Rights Clinic at Tel Aviv University of 9 February 2025.

M. an agricultural worker, worked with his friends in an orchard, in a border area evacuated of its residents, as the Ministry of Defence permitted employment in "essential" work. When a rocket hit them, one worker was killed and others, including M., were injured. M. requested to recover in his country and contacted Kav LaOved because his employer had not regularised his visa before the rocket fire, preventing him from leaving and returning. Eventually, he left to recover in his country, recovered, and returned to Israel – to the same employer, who demanded he returns to work on the border, in the same place where he was injured and his friend was killed, despite the danger and trauma he experienced. He contacted Kav LaOved again for help and then managed to find independently another employer in the agricultural sector.

reported there was no siren to be heard before rockets started falling. When Hezbollah rockets reached Haifa, the Galilee, and surrounding areas, and at the same time also the Houthis fired rockets on Israel, the number of workers housed without adequate protection under fire threat, or employed in open areas without any protection, grew. Workers who arrived in Israel in the midst of a war reported being sent to work in the south or near the northern border without receiving any explanation on how and where to take shelter during a siren and rocket fire.

Additionally, workers reported that their employers sent them to work in the fields even during periods of massive rocket fire in the area. Workers who were in the Gaza envelope area before the Hamas attack experienced it firsthand and had to return to work just a few days after. For example, on 10 October 2023, two agricultural migrant workers were killed by rocket fire and another one was seriously injured in Telmei Eliyahu, a settlement in the **Gaza envelope**. A worker reported to Kav LaOved that only three days after 7 October their employer sent them back to work in the fields, ignoring the fact that they were near Gaza and that there was active fighting in the area.

On 5 March 2024, a day after Thai agricultural

workers were injured by rocket fire, the Knesset Foreign Workers Committee held a debate about the difficulty of signing and implementing bilateral agreements due to the war. A representative of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs intervened saying that "one of the Thai workers who was injured yesterday was quickly discharged from hospital as he was only lightly injured, thank God. His employer came and brought him back to his farm, and this morning sent him to work in the same field where he was injured yesterday. We are not surprised that the Thai embassy in Israel is nervous. They are demanding answers from the government, so what am I supposed to tell them?" The committee chairman's answer was, **“you are expected, as someone representing the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and all the country’s interests, to try not to highlight the implications of being employed on the borders.”**

Some of the workers with whom we spoke since 7 October 2023, reported fearing to refuse their employer’s demands to work in the fields, or wanting to change employer, but not knowing how to request it (as detailed below). From experience during previous "rounds of fighting" in the south we know that many workers continue working because they not aware of security alerts having no access to the real-time instructions (which are not available in their language) issued by the Home Front Command, or because they fear (rightly) that if they do not work, they will not get their wages²⁷.

Indeed, the proportion of foreign casualties among all rocket fire casualties in the past year and a half is quite high, and a significant portion of them were migrant workers in agriculture and construction. This is beyond the heavy price paid by migrant workers on that cursed Saturday of 7 October 2023, when many of them were murdered, kidnapped, and injured. For example, in the agricultural sector, since 8 October 2023, 11 workers

27 Indeed, unlike absence from work in other justified circumstances such as illness, childbirth, or reserve duty, the right of a worker (Israeli and non-Israeli) to wages during absence in an emergency is not regulated by legislation, and there is no obligation for the employer to pay wages to someone who was absent from work in such an event. In practice, this is regulated retroactively through agreements between the General Federation of Labour and employers’ organizations, expanded through extension orders by the Ministry of Labour, alongside a compensation plan for employers formulated retroactively by the Ministry of Finance. For more on this and the problematic nature of it, especially concerning vulnerable workers, including hourly wage workers, see Kav LaOved’s report, “War and Unemployment,” May 2024.

have been killed by rocket fire, 8 of whom migrant workers; and 19 have been injured, 12 of whom migrant workers. In the construction sector, one Israeli worker was killed, and 8 workers were injured, 3 of whom migrant workers²⁸.

During 2024, the Population and Immigration Authority made a commitment to the governments of India and Thailand that Israel will not allow agricultural workers from their countries to work in border areas (regarding Thai workers, the commitment was only for "new" workers arrived in the summer of 2024, after the start of the war). In a discussion held in the Knesset Foreign Workers Committee on 17 July 2024, a representative of the Ministry of Agriculture claimed that this commitment led to a shortage of migrant agricultural workers in "red areas," evacuated of their Israeli residents, and that there was a need to open new unsupervised recruitment channels for new workers to address the labour shortage in border areas. The possibility of privately recruiting agricultural workers had expired in February, but about two and a half months after that discussion, on 1 October 2024, the government authorised again "private recruitment" in the sector, for all areas, citing a shortage of workers in the sector²⁹.

