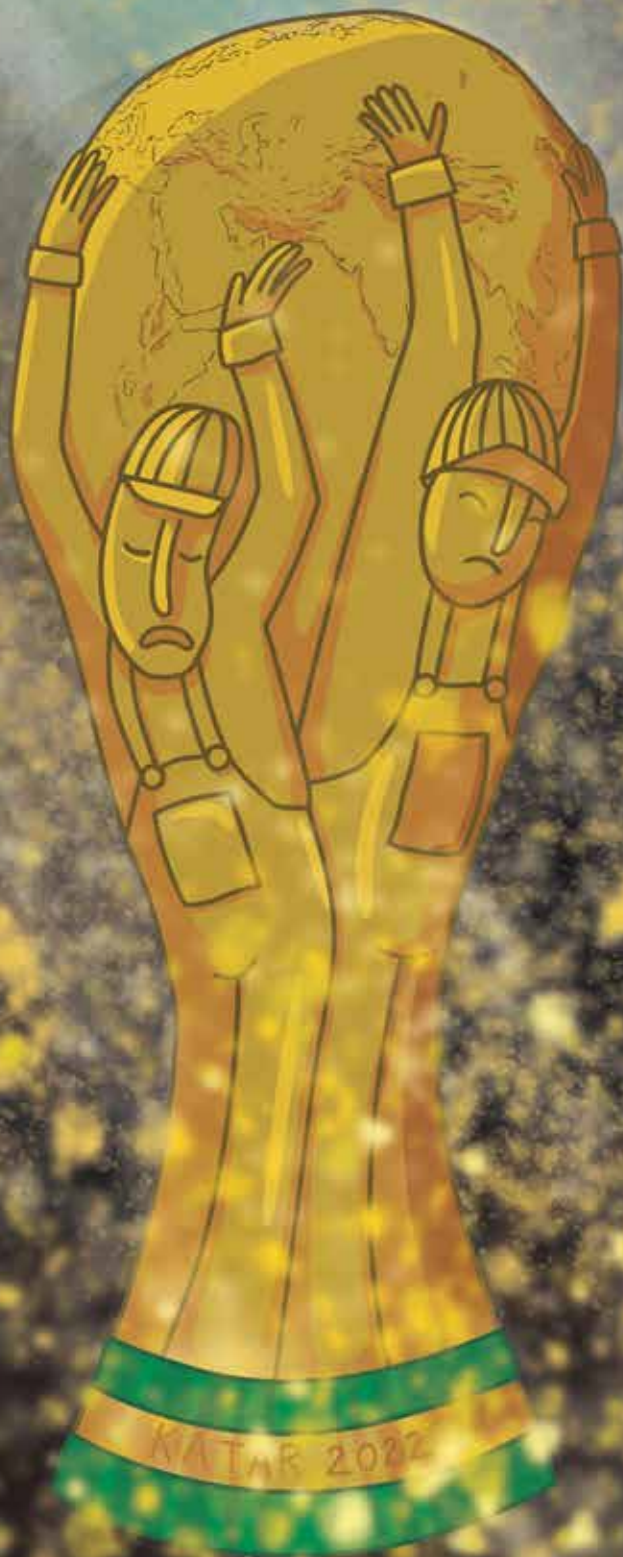


# Reclaim the Game

What We Can Learn from  
the Controversial World Cup in Qatar



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## **IMPRINT**

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Migrant workers in the Gulf are refusing to accept state repression: they are founding their own organizations, networking with other activists, and putting increasing pressure on the government to make reforms. Ulrike Lauerhass, a project manager at the Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung, spoke with a worker from Nepal about workers’ organizing.

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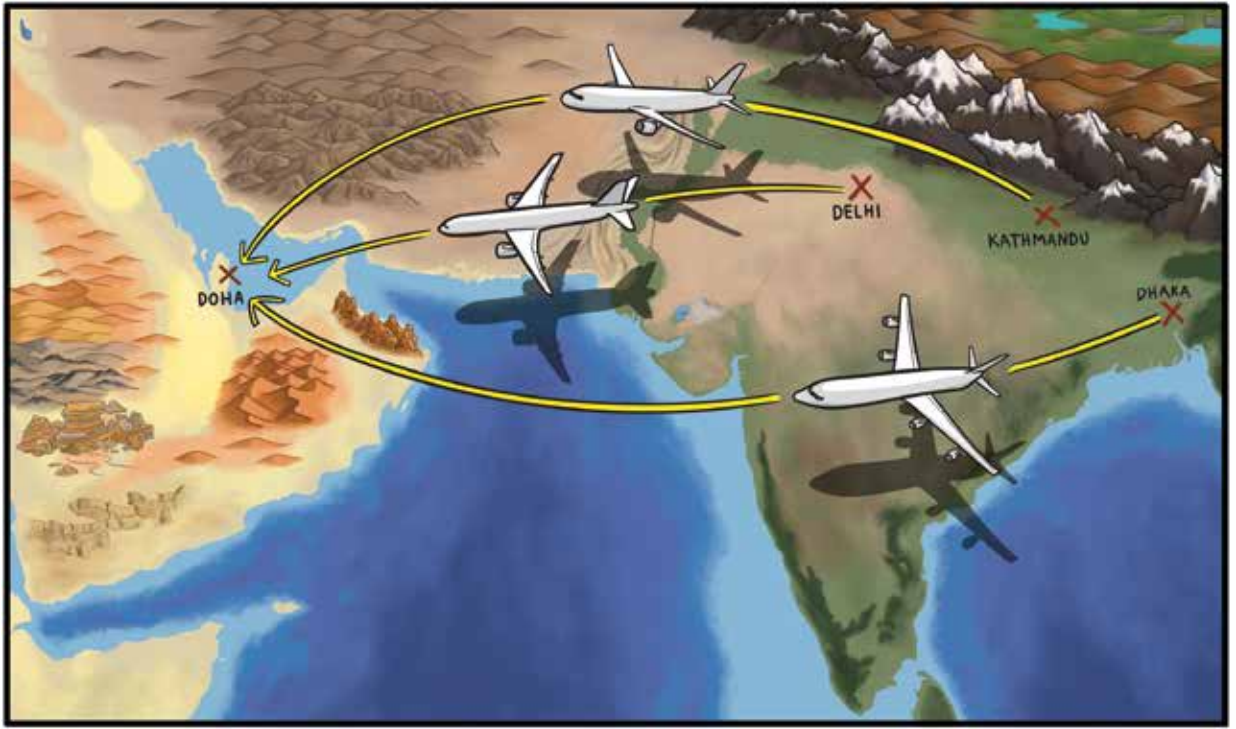
Qatar holds shares in several DAX companies, which is another reason why the German government withholds criticism. Michel Brandt of DIE LINKE demands mandatory human rights policies from World Cup hosts and FIFA.

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In football, sponsors and hosts increasingly come from authoritarian states. How can fans and clubs in Europe constructively advocate for human rights from a distance? Journalist Ronny Blaschke formulates some approaches.





# Foreword

Dear readers,

around ten years ago, FIFA awarded the hosting of the 2022 World Cup to Qatar. At first there were no major protests, but over the years, more and more reports have been released detailing the situation and the sometimes inhumane, slave-like conditions for migrant workers in Qatar. At the World Cup construction sites in Qatar, the workers are almost exclusively men and, due to the *kafala* system, which we discuss in more detail in this issue, are only allowed to stay in the country for the duration of their contracts and are left entirely at the mercy of their employers. Something unforgettable in connection with the first major headlines about human rights violations in Qatar was Franz Beckenbauer's statement that he personally had not seen any slaves there (who were chained up).

As the World Cup in Qatar draws nearer, we want to take a closer look at different aspects of the tournament. To do so, we invited experts from human rights organizations, trade unions, politics, fan initiatives, and migrant workers from South Asia themselves to share their

views. Among other things, we shed light on the region's geopolitical history, Qatar's "sportswashing", and the history of migrant labour in the country. We also discuss the current labour law reforms and women's rights in Qatar. We try to show what global justice in the sports industry could look like and what valuable contributions clubs and associations can make via critical engagement and promoting democratic structures.

With less than a year until the games kick off, we hope to use this booklet to give space to different voices without completely dismissing the World Cup and calling for a boycott. We want to deal with our own schizophrenia, the fact that we as football fans are mostly against the corruption and money-making of the "non-profit" associations like FIFA — but when the World Cup is on, many of us turn on the TV to watch. So how can we use the popularity and power of football positively? What examples are there, and what would have to happen for us to be able to fully enjoy a World Cup?

I hope you enjoy reading through this brochure.

**Daniela Trochowski**  
Executive director of the  
Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung  
Berlin, 2022

# Autocrats on the Offensive

Qatar is militarily inferior to its neighbours in the Middle East. To compensate, the small emirate pursues an elaborate strategy of soft power. Journalist **Ronny Blaschke** reports on Qatar's investments in science, culture, and above all – football.

In a blatant sign of disapproval, fans from the host team in Abu Dhabi threw bottles and shoes at players from the Qatar team during the 2019 Asian Cup semi-final. Abu Dhabi is the capital of the United Arab Emirates, a wealthy oil monarchy on the Persian Gulf. The UAE is an important ally of Saudi Arabia, and both countries have been mobilizing against Qatar's burgeoning geopolitical influence for years.

