



BUILDING AND WOOD WORKERS' INTERNATIONAL (BWI)

DECENT JOBS FOR SYRIAN REFUGEES IN LEBANON

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More than 5.6 million Syrians have fled the civil war in Syria to neighbouring countries according to the UN. Around 1 million refugees are registered with the UNHCR in Lebanon, but the actual number is closer to 1.5 million. This makes Lebanon the world's largest per capita recipient of refugees, and the social and economic strains on the Lebanese society are massive. Syrian refugees tend to be economically marginalised having little opportunity to provide for their own livelihoods. As humanitarian aid continuously fails to meet the necessary requirements, and hostility towards Syrian refugees is on the rise among the general Lebanese population, there is an urgent need for efforts to provide a fair labour market inclusion of Syrian refugees in the country.

Many Syrian refugees are skilled construction workers and manage to find jobs in the informal construction sector. However, these jobs are often precarious, and refugees are generally paid a fraction of the wages Lebanese workers are paid. This leads to many conflicts with local workers and creates tensions that are felt by both workers and employers.

Also, getting a work permit in Lebanon is notoriously difficult, and it is hard to imagine that Syrian refugees will find decent jobs and become productive and reliable resources for employers without a change in the policy of the Lebanese Government.

At its 4th congress in 2017, the global union federation for trade unions in the construction sector 'Building and Wood Workers' International' (BWI) adopted a strategic plan that seeks to address the Syrian refugee crisis and promote the inclusion and promotion of decent jobs for Syrian refugees on the labour market in the region. With support of international partners, such as the United Federation of Danish Workers – 3F, BWI has concluded that regardless of whether Syrian refugees remain in host countries, return to Syria or migrate to other countries, they will need assistance to understand their rights, organise and have the opportunity to upgrade their skills. BWI believes that promotion of sustainable jobs and livelihoods for refugees cannot be attained if they do not have a chance to enter the formal labour market and can join and represent trade unions that negotiate and operate on their behalf.

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In Lebanon, BWI is targeting Syrian refugees in the construction sector in partnership with the Lebanese construction union and the construction sector and seek to ensure that they know their rights and how they can avoid being abused in the informal sector. The BWI also influence their affiliated trade unions in the country to seek a cooperation on bi-partite level with employers' organisations to reach results in this field. In Lebanon, BWI has focused on organising and building capacity of Syrian refugees providing advice and legal aid in the different districts of the country. In cooperation with the Lebanese construction union, BWI is helping refugees to organise in committees where they can address their concerns and receive assistance. In many cases, Syrian refugees feel isolated and do not openly share their concerns with Lebanese colleagues. By supporting Lebanese trade unions to be more open and enter into dialogue with Syrian workers, they identify and understand problems on building sites and workplaces, as well as gain new potential members. In many districts of Lebanon there are now regular dialogue meetings in these networks where the trade union meets both Lebanese and Syrian workers to address their concerns and give legal advice. The BWI participates with support to organise these meetings and provides input and experiences from trade unions in other countries in the region.

The activity to support local unions to form refugee committees and give advice is paired with lobbying and advocacy on the national and regional level. The BWI

uses its position as a global union federation to issue support statements and raise awareness on the issue of refugees, ultimately aiming for the Lebanese government to better protect the rights of Syrian refugees and provide an uncomplicated way for Syrian refugees to gain work permits.

In 2019, the BWI can conclude that their work has yielded several results that immediately promotes the inclusion of Syrian refugees on the labour market in the country and that improves their livelihood.

- Syrian refugees are given legal advice on how to claim unpaid wages, protective equipment etc.
- Syrian refugees that have been unlawfully dismissed are reinstated after assistance from the trade union.
- Syrian refugees are coached and advised on how to register for a work permit in cooperation with their employer
- Lebanese and Syrian workers meet and discuss conflicts on the labour market relating to wages, working hours etcetera.

The BWI effort focusing on refugees is also part of a larger regional program in Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey in cooperation with 3F, and Danish Industry (DI) to improve social dialogue and increase the labour market inclusion of refugees all three countries. During the

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course of 2019 and 2020, social dialogue forums will be established to address hurdles and challenges that trade unions and employers can act jointly to overcome.

The BWI has also formed a regional network of trade unions in the construction sector, where trade union

representatives can meet to share experiences and plan regional campaigns relating specifically to how refugees can be represented in trade unions and how they can enter the formal labour market in the entire MENAT region.

Biography of Author

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Wassim Rifi, currently BWI MENA project Coordinator, was born and raised in Northern Lebanon. He has a teaching background but has since worked for the Lebanese Ministry of Education and Higher Education, appointed as activities coordinator working with Save the Children, UNICEF and UNHCR.

In 2008, Wassim began working with the Building and Wood Workers International (BWI). He develops and coordinates projects aiming at building strong unions, building capacities of workers in a rapidly changing social and economic environment, and helping trade unions in the BWI family to organise local, migrant and refugee workers into trade unions.

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