5. Inability to Change Employers

The situation has been greatly exacerbated by the fact that many migrant workers who arrived in Israel after the start of the war, in the three sectors, have had a very limited ability to change employers. This has left workers with the choice of staying in abusive workplaces, resigning and remaining without work, or finding work outside their sector, thus being exposed to arrest and deportation.

28 Additionally, 9 Israeli workers were killed and 7 injured by rocket fire during their work in industry and essential services.

29 Kav LaOved filed a petition against the decision, together with the Association for Civil Rights and the Workers' Rights Clinic at Tel Aviv University, as state data showed there were more workers in the sector than before the war, and 3 functioning bilateral agreements (HCJ 82462-12-24 Kav LaOved v. Government of Israel). On 20 February 2025, a new decision was published by the state, stating that the "private route" in the agriculture sector would be frozen; it may be renewed during 2025 depending on the status of the agreement with Thailand. The petition was dismissed with the consent of the petitioners.

In principle, migrant workers are entitled to change employers during their stay in Israel. This right was recognised following a prolonged legal battle carried out by human rights organizations which determined that "binding" workers to their employer gave the employer

In the summer of 2024, a worker from Venezuela contacted Kav LaOved after coming to Israel to work through two different contractors in a machinery job at a large technology company. He was fired and returned to his country within a day after complaining about working conditions. After returning to his country he contacted Kav LaOved with a detailed complaint about the rights he claimed he was entitled to. Kav LaOved forwarded the complaint to the authorities in Israel, and a few days later, the worker sent several urgent emails to Kav LaOved and the authorities, requesting to stop the investigation, claiming it was a big misunderstanding on his part and that it was his fault. He has never responded to Kav LaOved's inquiries since.

disproportionate power over them, allowing severe violations of labour and human rights³⁰. In practice, however, migrant workers cannot change employers at will. They are allowed to work only with employers holding permits to employ foreign workers, and only if these permits are available (i.e. the employer's allocated permits have not all been assigned to other workers), and only in the sector where the workers are permitted to work. When it comes to migrant workers who do not speak English or Hebrew and have just arrived in Israel without connections or familiarity with the local market, finding such specific employers is not a simple matter.

Additionally, a migrant worker cannot search for an employer at leisure. As mentioned, workers live in accommodations the employer provided, and

30 In 2006, the Supreme Court ruled that the Population and Immigration Authority's procedures linking dismissal/resignation to the loss of the worker's visa (i.e. requiring them to leave Israel and exposing them to arrest and deportation) bind workers to their employer and create modern slavery. This in the framework of a petition filed by several organizations, including Kav LaOved, where the organizations pointed to severe phenomena resulting from such binding, including physical and sexual assaults on workers, wage delays, and more, all linked to the worker's fear of reporting and ending their employment. See H CJ 4542/02 Kav LaOved v. Government of Israel, given on March 30, 2006.

if employment ends, they must vacate the accommodations within a week at most. Without an alternative employer, workers are left without housing and, of course, without income (migrant workers are not entitled to unemployment benefits according to the National Insurance Institute Law). Moreover, the Entry into Israel Law stipulates that workers must regularise their employment within 90 days, otherwise they lose their visa and remain without status, exposed to imprisonment and deportation.

These conditions create immense pressure on migrant workers, especially if they are in debt, to continue working under difficult conditions and rights violations as long as they have not found another employer; the alternative is to leave their employer and move to any employer willing to hire them – even if this is against the law.

In the **agriculture** sector, private mediation and placement agencies have been operating for years according to the Employment Service Law, 1959, with permits issued by the Ministry of Interior. Their role is to assist migrant workers with visas and place them with employers with permits in the sector, for the benefit of both parties. In the past about 100 private agencies operated in the sector, but their number dropped to 12 after the signing of a bilateral agreement with Thailand, and the end of unsupervised recruitment involving brokerage fees. Until the war the sector relied on Thai workers, and all agencies employed Thai language interpreters for communicating with workers. Each agency, however, employed only one or two interpreters, an insufficient number to provide adequate service to the thousands of workers it was responsible for. Indeed, for years the mobility of migrant workers in the agricultural sector has remained very low compared to the construction and caregiving sectors.