Three days after the semi-final, Qatar won the final against Japan and became Asian Cup champions for the first time. Politicians and sports officials from the host country, the UAE, boycotted the awards ceremony.

"Football mirrors the political tensions in the Gulf region", says Jasim Matar Kunji, former goalkeeper in the Qatari professional league and now journalist for the TV channel Al Jazeera. "Sponsorship contracts and the transfer of players between the countries were cancelled. When teams from Qatar played in the UAE, they had to be accompanied by a police escort."

## Economic Growth Takes a Hit

In 2017, a long-standing conflict in the Gulf region came to a head. At the time, Saudi Arabia had imposed an economic embargo on Qatar. The UAE, Bahrain, and Egypt followed suit and suspended diplomatic relations with Doha. They accused Qatar of sponsoring terrorist groups and of maintaining too close a relationship with the Muslim Brotherhood and Iran. Saudi Arabia halted food exports to Qatar. Families were separated as important travel routes were disrupted. The state airline Qatar Air-

ways was forbidden to use Saudi airspace. Qatar's economic growth took a hit.

"Many Qataris thought that Saudi Arabia might invade", said Jasim Matar Kunji. The Saudi Arabian army has some 200,000 soldiers, while that of Qatar only has 12,000. To compensate for its military inferiority, Qatar pursues an elaborate strategy of soft power, investing billions in culture, science, and football, including sponsoring major events, investing in other teams, and sponsorship partnerships with Paris Saint-Germain or FC Bayern Munich.

Hosting the 2022 World Cup is arguably the most important part of this strategy. It is worth taking a close look at Qatar's rising influence in sports and in politics, since other states could follow this model. Politics through football.

## A Coup against the Father

Fifty years ago, Cairo, Bagdad, and Damascus were the centres of power in the Arab world. The small sheikhdoms in the Arabian Peninsula such as Kuwait, Bahrain, and the UAE played no role at the time. Formerly under British control, Qatar had only 100,000 inhabitants in 1971, the year it gained independence. At the time, it received military protection from Saudi Arabia. In 1990, the more powerful Iraq invaded Kuwait, and the US intervened in order to liberate the country. The smaller states in the region quickly became aware that they would undoubtedly be outmanoeuvred in the event of a comparable attack – by Iran, for example.

In Qatar, the most important decisions have traditionally been made

by a handful of people, as the political scientist Mehran Kamrava writes in his book *Qatar: Small State, Big Politics*. The Al Thani dynasty, originally from Saudi Arabia, has been in power for decades. In 1995, Hamad bin Chalifa Al Thani deposed his own father in a bloodless coup. Rulers in Saudi Arabia and the UAE feared that power would slip away from them as well. The result was the increasing isolation of Qatar.

## For a Future without Gas and Oil

The new emir began a process of modernization to free Qatar from Saudi Arabia's grip. In the mid-1990s he set up the Al Jazeera news network and opened the economy up to foreign investors. Renowned universities from the US, Great Britain, and France – three of the five permanent members of the UN Security Council – established campuses in Doha. Further additions included the Museum of Islamic Art, the Philharmonic Orchestra, the Doha Tribeca Film Festival, as well as promotional videos and advertisements in Western media.

These measures helped Qatar, a county half the size of the German state of Hesse, to build relations with Europe and North America, but its strategy of soft power had still not received global recognition. "The Gulf states are looking to develop new economic sectors, since their traditional sources of income are finite", said Mahfoud Amara, a sports academic from the Qatari university in Doha. "Sports are part of a strategy to raise awareness of other sectors such as tourism, trade, or transport."

## FC Barcelona's First Jersey Sponsor

The Qatari ruling house had one of the largest sports academies in the world built, the Aspire Academy, which opened in 2005. Dozens of international competitions are now held in Doha every year. The venue first made global headlines in December 2010 when it was announced as the host of the 2022 World Cup, shortly after which Qatar acquired a majority stake in Par-

is Saint-Germain. The emir owns real estate, company shares, and art in France, and has reliable relationships with leading politicians such as former president Nicolas Sarkozy. Qatar Airways also became FC Barcelona's first jersey sponsor. More and more top football clubs now attend training camps in Doha — FC Bayern has done so ten times to date.

Qatar has invested well over 1.5 billion euros in European football. These financial transactions are criticized in Germany, England, and France, as realistically, there is hardly any separation between owners and sponsors. But Qatari influence is growing in the Arab world. This vexes the long-time hegemon Saudi Arabia, says sports economics expert Simon Chadwick: "One agency tried to prove that Qatar was not suitable for hosting the World Cup. Then it turned out that the agency was funded by Saudi Arabia." Qatar firmly rejected the request of FIFA, world football's governing body, to expand the number of teams competing in the 2022 World Cup from 32 to 48. This was a clear indication that the UAE and Saudi Arabia would not be co-hosts.

## Power Shifts to the East

In the Gulf region, Qatar is competing for investors, tourists, and skilled workers above all with Abu Dhabi and Dubai, the two most influential small states in the UAE. The larger one, Dubai, focuses on shopping centres, family entertainment, and large events like Expo 2020. The airport in Dubai is a leading aviation hub, largely due to football. The state airline Emirates, based in Dubai, has been active as a major sponsor in major European leagues since the beginning of the millennium.

The smaller Abu Dhabi followed suit and bought into Manchester City. The state-owned airline Etihad, a competitor of Emirates and Qatar Airways, serves as jersey sponsor. The company in charge of these transactions is called the City Football Group; it has a global network and has acquired shares in clubs in New York, Melbourne, and Mumbai, as well as in Chengdu in southwest China. Etihad intends to develop Chengdu into an hub for eastern



Asia. Chinese companies are building the stadium for the 2022 World Cup final in Qatar. "We are witnessing a massive shift of power to the east in the football industry", says Simon Chadwick. "Sports have become a starting point for new business relations."

## New Ruler, Old Conflicts

In this context, football intensifies economic power struggles, territorial struggles, and religious tensions, all of which has been compounded by a generational shift among the rulers: in 2013 Tamim bin Hamad al Thani took over from his father in Qatar. At only 33, he was the youngest state leader in the Arab world at the time. In Saudi Arabia, Mohammed bin Salman, known as "MBS", emerged from the king's shadow as crown prince. And in the UAE, Mohammed Ben Zayed, named "MBZ", positioned himself as the new strongman. MBS and MBZ allied themselves against the rising Qatar.

Accounting for the growing mistrust is complex. Qatar took a clear stance during the Arab Spring in 2011 and afterwards in supporting the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, Islamic forces in Tunisia, and rebels in Libya against Gaddafi and in Syria against Assad. Beyond that, Qatar refused to lend unconditional support to the Saudi military alliance in the war in Yemen.

Saudi Arabia and its allies temporarily recalled their ambassadors from Qatar in 2014. Many shops in Riyadh covered over the Qatar

Airways sponsorship lettering on the jerseys of FC Barcelona and FC Bayern. The display of Qatari symbols became a punishable offence. Among other things, Riyadh demanded that Al Jazeera and the Qatar Foundation, two of Doha's most significant institutions, be closed down.

## Neymar Trade as a Diversionary Tactic

Qatar defended itself. In August 2017, the trade of a Brazilian player named Neymar from FC Barcelona to Paris Saint-Germain for a record sum of 222 million euros was announced. "A strategic master stroke", remarked political scientist Danyel Riche, editor of *Sport, Politics and Society in the Middle East*: "just after the beginning of the embargo, Qatar changed the narrative in the media. The trade was unbelievably expensive. But in effect people stopped talking about Qatar's isolation and talked about football instead." The signing of Lionel Messi in the summer of 2021 only heightened the attention.

The fact that football was being used as a vessel for hostility was made clear above all by BeIN Sports. The Qatari sports channel was founded in 2003 as an offshoot of Al Jazeera, but has been independent since 2012 and now has one of the largest audiences of any football channel worldwide. Just a few weeks after the beginning of the embargo in 2017, a new channel was launched: beoutQ broadcasts

the same content as BeIN Sports, the same games, commentaries, and analyses, but with its own logos, graphics, and advertisements. Soon beoutQ broadcast the material from Qatar to ten of its own channels. “This represents a new level of piracy”, says Jonathan Whitehead, executive at BeIN Sports. It quickly became clear that the organization and technology for beoutQ comes from Saudi Arabia. From that point on, BeIN sports suffered heavy losses.

## Fragile Peace

It is very likely that this spiral of hostilities would have continued if it weren't for the coronavirus pandemic. Already low oil prices nosedived, foreign investments declined, and the nascent tourism sector shed tens of thousands of jobs. At the beginning of January 2021, Saudi Arabia ended its embargo on Qatar. “It is a fragile peace”, said Middle East expert Kristian Ulrichsen, the author of a book about the Gulf crisis. “The Gulf states have realized that they need to cooperate during this tumultuous time.”

Riyadh and Dubai also have plans to profit from the 2022 World Cup. If not through tournament matches, then with training camps, sponsorship events, and accommodation for fans. Discussions are also underway to develop shared technology platforms as well as a common strategy to combat the high rate of diabetes in the region that would help to ease the burden on the healthcare system in the long term.

## Protests Are Unlikely

None of the Persian Gulf states are under democratic rule, and there is no separation of powers. In the 2021 press freedom ranking compiled by Reporters Without Borders, Qatar ranked 128 out of 180 states. Homosexuals face persecution. Political parties are banned by law in Qatar. Independent media outlets that question the hereditary monarchy do not exist either.

