# Protecting Migrant Workers in an Overheating Planet A Call to Action

# Introduction

Climate change will be a key factor in the displacement and migration of 25 to 300 million people by 20501. In an overheating planet, more people will be pushed to search for employment overseas as extreme weather events and slow onset impacts become the norm. With climate change threatening key sectors such as agriculture and fisheries, people's abilities to seek livelihoods from natural resources and provide safety for their families will be impaired, forcing many to migrate as a coping strategy in the face of economic woes and extreme weather events. In particular, heat stress and climate disasters are increasingly becoming a factor in the decision of workers from rural areas to search for better employment in cities or other countries<sup>2</sup>. Often, they make a living through the informal economy as workers in the construction and forestry industries. It is in this context that the Building and Wood Workers' International (BWI), representing 12 million workers affiliated to 361 trade unions in 117 countries, calls on world leaders and stakeholders at COP 28 in Dubai, a hub for migrant workers in the United Arab Emirates and in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) Region, to recognise the urgent need to protect migrant workers' rights amidst intensifying climate change.

# Migrant workers at the frontlines of heat stress in the workplace

Between 2008 and 2014, 184.4 million people were displaced by sudden-onset climate disasters, resulting in an average of 26.4 million being newly displaced each year<sup>3</sup>. While the majority migrate to temporary shelter and eventually return to their homes<sup>4</sup>, a growing number of climate migrants are also searching for longer-term employment abroad. In the aftermath of a climate change-induced disaster, labour migration is a way to contribute to the reconstruction of their families' homes. In the long term, it is a means of building resilience within their families by earning enough money to invest in better housing, land and in their children's education<sup>5</sup>. However, such a situation presents a double vulnerability for migrant workers, who originate from communities already being battered by climate change and are then often subjected to discrimination and abuse during the recruitment process as well as in destination countries.

Owing to their precarity, migrant workers are more likely to work in sectors that involve high levels of job insecurity, physical exertion or prolonged sun exposure, such as in construction, wood and forestry, which are especially affected by rising heat stress due to climate change<sup>6</sup>. Heat stress, the accumulated heat in the body beyond what it can tolerate without suffering physiological injuries<sup>7</sup>, is already altering the world of work in significant ways. At the current rate of warming, the combined productivity losses in construction and agriculture due to heat stress are projected to slash up to 3.8% of worldwide working hours, or the equivalent of 136 million full-time jobs by 2030<sup>8</sup>. If temperature rises go unabated, heat stress will not only diminish global labour productivity but also imperil workers' health and well-being. Long-term sun exposure has also been linked to higher risks of cancer, immune system dysfunction and eye diseases<sup>9</sup>. In extreme cases, heat stress can result in rhabdomyolysis, stroke, permanent disability and even death<sup>10</sup>. If governments fail to rapidly cut emissions today, a temperature rise beyond 1.5°C will result in a 370% surge in heat-related deaths by 2050<sup>11</sup>.

### Heat stress and the global economy

Unsurprisingly, heat stress is disproportionately affecting countries that have historically higher rates of informal work, subsistence agriculture, and working poverty<sup>12</sup>. South Asia and Western Africa, owing to their geographic vulnerabilities, will be the worst affected<sup>13</sup>. With a 1.5°C temperature rise by end of century, these two sub-regions will suffer working hour losses equivalent to around 43 million and 9 million full-time jobs in 2030, respectively<sup>14</sup>. In 2022, however, Africa already sustained productivity losses that led to a 4% deficit in the continent's GDP<sup>15</sup>.