However, the situation of the "new" workers in the sector, those who arrived after 7 October 2023 from India and Sri Lanka for example, is much worse. As mentioned, many farmers refuse to employ them, limiting private agencies' options when searching for alternative employers in the sector. Agricultural workers from India and Sri Lanka who contacted Kav LaOved reported difficult working conditions, in northern and southern areas exposed to rocket fire, sometimes working 13 hours a day, sometimes

7 days a week without a rest day, at low pay below the minimum wage, and housed in places unfit for living (and unprotected); and when they asked their agencies for help in finding another employer, they were told that the agency could not assist them. In some cases, workers presented written evidence of such responses from their agencies.

The agencies' responses are not surprising as they had also contacted the Population and Immigration Authority during the year complaining about the new workers who arrived and their inability to work with them. These complaints focused on workers who arrived through the bilateral agreement with Sri Lanka, avoiding addressing workers who arrived through unsupervised recruitment³¹. In fact, regarding those who arrived in Israel through private channels, for example from India, some agencies initially chose not to bring them to Israel, which limited workers' ability to change agency later since most agencies do not, to the best of our knowledge, employ interpreters for the languages spoken in southern India, from where most workers arrived. According to testimonies received by Kav LaOved, confirmed also by the Population and Immigration Authority in a memo issued to private agencies, agencies neglected assisting Indian workers under their care, including in cases of complaints about employer violence, and did not inform the authorities about it³².

In the **construction** sector, no placement agencies were established. Since 2004, following recommendations from an inter-ministerial team established on the matter (the Andorn Committee), migrant workers in the sector are hired by manpower corporations with a special license to serve as migrant manpower companies; manpower corporations only employ migrant workers in construction, who are allowed to work only through corporations; and they place them with contractors. Until the

31 For example, see the letter from the “Blue Shirt” agency to the Population and Immigration Authority from August 2024, “Foreign Workers from Sri Lanka, Thailand, and more.”

32 Population and Immigration Authority letter to agencies from 15 October 2024, “Reminder of the Obligation of Agencies to Respond to Complaints and Inquiries from Foreign Agricultural Workers.”

war, about 50 manpower corporations operated in the sector, placing about 15-20 thousand workers with contractors, and paying them a minimum of 236 hours also if no actual work was found for them. This situation allowed workers to move between contractors, including in cases where work was difficult or dangerous, without this affecting their seniority or risking periods of lost income and housing.

The question of how workers were supposed to move between manpower corporations, however, was not addressed. The Population and Immigration Authority's data shows a high volume of transfers between corporations each year. In Kav LaOved's experience, a large part of these transfers is fictitious, as workers are transferred from one corporation to another over their head by the corporations themselves, not at the worker's initiative. Many transfers are made through illegal intermediaries, especially in the case of Chinese workers who struggle to communicate with the corporations. "Rais" (veteran Chinese workers) are involved in transferring workers between contractor projects and at times also between corporations (sometimes at the workers' request, sometimes without their knowledge). Additionally, data of the Foreign Workers Complaint Center operated by the Population and Immigration Authority through the CIMI association, reveals that each year a significant portion of the Center's resources are invested in assisting Chinese workers finding a new corporation in the construction sector to employ them³³.

The drastic changes in the construction sector since the war started have made the above-described model particularly problematic for new workers. The number of workers in construction corporations significantly increased, doubled, and perhaps even tripled; accordingly, the number of manpower corporations grew from about 50 to about 200. It can be assumed that the ability of the government's Complaint Center to continue serving these workers as a placement agency will only decrease. Even

33 According to CIMI's annual report regarding the complaint center's activity, in 2023, about 40% of the center's resources were dedicated to locating manpower companies operating in the construction sector; in 2022, the rate was about 50%, and in 2021, about 56%.

when the "assistance" offered by the Center is sending a list of about 200 manpower corporations, which the worker is supposed to start contacting and talking to in some way (as mentioned, most workers do not speak English or Hebrew). Workers who arrived from southern India, who often do not speak Hindi, cannot communicate with the Complaint Center as it does not employ interpreters for other languages spoken in India (for example, Malayalam, common in the Kerala region from where come a significant number of Indian workers who arrived in Israel through unsupervised recruitment). Construction workers from India who contacted Kav LaOved in 2024 reported not knowing about the governmental Complaint Center at all, or not being able to communicate with it, or not knowing how they could find an employer through the mentioned "list."