Wenzel Michalski of Human Rights Watch is critical of the fact that clubs from democratic countries like FC Bayern use their partner-

ships to legitimize Qatari foreign policy: “If European clubs are unwilling to forego profit, they could at least show more interest in the few local critical activists. Football should make a habit of seeking out advice from human rights organizations.”

Protests like those in Algeria or Lebanon in 2019 are unlikely to take place in Qatar. The emir has woven a dense web of family members and friends into the state, many of whom hold multiple offices, which is quite common in the Gulf region. The ruling family shares a portion of its wealth with the native population, which amounts to just over 250,000 citizens. These citizens enjoy privileges in education, healthcare, and job allocation, and their per capita income is one of the highest in the world.

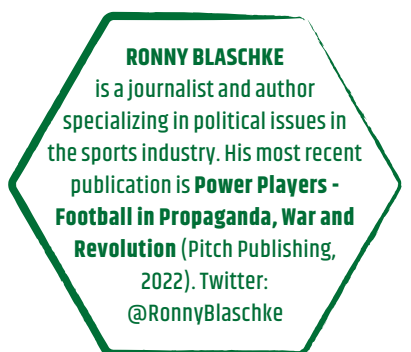
## Concessions to Conservative Circles

Flashback: when the Qatari state was still in its developmental phase in the 1970s, the ruling house feared the outbreak of resistance. Guest workers at that time came mainly from Egypt, Palestine, and Yemen. Although they spoke the same language as the locals, many of them had anti-monarchist attitudes. After Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in 1990, the Qatari government sought out migrant workers from South Asia, whom it could more easily segregate culturally. Workers from India, Bangladesh, and Pakistan were given a *kafala*, a sponsor who could confiscate their passports, make it difficult for them to leave the country, or prevent them from changing jobs. But it was thanks to these workers that the rapid development of Doha was possible in the first place. Many of them fell ill or died in the blistering summer heat (see other articles in this collection).

Only ten percent of the country's approximately 2.8 million inhabitants have a Qatari passport. No other country has such a high proportion of immigrants. “Some businesspeople are worried that the World Cup will open Qatar up too much”, says Mehran Kamrava, a political scientist at Georgetown University in Doha. They fear football fans will drink alcohol in public in 2022 and that gay people will not hide their

sexuality. In 2018, the emir raised alcohol prices drastically through taxes, and he replaced English with Arabic as the main language at Qatar University. These were concessions to conservative circles, since pursuing soft power abroad requires political stability at home. As Mehran Kamrava says, “The World Cup gives politicians the opportunity to quickly push through reforms that some economic sectors don't really want.” Saudi Arabia and the UAE sometimes see these reforms as provocations.

Doha is weaving its own network and playing the role of mediator far beyond the Gulf, with contacts in the West, but also with political Islam in Egypt, Lebanon, and Iran. Moreover, Qatar is also expanding its influence in democratic countries by funding mosques and Islamic cultural centres. As early as 2004, the Qatar Olympic Committee donated 6 million dollars to the new stadium in Sakhnin, which was apparently the first time a Gulf State had invested in an Israeli city. Of the city's 30,000 inhabitants, more than ninety percent are Muslim Arabs. In 2004, Bnei Sakhnin FC won the Israeli Cup. To this day, Qatar does not maintain diplomatic relations with Israel, though the stadium in Sakhnin bears the name of the Qatari capital.





# The Playing Fields of Politics

An instrument of colonial power, an emancipatory act, the resistance of the ultras: scholars **Jan Busse** and **René Wildangel** shed light on key aspects of the history of football in the Middle East and North Africa.

The fact that this year's football World Cup is scheduled to take place in the small Gulf State Qatar of all places is ironic. There is a rich and eventful tradition of football in the Arab world, the centre of which is by no means the emirate of Qatar on the Arabian Peninsula. There, the sport lived in the shadows, until in recent decades it was discovered as an "instrument of soft power" for those Gulf states that still have access to large reserves of gas and oil, yet for which the end of the age of fossil fuels will necessitate radical changes.

Sports, particularly football, are a crucial vehicle for transporting

these Gulf states into this new age. It is precisely the smaller Gulf states like Qatar and the United Arab Emirates that focus on major events in the hope of winning more global recognition, influence, and better representation of their security interests. At the same time, football is intended to serve as an impetus for social modernization as well as a popular distraction for the population, albeit strictly under the control of the ruling families. This opposition between football's power to mobilize and its strict regulation is characteristic of the history of football in the Middle East and North Africa.

## Colonial Powers Import Football

Since the end of the nineteenth century, football has primarily been brought to the continent by European colonial powers in the course of their imperial ambitions. The origins of modern football in the Middle East and North Africa are inextricably linked with colonial rule, above all that of Great Britain, the self-proclaimed "motherland of football", and the processes of globalization that extend beyond it. The region's growing importance for the expanding world economy was also a key factor.

At that time, football was not yet the "people's game", the game for everyman (there was no talk of women yet, neither as spectators nor as players), or for the working class that it would one day become. Instead, representatives of urban elites brought football to the capitals of the Global South and thus also to the Middle East, be it to Istanbul, Cairo, or Tehran. Their intention was not only to secure economic and political control over the colonized ter-

ritories, but also to export goods, "progress", and supposedly superior European culture.

## Teaching Respect and Discipline

The values that were exported in this process were also, but not exclusively, based on violence and coercion, since the imperial powers made use of the aforementioned "soft power" to embed their claim to power in the realm of culture. This meant that it was primarily British traders, teachers, soldiers, and sailors who introduced local elites in the capitals of the Middle East and North Africa, who for the most part were willing collaborators, to football, which acquired fixed rules and a rapidly growing public audience in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in Great Britain.

Unlike the French colonies in North Africa, where initially only Europeans were allowed to play, Britain allowed the Egyptian upper class to participate in football. As in Victorian educational institutions, their aim was, among other things, to teach the local population the so-called "European values" of discipline and respect for (colonial) authorities. Football and the values it transmitted via the colonial powers thus became an important instrument of colonial control.

## A Chance to Reconcile Tensions between Jews and Arabs

Great Britain also tried to maintain its supremacy after World War I in the Mandate of Palestine, using the motto "divide and conquer". Football was seen as a chance to reconcile tensions between Jews and Arabs at a time of growing hostilities, and Britain even organized competitions that clubs from both population groups took part in. Nationalist ambitions eventually surged within both Jewish and Arab clubs, and eventually hostilities against the British Mandate Government, which was increasingly perceived as an occupying force, were no longer confined to the football pitch.

Morocco, Tunisia, and Algeria also saw a marked growth of organized football under French occupation. Yet the local population was not allowed to participate. The very foun-



dation of the first clubs for the local population, such as Espérance Sportive de Tunis in 1919, therefore represented an act of emancipation against the colonial power. The founding of local clubs in Algeria and Tunisia was driven largely by republican and nationalist interests. In contrast, with the founding of Wydad Casablanca, Moroccan King Hassan I succeeded in establishing a form of nationalism that was supposed to be loyal to both the state and the monarchy.

## Football Becomes a Mass Phenomenon

Near the end of the nineteenth century, emancipatory aspirations intensified in the Middle East. The birth of nationalism during this period spawned new challenges to the rule of many colonial empires. Increasingly empty promises of independence and the attempt to prolong foreign rule by arbitrarily dividing up the territories between the British and the French in the Sykes-Picot Agreement after World War I were countered by the growing mass mobilizations against the colonial powers.

Originally established by colonial powers as a symbol of modernization and progress, football was eventually adopted by the nationalists for their own ends. At the same time, football transformed from an elite pastime into a mass phenomenon. Many teams sprang up in opposition to the previous clubs, which had mainly been dominated by the British. In Iraq, clubs such as Al-Quwa Al-Jawiya (“Airforce”), founded in 1931 in the context of the British military presence, quickly became symbols of the country’s newly won independence.

Egypt was the prime example of a country in which football became a site of national empowerment. Al Ahly Sporting Club, founded in Cairo in 1907 as the first club “of Egyptians for Egyptians”, was the most prominent example of an effectively anti-colonial club. In 1911, Al Ahly’s growing popularity in Egypt finally led to the founding of its arch-rival, the Zamalek Sporting Club, then called Qasr el Nil Club, later renamed Mokhtalat, “the mixed club”, because it admitted Europeans and Egyptians as members.



## Equals on the Pitch

In 1922, Egypt gained nominal independence, but remained dependent on Britain under the pro-British King Fuad. The dispute over the country’s political future was increasingly played out on the pitch as well. It was Zamalek, not Al Ahly, that was favoured by the Egyptian upper class and the late Egyptian King Farouk, who later renamed it the Farouk Club, until the monarchy was finally done away with after Gamal Abdel Nasser’s coup in 1952.

In the course of decolonization, the football pitch became an increasingly contested political arena. For example, when the Egyptian football team reached the semi-finals at the 1928 Olympics, many Egyptians saw this as proof that they were now the equals of the British. This further bolstered their aspirations to national independence. Likewise, French domination was definitively broken on the pitch when Wydad Casablanca won the North African Club Championship in 1947 and 1949.