Heat stress will also add pressure to the global economy, as projections, based on a 1.5°C temperature rise by 2050 and labour force trends, indicate that 2.2% of global working hours, or the equivalent of 80 million full-time jobs, will be lost due to unbearable heat<sup>16</sup>. However, with global emission reductions set to fall only by 2% in 203017, temperatures will likely rise beyond 1.5°C. A higher temperature rise will result in productivity losses of 3.8% of worldwide working hours, or the equivalent of 136 million full-time jobs<sup>18</sup>, which will have serious consequences for the global economy. In 2022, for instance, an estimated 490 billion hours in potential labour was lost due to heat stress, a 43% increase from the 1991-2000 average<sup>19</sup>. This has translated into a loss of \$863 billion in "potential income" globally<sup>20</sup>. In eight years, the economic losses due to heat stress are projected to balloon to US 2,400 billion, with lower-middle and low-income countries suffering the brunt of these losses<sup>21</sup>. Heat stress, and its ensuing health and economic impacts, is demonstrably an issue of climate justice.

## **BWI's Call to Action**

Governments and industries are enjoined to execute critical efforts to slash carbon emissions, boost climate adaptation and address 'loss and damage' associated with climate change to avoid the further suffering of frontline communities, including migrant workers. A just transition in the development of climate-resilient infrastructure is urgently needed to address the impacts of extreme heat and other weather events that are disproportionately affecting the most vulnerable workers in BWI sectors.

As enshrined in the International Labour Organisation and within the UNFCCC's Just Transition Work Programme, social dialogue and workers' meaningful participation in the transition to a low-carbon and climate resilient industry transformation will be vital in ensuring equity, efficiency, and genuine sustainability within the built environment. Hence, BWI offers these recommendations in safeguarding migrant workers' rights in building and construction, wood and forestry, and enhancing protection within the framework of the Paris Agreement.

#### Addressing the root causes of forced climate migration

- Mitigation: Cut emissions by 45% in 2030 to meet the 1.5°C temperature rise threshold in the Paris Agreement.
- Adaptation: Marshall public finance for climate adapta-tion, which has recently fallen by 14%<sup>22</sup>. Foster building local resilience by empowering frontline communities to promote indigenous and locally sourced adaptation knowledge and strategies.
- Loss and Damage: Mobilise public finance as well as new and innovative sources of funding for the Loss and Damage fund, ensuring that the fund is easily accessible to frontline communities in the Global South.
- Just Transition: Uphold the ideals and practices of a just transition by prioritising decent jobs and social protection in the push for a low-carbon economy. Additionally, states must invest in bringing workers out of the informal economy; removing barriers for migrant workers to access formal jobs; ensuring trade union rights in construction and forestry; training pathways; and implementing limits to subcontracting, in a way that protects them from the compounding impacts of heat stress and climate change.

#### Protecting migrant workers from heat stress

- Enhance Occupational Safety Standards by including specific guidelines for protecting outdoor workers from extreme heat and other weather conditions and providing specific attention to the unique hardships that migrant workers face.
- Provide early warning devices in every work site, including indoors.
- Guarantee access to adequate protecton such as personal protective equipment that is designed to mitigate the impacts of extreme weather conditions, including but

#### Endnotes

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not limited to, heat-resistant clothing, cooling vests and sweat-wicking clothing. Workers should also be provided with adequate hydration support.

- Provide trainings on heat stress adaptation among workers, taking into consideration language requirements and context specificity of training materials.
- Improve conditions of resting stations at the workplace by building places that adequately respond to the volume and needs of workers.
- Monitor the implementation of extreme heat adaptation strategies such as work stoppages and mandatory rest breaks.
- Strengthen transparency and accountability mechanisms by ensuring that migrant workers, regardless of their legal status, are protected from employer retaliation.
- Provide social protection schemes for migrant workers such that they have a safety net in cases of disabilities or prolonged illnesses.

#### Upholding migrant workers' rights

- Protecting migrant workers, especially those seeking employment after a climate disaster, begins in the recruitment process. Governments must accelerate the achievement of a fair recruitment process globally.
- Guarantee basic human rights for migrant workers, regardless of their status, by ensuring access to decent housing, healthcare, and social safety nets such as pension funds and conditional cash transfers during the aftermath of climate disasters.
- Safeguard fair and ethical labor practices by renewing commitments among public and private sector stakeholders, employers and government agencies.
- Ensure freedom of association, the right to organise and collective bargaining as a way for workers to improve their conditions, guarantee decent wages and climate adaptation in the workplace.
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