In the winter of 2024, several agricultural workers from Sri Lanka were arrested after being caught working in another sector. Kav LaOved was exposed to the story by chance, from the protocols of their detention hearings published in the Ministry of Justice's website. The protocols stated that they reported being in debt, sent to work in areas exposed to rocket fire, some complained about pay below the minimum wage, and unfit housing – and all reported that the agencies through which they arrived did not help them finding another employer in the sector and told them to stay where they were. All decided out of necessity to leave the farms where they worked and went to the first place willing to hire them – that did not have permits for them. The protocols were sent by the court to the Employer Enforcement Division of the Population and Immigration Authority, while Kav LaOved contacted the Coordinator for Combating Human Trafficking at the Ministry of Justice. Ultimately, the workers were released from detention on the condition that they reintegrate the agricultural sector; some contacted Kav LaOved afterward requesting to understand their rights, as the visa given to them upon release absurdly prohibited them from working. The workers managed to find employers in the sector, and Kav LaOved assisted them with the Population and Immigration Authority in renewing their work visas.

In the summer of 2024 two construction workers from India, who arrived through a supervised bilateral route, contacted Kav LaOved. They arrived in Israel and were sent directly to housing provided by the corporation, without receiving work, for weeks – without wages and without the ability to sustain themselves. After their requests to the corporation were not answered, they left and searched for work independently. An Indian friend connected them with a factory looking for workers – at that time, the Population and Immigration Authority allowed construction workers who arrived from India through the bilateral route to move to the industry sector and work with an employer with a permit to employ migrant workers in the industry sector. It emerged later that this employer did not have such a permit, and the workers, who had been in Israel for a very short time, were caught and detained before deportation. Kav LaOved contacted the Population and Immigration Authority, highlighting the difficulties migrant construction workers have in finding legal employers, and requesting that the workers be allowed to reintegrate into the sector. This request was never answered, and it was later learned that these workers were no longer in Israel.

The refusal of construction manpower corporations to allow workers to transfer to another corporation (or conditioning their consent on payment), is an additional problem which has emerged in the construction sector. Unlike in other sectors, migrant construction workers can only transfer between corporations once a quarter, at four fixed dates (1 January, 1 April, 1 July, 1 October), and even then, they can only be registered with a new corporation if no more than 30 days have passed since their last employment ended³⁴. Since the Population and Immigration Authority does allow transfers of workers between corporations during the quarter, if there is an agreement between two corporations, until the war many transfers were made this way. Following the arrival of Indian workers to the sector, and the refusal of many contractors and corporations to work with them, we began encountering the phenomenon of corporations refusing to "release" workers

34 These arrangements were established in 2006 and have not been amended since, see Foreign Workers Regulations (Transition of Foreign Workers Between Employers Who Are Manpower Contractors in the Construction Sector), 2006. In 2024 Kav LaOved requested to amend these regulations which appear to violate also the Supreme Court ruling on work binding, or the Entry into Israel Law which allows a 90-day stay to find an employer.

during a quarter or conditioning their consent to a payment (for example, from the receiving corporation). The result is that workers who were fired or resigned, sometimes after not being provided work at all, cannot re-arrange their employment, certainly not within the 30-day period stipulated in the regulations, due to the previous corporation's refusal to "release" them.

A construction worker from India contacted Kav LaOved in the winter of 2024 requesting help with his manpower corporation. The corporation transferred him to another corporation that did not register him, and when it decided to stop employing him, the original corporation – with which the worker was still registered – immediately reported him as "deserting." The worker began searching for work and, through a friend, found a new corporation willing to take him, but since the quarter had not yet ended, the corporation said it could not register him without the original corporation's consent – which, according to the new corporation, demanded payment for his "release" and re-registration. The worker was left without a registered corporation and without work, fearing that the permitted period for his stay without a corporation would soon expire. Kav LaOved filed a complaint against the original corporation and requested immediate permission for his re-registration. To date, no answer has been received.