## Sites of Nationalist Mobilization

In Algeria, so-called “Muslim clubs” — clubs which the local population founded independently of the colonial administration and which

sought to use their name to express their Islamic identity — played a central role in the struggle for independence against France. These clubs contributed to the formation of a distinct Algerian national identity. Stadiums became places of nationalist mobilization, where Algerians could express their rejection of French foreign rule. France tried to curb this trend by mandating that every club have at least five European players.

During the Algerian war, the Algerian National Liberation Front (FLN) founded its own national team in 1958 as an expression of national independence. The most famous Algerian football player, Rachid Mekloufi, accepted the fact that his membership in the Algerian national team would prohibit him from playing for France at the World Cup in Sweden. This desire for independence in football eventually made its way into politics: Algeria became independent in March 1962 and was recognized by FIFA the following year.

Although FIFA was founded by eight western European nations, by 1939 the membership had grown to include 56 different countries, including Egypt, Lebanon, and Syria. Immediately after World War II, many countries not only became members of the United Nations, but of FIFA as well. Some states, such as Palestine, are members of FIFA without being full members of the Unit-

ed Nations. For example, in 2012, the United Nations granted Palestine observer status as a non-member state, despite being admitted to FIFA in 1998. Football became a powerful national symbol, and being recognized by FIFA can even be said to represent an important step toward national liberation.

## Ultras in the Streets

Football was more than just a vehicle for anti-colonial nationalism. Many autocratic rulers who came to power in Middle Eastern states soon recognized that football had the potential to divert the population's attention away from political grievances, thereby strengthening their own legitimacy. For example, President Mubarak benefited from the Egyptian national team's many successes in the Africa Cup. These victories gave rise to the occasion to celebrate Egypt as a country, despite the fact that corruption, economic crises, and rampant police violence had produced widespread discontent. Mubarak staged the victory celebrations at great expense.

However, powerful opposition forces emerged. The ultras fan groups of various Egyptian clubs — led by the "Ahlawys", or Al Ahly ultras — already constituted an important social group prior to the Arab Spring. Ultras had developed their own underground culture that extended across social classes and expressed itself in direct opposition to the state and the (football) establishment. The uprisings that began at the end of 2010 in the Middle East and North Africa made the emancipatory potential of football and its fan groups clear. Especially in the protests against the Egyptian ruler Mubarak in Tahrir Square, ultras played an important role due to their experience in street fighting.

Ultras were involved in the protests that led to the overthrow of dictator Ben Ali in Tunisia. But in a different context, they were also victims of one of the most brutal massacres in Egyptian history, when 74 Al-Ahly supporters were killed in Port Said stadium in 2012 while security forces stood back and watched the allegedly state-planned killing.

## Players in Prison

Football was by no means spared from the impacts of the brutal dictators and bloody conflicts that dominated national politics. In Syria, the dictator Hafiz al-Assad had insurgent Islamists executed in a stadium in 1982. The notorious son of Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein, Uday, who was also chairman of the national football club, had players thrown into prison and tortured following defeats.

Regional rivalries also played out on the football pitch. Tensions during the qualifier for the 2010 World Cup between Egypt and Algeria which were often compared to the so-called "football war" between Honduras and El Salvador in 1969. The heated atmosphere at the games erupted in diplomatic confrontations and violent riots in Cairo, which were also fuelled by Egyptian President Mubarak.

The Arab-Israeli conflict has also continued within FIFA, with Palestinians trying to draw attention to the ongoing occupation of Palestine and human rights violations. For example, footballers from Gaza are generally unable to travel to matches due to the ongoing Israeli blockade.

## The Growing Influence of Women

Football is often praised as an integrative and equalizing force within society, yet these effects are rarely put on display for an international audience. Examples of these effects include the Iraqi football team's vic-

tories at the 2004 Olympic Games against Portugal and others, which brought together an ethnically disintegrating nation for a brief period of time, or the games between North Yemen and South Yemen in the 1980s, during which hopes that football diplomacy could reduce tensions were realized when the unification of the two states took place in 1990.

Football's emancipatory and integrative power is more visible at the social level. In recent decades, women's football, long frowned upon as "un-Islamic", has been at least officially recognized in all states in the region, even if there is still a long way to go before it is promoted and spread. In Iran, female fans are leading a remarkable campaign fighting for access to stadiums.

At one point the enthusiasm and awakening of the so-called "Arab Spring" and its attendant demands for *karama* (dignity) and participation had even made their way into football stadiums. Yet today many countries, including Egypt, are witnessing the return to power of dictators who crack down on any spaces of potential freedom. Most recently, some rulers have used the COVID-19 pandemic as a welcome pretext to deny people entry to the stadiums.

This brief exposé of football in the Middle East illustrates its lasting emancipatory and revolutionary dynamics as well as the repressive forces at play. The World Cup in Qatar is simultaneously an expression of the extent of the ruling elite's power and of the fundamental desire for change. It remains to be seen if, when, and how these changes will come about as a result of the 2022 World Cup, which is marred by human rights violations and corruption.

**RENE WILDANGEL**  
holds a doctorate in history with a focus on the history of the Middle East and spent several years in Damascus, Jerusalem, and Ramallah, among other places. He has lived in Thessaloniki as a freelance writer since 2021.

Both authors are editors of a book on football in the Middle East, which will be published by Die Werkstatt in the run-up to the 2022 World Cup.

**JAN BUSSE**  
holds a doctorate in political science from the University of the Federal Armed Forces in Munich and works on international conflicts and the development of social and political orders with a regional focus on the Middle East and North Africa. His most recent publication is **Der Nahostkonflikt: Geschichte, Positionen, Perspektiven** (C.H. Beck, 2021), co-authored with Muriel Asseburg.

# A Boycott Won't Help

International labour organizations are speeding up reforms in Qatar with campaigns and consultation. Yet the implementation of new laws is still not adequately monitored. Trade unionist **Dietmar Schäfers** gives an account of the achievements and setbacks in this process.

More than ten years ago, the Building and Wood Workers' International (BWI) found out that virtually nothing was known about the working conditions surrounding major sporting events. The BWI brings together 351 affiliated unions with some 12 million members from 127 countries. This federation also includes the Industrial Union for Building, Agriculture and the Environment (IG BAU), for which I served as national deputy chair until 2019.

For a long time, no one bothered to think about the importance of human and workers' rights in the context of sporting events. Neither governments, sports teams, corporations, nor fans had any interest in this.

Consider the fact that in the Olympic games of antiquity, only free men were permitted to compete with each other. It is well-known that slavery was considered to be socially acceptable and we can assume that it was slaves who built the sports arenas.

## No Passports, No Unions

Today slavery has officially been abolished in nearly every country in the world, yet construction workers in the sports industry still often suffer under working conditions that fundamentally resemble those of slavery in that they are unsafe and sometimes even life-threatening: inadequate housing, insufficient food and water supplies, extremely low wages, and restrictions on union organizing and wage negotiations.

For decades, commercialization has been a major determining factor in professional sports. But we should also look closely at the political and social conditions in the host countries. Qatar, for example, is one of the richest countries in the world,

but the emirate on the Persian Gulf cannot really be considered a sporting nation. It is a country with about 2.8 million inhabitants, of which about 2.4 million are immigrants and migrant workers.



Qatar is also a country where workers' human rights are routinely violated. Some do not receive their wages or are paid less than agreed. The *kafala* system prevailed for a long time in Qatar as well. Under this arrangement, people's passports were confiscated and they were not free to leave the country when they wanted. Moreover, there is no right to unionize in Qatar.

## Red Card for FIFA

When FIFA, the world football federation, awarded the hosting of the World Cup to Qatar in 2010, a slew of corruption allegations followed, many of which have still not been cleared up. Soon after the announcement was made, the BWI and IG BAU, together with other actors, launched the "Red Card for FIFA" campaign. The pressure put on Qatar and some of its partner corporations by the public and trade unions has led to some improvements since 2013.

The BWI's campaign included a complaint against FIFA under the OECD Guidelines for Multinational

Enterprises. The International Labour Organization (ILO), one of the world's major labour organizations, also filed a complaint against Qatar, citing ILO Convention 29, which refers at length to forced labour. FIFA sponsors have also put pressure on the football industry and Qatar, since they do not want to be associated with human rights abuses. Multinational construction companies — driven by



works councils and national trade unions — have changed their behaviour in Qatar. As a result, decision-makers in Qatar have begun to shift as well.

## Elected Spokespersons for Workers

After the campaign, contact was established between the BWI, FIFA, and the Supreme Committee for Delivery and Legacy (SC), which is responsible for the World Cup infrastructure in Qatar. The BWI helped FIFA draft its human rights policy. It also negotiated a memorandum of understanding with the Supreme Committee for Delivery and Legacy, which came into effect at the end of 2017. Since 2018, we have been conducting international inspections of World Cup construction sites at regular intervals and advising Qatari authorities on workplace safety.

Workers on the construction sites are now represented by elected spokespersons who are backed by us. Since we began to address the situation, many workers on the construction sites report noticeable improvements in their working conditions, including receiving more adequate food and water supplies. Occupational health and safety standards on the construction sites are now on par with those of Germany or the US.

When disputes arise, we get involved by acting as mediators between workers and Qatari authorities. We ourselves have a permanent trade union secretary on site who maintains contact with the migrant workers.

## Safeguarding Achievements in the Long Term

Since beginning our work in Qatar, some of the country's labour laws have been changed. For example, workers may no longer be charged commission fees. Yet the reality of the situation does not always live up to this rule. In the past three years, we have managed to refund fees paid by over 16,500 workers, totalling more than 10 million euros. In the past three years alone, the new dispute review boards have helped secure the payment of more than 11.3 million euros to workers.

