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Research Report on Migrant Workers in High-risk Industry

RESEARCH REPORT ON MIGRANT WORKERS IN HIGH-RISK INDUSTRY

Within the framework of Spanish MDG Fund Joint Programme on ‘Protection and Promotion of Migrant Workers’ Employment and Rights in China’, the Rural Labor Resource Development Association of State Council Development Research Center (Project implementing team) carried out a survey on migrant workers in high-risk industry during November to December 2009 in four project cities, including Hangzhou in Zhejiang Province, Tianjin City, Jiaozuo in Henan Province, and Cangzhou in Hebei Province.

During this survey, overall 1,000 questionnaires were sent out and 965 copies were collected, among which 98.4% of respondents were valid. Apart from the questionnaire survey, the Project Team also interviewed more than 100 interviewees varying from government department leaders who are familiar with construction industry, HR of construction companies, to NGO practitioners working for migrant workers. In addition, 10 group interviews were held directly with migrant workers in construction industry.

There are several reasons for taking migrant works in construction industry as the target group of this survey. First of all, construction industry is obviously one of the high-risk industries, which is more widespread compared with other high-risk industries like mining or firecracker manufacture. Secondly, over 75% construction workers are migrant workers. The characteristics of migrant workers in construction include higher age, lower education level, poor technical skills and almost the heaviest workload. Therefore, the research on the migrant workers in construction will be very helpful for us to understand the general situation of migrant workers in high-risk industries, in terms of employment, training and rights protection.

Employment Status

In the first place, income for migrant workers in construction industry is relatively low. Annual average income is 8,525 *yuan* and quite few of construction workers can earn 10,000

yuan or more. The main factors that constrain their income are, in their words, education level and technical nature of the work. Better educated migrants are less willing to work in construction industry. Most migrants in construction industry are aged between 40 and 50 years old, who have migrated to cities for many years yet with a relatively low income.

Secondly, construction jobs are unstable. The migrant workers in construction industry are the least stable migrant group. Since the financial crisis in 2008, some migrant workers have lost jobs over five times because of different reasons. Sometimes it was because the project contractor stopped the contract with the construction company. Sometimes the worker believed the job was not good for him. Sometimes migrant worker had disputes with the project contractor, or he found a better-paid job, which are the most common ones for job changing of migrant workers.

Thirdly, the income of migrants in construction industry accounts for most family income. The research shows that for the construction workers over 45 years old, their income is the main source for their children's education, medical care for their parents, and other living expenses. Senior age, heavy workload and high risks are the main feature of migrants in construction industry.

Fourthly, since construction workers are relatively older, many of them live separately from their spouses. The survey shows that the average age of migrant workers in construction industry is 37, which is the highest among all kinds of industries that migrants usually work in. Marriage rate among migrants in construction industry is 80.2%, but many of them leave their spouses and children behind in their hometowns.

Fifthly, another outstanding characteristic of migrant workers in construction industry is low education level. 71% of the migrants in construction industry have an education level of middle-school and below. Due to many factors interacting with each other, the construction jobs are relatively stable, but working conditions are worse than before.

Besides, some remaining issues, for instance, housing conditions, wage payment delay, and long working time, have not yet been completely resolved through there was some improvement in recent years. If the basic issues of social positions and rights for migrant workers are not improved, new issues will keep coming up and situation will be worsen day

by day. When the old generation of migrant workers withdraws from the labor market and the young generation of migrants comes, these issues will cause extreme problems.

Training Status

The training conditions are less than satisfactory for the high-risk industry, which has many hidden risks. The research shows that 23.3% of the migrants in construction industry have received training on technical skills and work safety, but only 12% of those who are working in high-risk condition ever received such training. Only 2.7% of the migrant workers were trained by governments and most were trained by enterprises or by private teachers. As part of the high-risk industry protecting action, many construction sites have a warning sign at the entrance which says, “Persons without work safety training and certificates are prohibited from the construction site.” But for those who have never taken any training, nearly 50% of their construction sites even did not have the weekly meeting on work safety.

Among those who have participated in training, 69% of them were unsatisfied with the training. The reasons are as follows: Firstly, despite of the practical nature of the construction work, most training courses were just a lecture which made the migrant workers feel really difficult to understand the content. And the trainings were not effective. Secondly, Most of trainings were very short, a couple of days usually, which did not give enough time for trainees to acquire the skills. Thirdly, due to the high-risk nature of construction industries, many migrant workers hope to receive trainings on national policies on protecting their rights. However, they can hardly access to this kind of trainings said by migrant workers.