In the **industry** sector, the state has not yet established how migrant workers can move between employers, and therefore no placement agency or manpower corporation operates in this sector. The sector, which was effectively opened to labour migration around 2022, included only about 100 migrant workers until the war, all from countries with a GDP per capita equal to or higher than that of Israel (a condition set to prevent worker exploitation during recruitment), almost all experts in high demand. At least theoretically, these were relatively strong workers with many job options and limited competition from other workers, which should somehow balance the inherent weakness of migrant workers when searching for a new employer. In practice, however, the Population and Immigration Authority data shows that there were no worker transfers in the sector (which may have been due to the fact that this is a new sector, and workers have just started working in it).

This situation changed drastically since the war, as the government removed the "GDP requirement" and encouraged employers to bring manual workers from poor countries to the industry sector (without recruitment supervision, in the absence of a bilateral agreement). This affected not only the recruitment process (which, as expected, involved illegal brokerage fees – evidence of which was sent to the Population and Immigration Authority by Kav LaOved), but also created a situation where hundreds and thousands of new workers, whose English proficiency is unclear, arrived in a sector not prepared to absorb them and lacking any placement mechanism. This is particularly troubling in the industry sector, which comprises very different fields and categories, making a worker's ability to find work in a specific "category" even more limited and complex. Israel has now permitted the arrival of migrant workers to more and more new sectors that until the war employed Israelis, Palestinians and asylum seekers– restaurants, garages, cleaning, and more – and where no mechanism was established to help workers find new employers. Kav LaOved's October 2024 query on this matter has not yet been answered.

The situation was and remains difficult, especially in specific machinery jobs, where employment was inherently binding even before the war. In such cases, any worker complaint about working conditions can lead to immediate dismissal and repatriation. Some of the workers' countries of origin in this field have very poor human rights records, to say the least, which in itself can pressure the worker not to complain.

*In the summer of 2024, a worker from Venezuela contacted Kav LaOved after coming to Israel to work through two different contractors in a machinery job at a large technology company. **He was fired and returned to his country within a day** after complaining about working conditions. After returning to his country he contacted Kav LaOved with a detailed complaint about the rights he claimed he was entitled to. Kav LaOved forwarded the complaint to the authorities in Israel, and a few days later the worker sent several urgent emails to Kav LaOved and the authorities, requesting to stop the investigation, claiming it was a big misunderstanding on his part and that it was his fault. He has never responded to Kav LaOved's inquiries since.*

D. The State's Handling of the Phenomena – Lack of Enforcement

Since 7 October 2023 decision-makers and authorities in Israel have refused regulatory changes that would have prevented the described phenomena from the outset, despite repeated experts' requests and warnings; they even promoted regressive regulatory changes. As mentioned above, the general trend was "not to complicate," dismissing concerns about worker exploitation with the response that "violations will be addressed" – through inspections and enforcement.

Thus, inspection and enforcement became magic words in 2024 as far as labour migration was concerned, as if every problem could be solved through them. **This despite the fact that even before the war, when the number of migrant workers in Israel was significantly lower than it is now, enforcement of migrant workers' rights was minimal** and based on workers' complaints, alongside few proactive enforcement actions by the authorities, without significant sanctions. In the agricultural sector, for example, long-term under-enforcement has led to entrenched violations by many employers who systematically do not pay minimum wage and social rights according to the law.

Government Decision No. 1752, which led to the increase in the number of migrants workers and the removal of protective regulation, began with the commitment to increase the number of enforcement and inspection positions in the Ministry of Labour and the Population and Immigration Authority (the Israel Police, a critical element for enforcing criminal law in cases of severe violations against migrant workers, was left out of the decision³⁵). However, enforcement and inspection, even if they were carried out, are not magic solutions. Some of the problems they are supposed to solve, such as illegal collection of brokerage fees and deception during recruitment in the country

35 Apparently, it was related to a previous government decision from September 2022, intended to lead to an increase in standards and the formulation of an enforcement policy. To the best of our knowledge, nothing has happened in the last two and a half years.

of origin, are almost impossible to enforce and inspect in Israel, even if some of the illegal brokerage fees collected find their way to Israel. Additionally, the experience of state authorities shows that inspections and enforcement are not useful if workers fear complaining and exposing violations occurring in Israel – for example, in cases where they are bound to their employer and/or indebted.