Although the *kafala* system has been formally abolished in Qatar,

the reality is that this reform is hardly monitored. There is a lack of consistent audits and further steps being taken. From a European perspective, these reforms may seem like small steps. But for those living under the political system in Qatar, they are huge leaps. I myself have visited Qatar on a regular basis since 2013, holding talks and negotiations with the authorities. I come across people advocating for lasting change and reform in the country, but I also meet conservative forces who reject change.

In recent months, a number of people have approached IG BAU and the BWI to discuss calls for a boycott of the World Cup. In 2010 we still supported the idea of a boycott — now we reject it. A boycott would certainly not help the migrant workers, some of whom have experienced significant improvements to their conditions. Progressive forces advocating for reform would also lose strength through a boycott, and many of our achievements would be rolled back.

## We Need Resolute Action from the Football Clubs

In the remaining months leading up to the World Cup, we continue to call for the implementation of further reforms that will remain in effect after the tournament. We stand for efficient inspections and for penalties for violations to be consistently applied. Qatar has already ratified five of the eight core labour standards. We demand that the last three standards also be signed off in a timely manner. This concerns number 87: freedom of association and protection of the right to organize, number 98: the right to organize and to collective bargaining, and finally, number 100: equal pay.

The awarding of hosting the World Cup to Qatar and the broad discussion that followed have changed the small country and brought the issue of human rights into the international spotlight. But that is not enough: the decisive factor is that the decision-makers at FIFA, UEFA and the IOC take resolute action. The hosting of major sporting events should only be awarded to countries that have ratified all eight core labour standards or agreed on a plan to ratify them.

Those eight core standards are the following: number 29, on forced and compulsory labour, number 87 on freedom of association and protection of the right to organize, number 98 on the right to organize and collective bargaining, number 100 on equal pay, number 105 on the abolition of forced labour, number 111 on discrimination in employment, number 138 on the minimum age for employment, and number 182 on the worst forms of child labour.

## In China, Efforts Have Come to Nothing

Countries seeking to host major sporting events should seek advice from NGOs as well as from international trade unions at an early stage. China, for example, has not ratified all core labour standards. The human rights situation there is a disgrace. Despite this fact, Beijing hosted the 2022 Winter Olympics. Experts speak of genocide against ethnic Uyghurs in the Chinese province of Xinjiang. With its silence, the IOC paved the way for China to make its way onto the global stage of propaganda.

In China, our efforts to improve human rights and working conditions have come to nothing. The public pressure that was mounted in Qatar led to a willingness for more transparency and change. In China, such willingness does not exist.

### DIETMAR SCHÄFERS

was the national deputy chair of the Industrial Union for Building, Agriculture and the Environment (IG BAU) until 2019. Today, as deputy president of the Building and Woodworkers' International (BWI), he is responsible for monitoring sports campaigns and working conditions.

# The *Kafala* System Persists

The Qatari government has initiated reforms. But the absence of trade unions, an engaged civil society, and opportunities for legal aid mean that the laws rarely have any effect, according to activist **Vani Saraswathi**.

Since 2014, the Qatari government has claimed to have abolished the *kafala* system. At first, this consisted of merely renaming it as a “contract system”. Then the restrictions on changing jobs were partially relaxed. After that, the former procedure for obtaining an exit permit was gradually abolished. Finally, the so-called “No Objection Certificate” (NOC), a certificate granted by the employer which workers were required to have in order to legally change jobs, was completely abolished.

This article is about the *kafala* system in Qatar — not because the abuses here are worse than elsewhere, but because it is an area in which both human rights activists and the government itself have done the most visible work, especially because of the international attention brought about by the upcoming 2022 World Cup.

## The Ministry of Interior Still Has the Upper Hand

It is true that it took a concerted global campaign to force Qatar to commit to respecting the human rights of migrants. But we should also recognize that Qatar’s willingness to work with international NGOs, trade unions, and UN agencies is unprecedented in the region. Technical cooperation with the International Labour Organization and the establishment of a project office have also ensured that laws and regulations meet international standards.

The reforms made over the past six years are remarkable. They primarily concern labour law, which the Ministry of Administrative Development, Labour, and Social Affairs (MADLSA) is responsible for. But a law is only as effective as its implementation and only as good as the

worst laws the code contains — in this case, immigration laws, which the Ministry of Interior is responsible for. Moreover, the Ministry of Interior has the upper hand in the hierarchy of government agencies.

One of the reasons why problems persist is the fact that migrants’ rights are only considered from the perspective of labour law. The absence of trade unions, an official civil society, and legal representation also means that even meaningful reforms have failed to take effect.

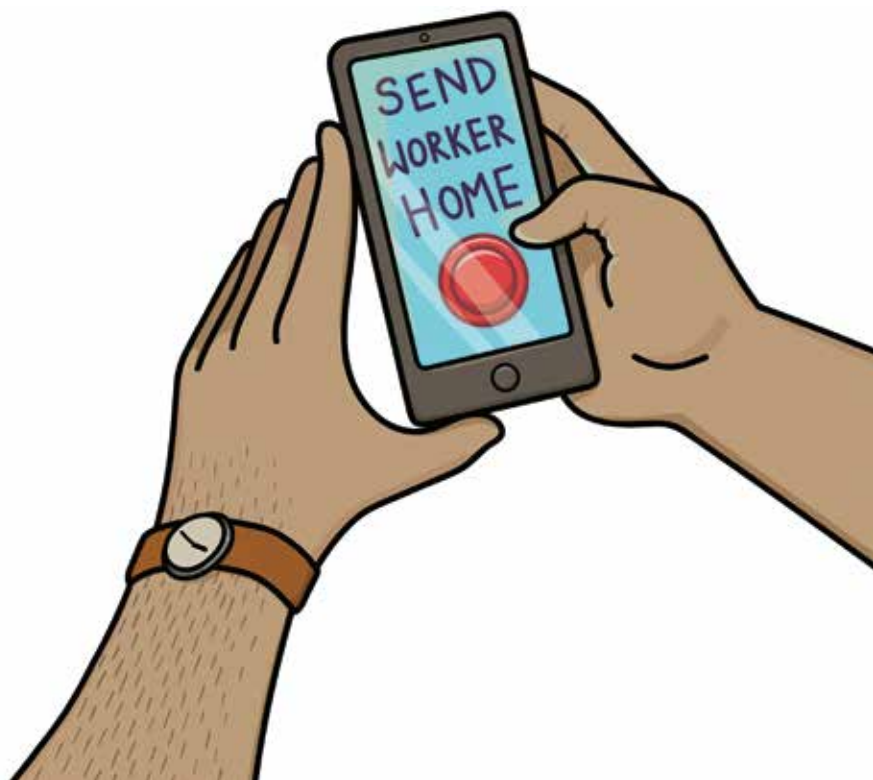
## Employers Are Barely Held Accountable

To understand why the *kafala* system persists, it is important to know what exactly this system consists of. *Kafala* as a term is too general and rigid to

say anything meaningful about the well-being of migrant workers who are subject to it. The *kafala* system is different in every region where it is in effect. The only common denominator is that each foreign worker’s residence and work permit is linked to a single individual or legal entity, the so-called sponsor.

The employer controls each worker’s entry and right to live and work in the country. Migrant workers are not permitted to renew their residence permits themselves — only their employer is. Should the employer fail to do so, the migrant worker becomes an irregular or “illegal” resident and is punished and criminalized. What Qatar, like other Gulf states, has done over the years is to adopt relatively strict labour laws that provide minimum standards for working hours, rest periods, claims, and wages — at least on paper.

Yet there is little to no accountability for employers who fail to comply with these minimal standards, since workers cannot afford to wait even a short time for justice to be administered. In the procedure for filing labour complaints, migrants remain at the mercy of the employer they are bringing a complaint against. This is unfortunate, since otherwise the processes overseen by the Ministry of Labour are relatively work-



er-friendly and the online platform for changing jobs is easy to use and access. In the event that a case goes to the labour court, it is invariably decided in favour of the workers.

However, at any point in the proceedings, the defendant can file a counterclaim against the claimant by citing any number of grounds and without any obligation to present substantial evidence in support of their claim. Workers who file grievances must not only fight for justice, they also have to prove their own innocence, i.e., defend themselves against allegations ranging from “absconding” or “running away from the workplace” to theft or financial fraud.

## Housing with Surveillance

Since the NOC was abolished, all that is required of workers wishing to change their jobs is that they give their current employer notice and use a straightforward online procedure to apply for a change of job. Once these two steps have been completed, they receive notification that their request has been approved. This system is indeed commendable.

However, since the residence permit is still linked to the employer, the employer receives a notice that the worker intends to quit and can then file a lawsuit against the worker or invalidate the worker’s identity card (Qatar ID Card or QID) at the touch of a button via an app called Metrash. Workers whose QID has expired or been invalidated have 90 days to change jobs before they are fined for the expiration of their residence permit. However, they must submit a separate application to renew their QID before they can apply to change jobs.

Workers are often reluctant to do anything that might upset their sponsor, since the latter has the ability to inconvenience them and create legal trouble, which would prompt yet more lengthy legal proceedings. Intimidation is by no means always done covertly. Most low-income workers live in housing that is under tight surveillance, and where their arrivals and departures are closely monitored. When the employer finds out that a complaint will be filed, he or she often finds ways to

prevent the worker from attending hearings or further appointments to advance the case.