We found in the research that the construction workers are less willing to take training courses due to the government management system and the awareness of migrant workers on training. Moreover, given that most migrant workers in construction industry are main supporters of their parents and children, if they took training courses, it will reduce their work time and consequently lower their life quality. The subsidies provided by government on training are not sufficient for supporting migrant workers’ living. What’s more, the training effect is uncertain, with as high as 60% of the trainees saying that the training did not meet their expectation. In sum, training is a risky investment for many migrant workers and easy to fail. At the same time, the high mobility of migrant workers in construction industry is not

good for their self-development and training, because they may change the category of work when they move to a new construction site. Project contractors and construction companies also paid little attention to training, which further reduces the interests of migrant workers in training.

Overall, the training mechanism for migrant workers in construction industry is problematic and the number of participants in training is unsatisfactory. Some training programs organized by enterprises only existed in name. Having training or not is just one issue, there are many other issues, for instance, short training time, improper training format, poor training quality, unfinished training programs, etc. All these training programs were designed based upon the needs of governments, rather than the needs of migrant workers. Therefore, the training programs should put migrant workers as the center of program, and respect their opinions.

Protection of Rights and Interests

In terms of protecting rights and interests of migrant workers, those who are in high-risk jobs are the most concerned ones. Being 37 years old on average, most migrant workers in high-risk industry have very low requirements on work conditions and are mostly satisfied with minimum income which just meet the needs of their families. Thus many of them have very little knowledge of employment contracts, medical insurance, work accident insurance and pre-employment training. If some disputes and difficulties happen, they would choose to stay silent. Because they thought that it will take lots of time, energy and money to resort in the ways like revealing to the media, petition, and appealing to the government, and in the end they might not succeed. Most migrant workers said that they don't have time and energy to defend their rights, and they would rather use the time to earn more money. Fortunately, some migrant workers have recognized the importance of employment contracts on protecting their rights. Some workers mentioned that contracts can ensure their wage payments, make them eligible to insurance programs, and thus can protect their safety. But still, project contractors, construction companies, and migrant labor, in most cases, are not willing to sign labor contracts. Our research shows that 62.8% of migrant workers did not sign a contract. Participants of accident insurances were even fewer, totally accounting for only 26.5%. Among the participants of work accidents insurances, only 22.2% were aware of

the means of payments and compensations. Only 5.9% of the total migrant workers in our research participated in work accidents insurances and were aware of the detail contents and rules. Others said that they were only told by project contractors that they were helped to purchase the work accidents insurances, but that is all they knew. In other words, it is even doubtful whether the companies really bought the insurance for the migrant workers.

In terms of other social insurances, there are more and more social security policies to protect migrant labor's interests. However, the coverage rate is not very good, and the majority of migrant labors are still not covered. In the first place, unemployment insurance: although migrant workers have the highest unemployment rate among all working groups, many of them are not covered by unemployment insurance. Data shows that only 3.6% of the migrant workers were covered by unemployment insurance purchased by their employers. 0.78% of them paid for their own unemployment insurance. 6.24% of them had it paid by their employers and themselves together. 86.19% of them had no unemployment insurance. Secondly, social pension: traditionally, it is believed that peasants have the farmland as their pension insurance. But currently, working in cities has been the primary way of making a living for peasants and the gradually reduced agrarian land makes it harder to meet the demands of peasants. At the same time, when peasants become older and lost the working capacity, the pension system is extremely important to them. However, in reality, only 5.05% of the migrant workers had their employers pay for their pension, 2.64% purchased social pension insurance themselves, and 9.61% had it paid by the employers and themselves together. 80.29% of them had no pension insurance. Thirdly, health insurance: among all the social insurances, health insurance was the one caught early attention of government and implemented most effectively so far. However, the coverage rate is only 10% among migrant workers. As a result, many migrant workers would not go to the hospital if it is only small diseases and would return to their hometowns if they got serious diseases.

Since the end of the last century, many policies were published to protect the rights of migrant workers in construction industry and the policies tackled with almost every issue of the migrant workers. Some issues have improved dramatically, yet others became more difficult to resolve. Governments of all levels are well aware of these problems, but for different reasons, they have not made up their mind to take effective actions. Some debates occurred about in which level of the governments, the problems should be tackled first. In the

society, interests of different groups are protected with different priority, ranked from the government interests, corporate interests, and general group interests, to the last, interests of vulnerable groups. However such ranking does not comply with the logics of a modern society. With the increasing number of different social groups, the interest groups are also diversified. However, diversified interests do not mean conflicting interests, in contrary, interest needs to be protected by implementation of different policies. Each interest group should realize their rights by fulfilling their responsibilities rather than by infringing rights of others. Every social group exists for a reason, and we need to respect the rights of vulnerable groups and promote the equality among different social groups.