Even in cases where violations can be investigated, experience – including from the past year – shows that a significant portion of the authorities' little enforcement resources are invested in deporting migrant workers who left their employers³⁶, sometimes without a real understanding of the circumstances of their departure and arrival at an employer not authorized to employ them; and even in cases where violations are found, state authorities have been content for years with warnings only: the vast majority of violations are handled administratively rather than criminally, and government ministries choose to issue only warnings instead of imposing sanctions (as enshrined in the Ministry of Labour's procedures), or admonitions and limitations to the employer's permit, instead of permit revocation to ensure that no other worker falls victims again (the Population and Immigration Authority)³⁷.

Ironically, the only change in enforcement which occurred in 2024 – the increase in standards in the Ministry of Labour and the Population and Immigration Authority – did not materialize, either due to across-the-board budget cuts, or due to a chronic difficulty in filling existing positions, let alone new ones.

36 See Kav LaOved's May 2022 report, "Enforcement of Palestinian and Migrant Workers' Rights – Analysis of the Population and Immigration Authority's Activities in 2018-2020."

37 Regarding the Ministry of Labour, the matters are enshrined in a procedure issued by the ministry about a decade ago, "Procedure Regarding the Issuance of Administrative Warnings According to Section 15(a) of the Law to Increase the Enforcement of Labour Laws, 2012." Regarding the Population and Immigration Authority, see Kav LaOved's report mentioned in note 36.

E. Conclusions and Recommendations

The sharp change in labour migration policy during 2024, with no thorough planning or comprehensive thinking, has not eased the burden on employers to date, but it has worsened the situation of migrant workers. These workers were invited to Israel as temporary spare parts, even if for them, moving their lives to Israel (often against a huge payment) was not temporary but for many years. The way decision-makers discuss their arrival, housing, and employment resembles more to the ordering of a product on Amazon, than discussing about vulnerable human beings who pay astronomical sums to come and work during wartime in difficult and often dangerous jobs.

The price of these decisions is paid by the migrant workers who have come here, and those who will come after them will continue paying it, including in the many new sectors opened to labour migration in the past year. Experience shows that the slippery slope of inviting migrant workers in an unregulated manner, without guaranteeing in advance their rights, and without protecting them afterward, will also be paid by Israeli manual workers, who will gradually be excluded from sectors that will increasingly become addicted to employing weak exploitable migrant workers, demanding more and more – if a sufficient number of suitable migrant workers will arrive at all.

The State of Israel must stop and change direction, formulate a coherent, data-based policy, supported by research with a holistic and long-term perspective, examining each sector separately based on its circumstances and characteristics. Among other things, and as a general policy, the following actions should be taken:

- Prevent unsupervised "private" recruitment of migrant workers while improving the recruitment process and implementing existing bilateral agreements.
- Invest in developing long-term solutions for employers, not relying only on migrant labour; this should include mapping the shortage of workers and its causes, as well as mapping the difficulties and barriers in integrating local workers in these sectors.

- Establish a limited list of languages that workers arriving in Israel must be proficient in at least one of them, ensuring that there are enough employers/agencies in the sector with interpreters for that language.
- Establish placement mechanisms in each sector as a condition for opening it to labour migration. Additionally, carefully examine requests to hire from employers who have never former employed migrant workers before, especially female migrant workers, to ensure that they are suitable and can employ migrant workers long-term. This is particularly relevant for former employers of Palestinian workers, many of whom, according to the Bank of Israel's findings, employed Palestinians fictitiously until the war, selling their employment permits to others.
- Encourage through various means employers to employ migrant workers who arrived from India and Sri Lanka after the start of the war for agricultural and construction jobs; conduct training for migrant workers in Israel as needed; and allow those who cannot integrate into the sector they were allocated to, to move to other sectors where migrant work is permitted, so they can complete their employment period in Israel legally, instead of deporting them and bringing new workers.
- Formulate an enforcement policy regarding migrant workers who arrived after 7 October 2023, left their employers, and moved to undocumented work, examining the circumstances of their departure from the previous employer and their failure to reintegrate into the sector. Workers should be encouraged to reintegrate into the sector, and not automatically assumed to be manipulative "deserters", and consequently repatriated immediately.
- Expand proactive enforcement actions and surprise inspections by the Population and Immigration Authority, the Ministry of Labour, and the Safety Administration; and impose significant sanctions, including fines and permit revocations, on employers and agencies violating their obligations; develop work interfaces between the various authorities, share and rely on available data, and map particularly vulnerable workers groups (e.g., those employed in new labour migration sectors; women; those recruited through unsupervised recruitment processes; those employed in sectors with no real feasibility of finding an alternative employer, etc.).