## No General Definition

It is clear that workers are fundamentally disadvantaged and are at risk of deportation as soon as their cases come under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Interior. Even if a complaint is also filed with the MADLSA, there is reason to fear that the claims may not be considered.

What the global campaigns and activism against the *kafala* system have failed to recognize is the gaps in their own understanding; it is possible that their own demand for the abolition of the *kafala* system has not been fully grasped. Unlike slavery, which the *kafala* system is often compared to, there is no universal definition of the sponsorship system. People experience and understand it differently depending on their environment, nationality, and place of residence. It is therefore time to move away from sweeping calls for a reform of the *kafala* system and to instead concretely address the practices and laws that contradict universal human rights.

## Changes, but Hardly Any Improvements

Seven years after it was first claimed that the *kafala* system had been abolished, workers’ experiences have remained largely the same, according to research and investigations by Migrant-Rights.org. The so-called wage protection system introduced in 2015 has so far failed to curb wage theft. The confiscation of passports, while illegal, is widespread and employers are not prosecuted for it. The Workers’ Support and Insurance Fund established in 2018 still does not reduce the time workers have to wait for payment of withheld wages, and the conditions under which the fund is to be used remain unclear. Making it easier to change jobs is also not enough to loosen the stranglehold that employers have over their workers.

In 2017 and 2018, 1,200 workers at the HKH contracting firm were not paid for several months, leav-

ing them destitute. Many workers grew desperate and returned to their home countries empty-handed. Those who went to court were able to secure a ruling in their favour in mid-2019. However, this ruling was not enforced until the third quarter of 2020 and the plaintiffs only received the wages they were owed, without any compensation for the hardships they suffered. The company is owned by a member of Qatar’s ruling family.

Around the same time, in 2018, 800 workers at Hamton International were housed without running water or sanitation and were not paid for over a year. Two workers died in this environment. The company was run by an Indian manager who fled the country. His Qatari partner, who had comparatively little influence, was arrested. The workers had to give up part of the wages they were owed in order to change jobs or to be able to leave the country.

## The Companies Have the Advantage

A worker named Abbie suffered from long working hours, sexual harassment, and psychological stress at her job from 2016 to 2018. Although she resigned, she was not allowed to leave because her employer threatened to sue her and her colleagues for absconding. She was reluctant to file a formal complaint since she had little confidence in the system.

In 2019 and 2020, workers from the company Qatar Meta Coats who worked at a World Cup site were not paid for several months. The workers filed complaints and exhausted all means at their disposal, to no avail. It took a report by Amnesty International to get the workers paid. One of the workers summarized the problem by saying “the company has such a strong advantage over the workers that the workers regret going to court. Whatever the company decides to do, Qatar supports it. The workers are suffering because the companies are in charge.”

In 2019, about 550 workers at Imperial Trading and Contracting Company stopped receiving their wages. Lawsuits against the company have had little effect; they are still waiting for their money. The Wage Pro-

tection System did not identify this case in time, and so the fund that was intended to support the workers in a timely manner was never used.

### COVID-19 Worsens the Situation

Over the past seven months, we have seen a growing trend of employers making use of their unlimited power. Amidst the lockdown occasioned by the pandemic and an economic recession, employers have attempted to shirk their legal obligation to provide room and

board to their workers by falsely accusing workers who are unfamiliar with the system, and thus helpless, of unauthorized absence from the workplace and theft.

Unlike the MADLSA, the Ministry of Interior does not effectively cooperate with civil society actors. The foreign embassies present in Qatar even have standardized letters which they use to demand the release of detained workers or the settlement of disputes. However, these letters are not guaranteed to speed up the process. Workers whose country does not have diplomatic representation in Qatar can

remain in detention for a very long time unless their employer is “lenient”.

Workers’ rights extend beyond labour law, and their access to justice does not only revolve around the labour system. What ultimately matters is who their sponsor is. This is the reason why the *kafala* system remains in place despite the reforms. The more powerful the *kafeel* or sponsor, the less they are held accountable. Although some are more powerful than others, the majority of this small group of actors has enough power to intimidate their employees.



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# The Great Wage Heist

In Qatar and other Gulf states, migrant workers often experience wage theft. Journalist **Rejimon Kuttappan** describes how new safeguards are failing and how the pandemic has exacerbated inequality.

In 2017, John Xavier (name changed) migrated to Qatar from India through an agent, paying a recruitment fee of 1,400 US dollars to secure a position as a security guard for a global security company. Since then, during the last four years, he has been deployed to many sites as a guard, including the 2022 FIFA World Cup work sites.

But he feels that he has been denied decent working conditions, experiencing both salary cuts and denial of overtime pay, even in Qatar, which claims to be a migrant-worker-friendly country that, when compared to its neighbours, has been a pioneer in reforming the exploitative *kafala* system.

“I was paid 450 US dollars monthly, which includes 70 dollars that is being paid by the client whom we guard, till February 2020. Following the outbreak of COVID-19 in Qatar, we were put in camps without work till May, without pay. And when the work resumed during the second week of May, our salary was cut”, John said.

According to John, citing a liquidity crisis caused by COVID-19, the company issued a notice stating that their salary has been cut to 330 dollars, including the client’s 70 dollars. “We were told that those who agree to the slashed salary can continue, and others who disagree can tender their resignation and leave”, John said, adding that the workers went on strike for two days but finally gave up the protest as the company was not ready to listen to the workers’ grievances.

“At that time, four months’ salary was pending. Those who were ready to resign gave up their pending salary and accepted the slashed end-of-service benefits and bid farewell to the company. A few like me didn’t have any other options, so we decided to continue”, John said. He says that there were some 5,000 migrant workers in the company. But now,

after May 2020, only some 2,000 are left.

“My friends who have worked for seven years in the company were supposed to get around 1,300 dollars when they resigned in May last year. But they were given only 970. Their wages were stolen”, John said. “But nobody dared to complain. Everybody ‘agreed’ with the company and left”, adding that he is aware that his wages were also stolen.

Nandu Krishna, an Indian migrant worker who “resigned” and returned in May 2020 from the same security company where John works, said that he got only 970 dollars instead of 1,300. “I was shocked to learn at the last moment that a lot of miscalculation had happened in my end-of-service pay. But I didn’t have time to complain as there were only limited flights to return home then. Additionally, the Indian embassy wasn’t functioning full-time. The COVID-19 crisis was at its peak. So, I didn’t fight for what I was entitled to. I decided to forget that and return”, Nandu said.

As mentioned earlier, wages in John’s company were reduced due a liquidity crisis caused by COVID-19, but working hours remained the same. “We work for 12 hours at normal sites and 14 at World Cup sites for 26 days. The remaining four days in the month are paid leave. We are supposed to get 450 dollars, but we get only 330”, he said. “If we question that wage theft, we will be called out on some trivial issue, penalized, and sent back”, adding that this is happening in a country that takes pride in its pro-labour reforms.

In addition to pioneering labour reforms including a minimum wage, Qatar had also introduced many improvements to its Wage Protection System. Quoting a statement from the Qatar government, Reuters reported in September 2020 that the “Qatar Wage Protection System obliges employers to pay all out-

standing dues to employees who have left and are unable to return during the pandemic.”

The report also added that “workers who have left the country can submit and follow up complaints electronically on the labour ministry’s website, it said in a statement, adding the ministry had resolved 91 percent of complaints lodged between March and August in 2020.”

In 2015, following the United Arab Emirates’ lead in 2009, Qatar installed a Wage Protection System (WPS), meant to ensure migrant workers are paid in a timely manner.

However, workers’ wage violations remain prevalent in Qatar and the region. John confirms the same by saying that companies in Qatar find loopholes to bypass the reforms.

In his case, the company only gave him an ATM card provided by a telecom service provider with which to withdraw his salary. “Other than that, we won’t get either an account statement from the bank nor a pay slip from the company. So, how do we check the breakdown of the salary, and whether they actually deposit it? We are supposed to withdraw the money and remain quiet even if there is a lower amount”, he added.

John’s case of wage theft is not an isolated incident, and neither is Nandu’s.

## 700 Cases in Three Months

A report published in April 2021 by the Manila-based Migrant Forum in Asia (MFA), a grassroots migrant rights organisation, reveals that wage theft cases are rampant in Qatar and the other five Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries as well. Based on some 700 wage theft cases of migrant workers documented, mainly from the GCC countries between November 2019 and January 2021, the MFA states in its report that thousands of migrant workers are victimized by wage theft. Out of the 700 cases documented in some three months, the MFA was able to record 63 wage theft cases from Qatar.

According to the MFA, wage theft consists of the total or partial non-payment of a worker’s remuneration, earned through the provision of labour services, as stipulated in a

written or non-written employment contract. The MFA adds that wage theft also includes the payment of salaries below the minimum wage, non-payment of overtime, non-payment of contractually owed benefits, the non-negotiated reduction of salaries, as well as the retention of dues upon termination of one's contract.

The 1966 International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights recognises the opportunity to work as a fundamental right. Such entitlement must be exercised under just and favourable conditions, including fair remuneration.

The 1949 ILO Wage Protection Convention also affirms that wages should be paid in full and regularly. Partial payments in the form of allowances in kind or deductions are possible only in specific circumstances, in line with legislative provisions and the convention itself.

More specifically, article 12 affirms that the payment of wages should take place at regular intervals and all wages should be settled upon termination of the employment contract. Nonetheless, this is not yet upheld everywhere and is of little avail to migrant workers when they experience employment abuses. Because of the countless layoffs due to the COVID-19 pandemic, migrant workers were forced to return home empty-handed, with unpaid dues, and unable to address the power imbalance between them and their employers.

## Claims Commission

According to the ILO, five million full time jobs had been lost in the Arab States alone during the COVID-19 pandemic. Data collected the south Indian state of Kerala states that out of the 850,000 Keralites who returned from foreign countries between March and December 2020, some 550,000, mainly from the GCC, had cited job loss as the reason for their return.

The MFA started a Justice for Wage Theft Campaign in June 2020 and says that the establishment of an international claims commission, setting up a compensation fund, and strengthening the judicial system can address wage theft cases. Citing cases in the report, MFA Regional Advisor William Gois said that "the

study highlights how universal the issue of wage theft is ... how systemic this problem is". "It is time for us to look at how we want to take this forward. We need to make this a tipping point in our struggle for looking for justice for migrant workers; we must see what more needs to be done and what more we can do", he added.

The Institute of Human Rights and Business also recognized wage theft as "part of the process of modern slavery" in its top ten business and human rights issues for 2021. And in August 2020, Human Rights Watch (HRW) also reported on how the pandemic has amplified how migrant workers' rights to wages have long been violated. "While none of the wage-related problems migrant workers are facing under Covid-19

are novel, since the pandemic first appeared in Qatar, these abuses have appeared more frequently", the HRW said in its report.

Qatar has ratified five of the eight International Labour Organization (ILO) conventions setting out core labour standards, yet is failing to protect workers' wages. Unfortunately, despite the ratifying of the ILO conventions and reforms, workers' cases on the ground reveal that Qatar still has a long way to go to be the real champion of reforms in the GCC.

"In some 500 days, world-class players will dribble the FIFA World Cup football and shoot goals in the stadiums which were built by migrant workers and guarded by me. Whether our wage theft issue will be addressed or not, we don't know. I am not optimistic", John concluded.

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# On the Bottom Rung

Many workers from Nepal are forced to travel abroad to countries like Qatar to earn higher wages. Trade unionist **Smritee Lama** describes the system of exploitation and puts forward suggestions for dignified working conditions.

The current population of Nepal is 29 million, of which 53.5 percent are women. The majority of the population, 63 percent (18.3 million), reside in urban areas, while the remaining 37 percent (10.7 million) live in rural areas. The working-age population (15+ years) constitutes 71.5 percent of the total population, of which 55.6 percent are women.

Approximately 7.1 million are employed, while 908,000 are unemployed. This translates into an unemployment rate of 11.4 percent. 38.1 percent of job seekers are young people aged 15–24. A higher unemployment rate of 13.1 percent has been reported for women, 2.8 percent higher than men.

The size of the labour force in Nepal is increasing as the population grows. At present, the country has a golden opportunity with an increasing share of people of working age in the population, while the dependent population of children and the aged is declining gradually.

Over 400,000 young people are estimated to enter the labour force every year. The majority of the Nepali labour force works in agriculture and is unskilled. This is also the case for those working in other significant sectors like construction and manufacturing. More than 90 percent of Nepali workers are working at home or abroad without any training related to their job, although some are skilled because of their experience. According to the NLSS 2011, more than half of working people in Nepal are underemployed, working less than 40 hours in a given week. Contrary to this, slightly more than one third (35 percent) reported being underemployed in a given year as per the national population census.

Not all Nepali working people have full-time employment, even if they are interested in and available for it. A lack of a decent and appro-

priate employment policy as well as its honest implementation in the country is the basic problem faced by the highly skilled Nepali workforce. The situation is forcing them to emigrate for better employment opportunities. The youth in particular have opted for overseas migration in search of higher incomes and dignity at work.

## Labour Migration

Migration is a global phenomenon caused not only by economic factors, but also by social, political, cultural, environmental, health, education, and transportation factors. It commonly takes place because of the push factor of a lack of opportunities in the socio-economic situation domestically, and also because of pull factors in more developed countries.

Labour migration has become one of the defining characteristics of Nepal's socio-economic landscape. For a young population in the midst of a demographic window of opportunity, labour migration has provided immense employment opportunities. Remittances amount to over a quarter of the country's GDP.

A defining characteristic of Nepal's labour migration since the early 2000s has been an unprecedented increase in the number of workers heading to the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries and Malaysia. According to the Department of Foreign Employment, the labour approvals issued numbered just 3,605 in 1993–1994, while in 2013 the figure had reached 519,638. However, the volume of annual out-migration has been decreasing in the aftermath of the devastating earthquake in Nepal. Labour migrants from Nepal are predominantly men, who make up more than eighty percent of the to-

tal labour migration population in the 18–35 age bracket. The share of workers taking up low skilled work is high, at 59–64 percent.

Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE have been cited as the major destinations attracting migrant workers from Nepal, while Malaysia and Kuwait together take nearly one third of all women migrants. Over 100 other destinations, including primarily Bahrain, Oman, Lebanon, and Japan, account for 15 percent of Nepali workers in foreign employment. Similarly, other countries with less than one percent account for around 31 percent of women workers in migration.

Generally, migrant workers are hired for work which is considered menial, dangerous, or is avoided by the citizens of the country. Nepali migrant workers have to perform such work in a precarious environment. Being forced to work in totally different jobs, and with lower wages than what was stipulated in the signed work contract, not having their work visa renewed in time and therefore being forced to work illegally, extreme exploitation in a bureaucratic grey zone, abuse, mental torture, and unhygienic workplaces and accommodation are some of the common problems facing migrant workers.

In Qatar, as in other GCC countries, migrant labour recruitment is a major industry. Qatar's treatment of migrant workers has been in the spotlight since 2010, when it won the bid to host the 2022 FIFA World Cup.

Qatar has only around 300,000 citizens among a population of 2.8 million, with the Nepali community being one of the largest migrant communities in the country. As of March 2019, there were around 365,000 Nepalese people living and working in Qatar. Nepalese people largely perform unskilled work. They are the lowest level of the genetically engineered pyramid of the approximately two million migrant workers who make up around 90 percent of the resident population of Qatar.

## GEFONT Initiatives Beyond the Borders

The General Federation of Nepalese Trade Unions (GEFONT) has been

assisting Nepali migrant workers in major destination countries through support groups. Taking into account the situation in different destination countries, GEFONT has initiated what are known as “GEFONT Formulas” to protect migrant workers’ rights. These include:

- contacting trade unions in the destination countries;
- obtaining membership of the trade unions contacted and paying membership dues;
- requesting that they resolve the problems;
- if there is no trade union in the destination country or if the trade union of destination countries does not organize migrant workers, then migrant workers should organize among themselves and utilise the country’s law;
- staying in contact with the Nepali embassy and with human rights organizations.

Gulf counties are a major destination for Nepali migrant workers. The Arab world is an entirely different context to countries in other parts of the

world. In 2011 in Qatar, GEFONT established the Nepali Migrant Workers’ Association (GSG). GEFONT is engaged in activities through this association to help Nepali migrant workers in Qatar.

GEFONT has been involved in campaigns conducted by ITUC/ILO/BWI to safeguard the rights of Nepali migrant workers in Qatar, such as for decent work, fair recruiting, Occupational Health and Safety (OHS) issues, and the end of the *kafala* system. We have begun developing a mechanism that would force recruiting agencies to comply, and hope this initiative will end the current trend of destroying the original contract paper at the airport and forcing workers to sign different contracts.

Apart from this, GEFONT concludes memorandums of understanding with the unions of destination countries to safeguard migrant workers’ rights. We have lobbied the Nepal government to conclude bi-lateral agreements and memorandums with governments of major destination countries.

## Rays of Hope

Continued efforts by trade unions and organizations have shown some rays of hope in Qatari labour market, such as putting an end to the *kafala* sponsorship system that requires migrant workers to obtain their employer’s consent to change jobs, and the adoption of a non-discriminatory minimum wage. By introducing these significant changes, Qatar has delivered on a commitment.

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# “Qatar Is Rich Enough to Respect Migrant Workers’ Rights, So It Should!”

Migrant workers in the Gulf are refusing to accept state repression: they are founding their own organizations, networking with other activists, and putting increasing pressure on the government to make reforms.

**Ulrike Lauerhass**, project manager at the Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung, spoke with a worker from Nepal about workers’ organizing.

Most of Qatar’s 2.4 million migrant workers come from Nepal and India. Widespread poverty and high unemployment rates make the choice of finding work abroad a not entirely voluntary decision. Today, around 400,000 Nepalese migrants are employed in Qatar, mainly in construction, but also in hotels, restaurants, and private households. Migrant workers’ remittances account for almost one third of Nepal’s gross domestic product.

The living and working conditions of low-skilled construction workers building the infrastructure for the 2022 FIFA World Cup are particularly appalling. The lack of rights, legal protections, and health and safety regulations are often described as modern slavery. At the heart of the migration regime is a sponsorship system called *kafala* that binds workers’ residence and work permits to their employer, placing them in a highly dependent situation and at the employer’s mercy.

To learn more about workers’ conditions in the Gulf state and what they are doing to fight back, the Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung’s Ulrike Lauerhass spoke with Chandra, an activist from a Nepalese migrant workers’ organization. Due to the increasingly repressive conditions in which activists live and work in Qatar, his real name and his organization must remain anonymous.

**How did you come to work in Qatar, and what are you doing there?**

I come from the northeast part of

Nepal. I completed a Bachelor’s degree in Business Studies at Tribhuvan University. I had worked in a very small private company to fund my studies, but the salary was too little to pay for the very expensive Master’s course I planned to do. Neither in the private nor NGO sector was it possible to find a suitable, secure job, so in April 2013 I decided to go to Qatar for work.

By that time, there was a massive trend of migration from Nepal to the states of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and Malaysia, especially among the youth. Right now, there are more than 350,000 Nepalese migrant workers in Qatar. When I walked the streets in Qatar, I met many migrant workers living in poverty and I started talking to them, asking about their current living and working conditions and listening to their stories, and this pushed me to do something.

Talking to my Nepalese friends in other countries like Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and the UAE, we came to understand that it was a common phenomenon, and we wanted to do something about it. So we organized a meeting and talked about the issue from a human rights and justice perspective, and launched an initiative to advocate for migrant workers’ rights. It’s difficult to organize, but luckily, all Nepalese migrant workers travel back to Nepal for the festive season. The employer covers this trip each or every second year, so in that time, we can meet in Nepal and discuss strategies.

**When did you decide to found your own organization?**

We organized a three-day strategic meeting with participants from Malaysia, Qatar, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, Oman, and Kuwait with journalists and Nepalese human rights and migration activists. We founded the organization and came up with three important issues we wanted to work on: first, empowering the mainly low-skilled, low-educated, and low-paid migrant workers to speak up about justice and rights; second, pressuring the government to regulate and abolish the excessive recruitment fee that the recruiting agency back in Nepal demands; and third, advocating for Nepalese migrant workers to be able to exercise their voting rights in Nepalese elections abroad, as the Supreme Court confirmed.

After that meeting, we networked in the destination countries and got support from international NGOs. We also looked further into the migrants’ conditions and living situations and gathered more detailed information.

**Your network has hubs in so many places and your website covers a lot of issues. How did you get from your first meeting in 2017 to the current setup?**

We started regular video conferences in Nepal on the last Friday of the month via social media channels, providing a space for debate, exchange of information, counselling, and organizing. We invited migrant rights activists, human rights activists, and journalists to join us and provide input on certain questions.

We had one representative in each state and had to be careful to find more team members. In most of our destination countries, unionizing is forbidden, so it requires a lot of trust. We grew through word-of-mouth networking, so it took time. Now, we have 35–40 members in Qatar. We meet in small groups for coffee or tea in a small restaurant and talk. Some of us have already returned to Nepal, because our contracts finished or because of the COVID-19 pandemic, so we met in the beginning of this year and developed a simple strategic plan for the next two to three years. Our ambitious goal is to recruit 500–600 members dedicated to improving the situation of migrant workers.

When the pandemic broke out, the situation got really difficult, sometimes even chaotic, especially for migrant workers that do not speak or write English, because they did not get any information. We started a regular live video call to provide basic information on COVID-19 — how to protect oneself and others. The outreach was very high, we had more than 20,000 followers from everywhere, so we know that we met a need. We also started cooperating with an NGO to provide emergency aid (food and disinfectant) to those who did not get proper support from their employers. At the moment, we are online three times per week discussing a wide range of issues, including cultural exchange.

### What are working and living conditions like now during the pandemic?

The situation of migrant workers was already really strained before the pandemic, but it doubtlessly got a lot worse. Take construction workers, for example: they usually work in teams because they do manual work, and they share a room, so the system does not allow for physical distancing, and they got infected at higher rates than others.

In mid-August of last year, I myself got infected with the virus, and so I was able to observe the situation in the quarantine and isolation facilities. Even if the Qatari government provides free accommodation and food for affected people, which is really good, you could clearly see the inequality of access: the better-qualified workers were sent to five-star hotels, while the less-skilled workers were housed in very simple, poor accommodation without adequate food — in a situation where both groups had the same health problems!

The more vulnerable workers get insufficient support, i.e. those who do not have the means to buy what is lacking. Therefore, this is a discriminatory policy, especially taking into account that the state of Qatar has enough capacity to give everybody the same qualified service. From a justice perspective, everyone should be treated the same.

**The International Labour Organization (ILO) and the Building and Wood Workers' International (BWI) union claim that the conditions on construction sites in Qatar have improved over the last few years. Do you agree?**

This is somewhat true, and the presence of the ILO and BWI in Qatar as well as international pressure on the Qatari government has had a positive impact on workers' conditions — but only to a certain extent. It's also positive that human rights activists have more space today than before. But this is only what you see on the surface.

We have "FIFA projects" in Qatar, where these improvements were implemented and certain requirements are fulfilled. But the construction sites for the world championship only account for around two percent of construction sites in Qatar. The other sites, which are not in the spotlight, employ the majority of lesser-skilled migrant workers. They cannot benefit from these improvements, and for them, there has not been significant change.

To explain this in more detail: the Qatari government introduced slight, cosmetic improvements in workers' rights and protections, e.g. related to the *kafala* system, and in 2020 they even introduced what they call a "non-discriminatory minimum wage" and removed the no-objection certificate requirements for changing employers. That sounds liberal and progressive, but



these mainly exist only on paper. On a large scale, there are still many cases of harsh working and poor living conditions. What has been done is not enough, and since Qatar is one of the richest countries, it has the means to treat its migrant workers with dignity, and to respect their workers and human rights in an accountable way.

### What do you think about the idea of launching a boycott of the World Cup, as proposed by some groups here in Germany and internationally?

I understand the frustration of critical progressive people and football fans, and we appreciate the effort and solidarity that comes with this initiative, but I don't think that this is a good idea, because it will not improve the lives of migrant workers now. It might have been positive at an earlier stage, but now it is too late and might have negative impacts on today's migrant workers. I am concerned the small improvements could even be reversed.

### Do you think court cases are a good strategy to enforce changes?

We actually supported a migrant worker with outstanding salaries,

because his company went bankrupt. Altogether, 470 Nepalese workers had not been paid, and the Nepalese embassy could not help. Even with the mechanism for dealing with such cases in Qatar, the Committee for Labour Dispute Resolution, it could not be solved, so we supported him in taking the case to the Supreme Court, which ruled in favour of the workers, meaning the state has to pay the outstanding salaries.

That sounds like a success story. However, if you dig deeper, you see that it is not a functioning system: first, it took more than a year to win this case — a year without income and the risk of being deported. Then, the state is allowed to pay in instalments, so the worker has to wait even longer for the payment to which he is entitled, because he fulfilled his side of the contract and delivered the labour he was supposed to.

Not surprisingly, not every migrant worker is willing or able to fight this through, and therefore the legal accountability mechanisms do not provide proper protection for migrant workers against these kind of injustices. The system is not effective, and this worker would not have been able to bring his case be-

fore the court without support from us and many others paying for his lawyer, food, accommodation, and transport during the trial.

### What are your demands from the Qatari state and other actors?

The Qatari government should make sure *all* migrant workers are able to live and work in adequate conditions, with freedom and dignity, and have their human, social, and economic rights respected. For now, they do so only for a small amount of migrant workers.

The ILO might face certain limitations in Qatar, but it also comes with a mandate to standardize working conditions and the labour system. It has both the right and capacity to do so. Germany, as one of the most powerful states in the world, should support and pressure the ILO — and FIFA — to fulfil its mandate. The small improvements by the Qatari government give us hope that further steps are possible and will be implemented. The ILO is more powerful than a migrant worker, so they should make strong demands. I have not been able to benefit from my freedom as a migrant worker in Qatar, but maybe the next generation will be able to enjoy the freedom we are fighting for.



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# The Power of Dialogue

FC Bayern regularly travels to Doha for training camps and is sponsored by Qatar Airways. Fans use banners and events to raise concerns about human rights. But the club management has by and large declined to engage in dialogue on these issues. Observations from a fan who wishes to remain anonymous.

The Garcia Report, commissioned by FIFA, was intended to investigate corruption claims surrounding the awarding of the hosting for the 2018 and 2022 World Cups. In this report, the name FC Bayern Munich is mentioned in connection with Qatar's bid, even if only in passing: in an email exchange, the director of Aspire Academy, Qatar's national sports academy, and the World Cup bid committee debate the possibility of holding training camps for top European clubs in Doha. The email exchange suggests that inviting prominent guests like Manchester United or FC Bayern would make for good publicity and increase the likelihood of being selected to host the World Cup.

This email dates from 25 April 2010. Some seven months later, in December 2010, FIFA selected Qatar to host the World Cup. Just one month after that, FC Bayern completed its first training camp in Qatar. The trip has since become a tradition. This is reason enough to take a closer look at FC Bayern's connections to Qatar.

## "A Training Camp Is Not a Political Statement"

Franz Beckenbauer, president of FC Bayern between 1994 and 2009, was one of the members of the FIFA executive committee who voted on awarding the hosting for the 2010 World Cup. In 2013, Beckenbauer commented on the growing criticisms of Qatar by saying "I have not seen a single slave in Qatar. They all roam around freely, neither bound in chains nor with dunce caps on their heads."

This statement was made during a time in which human rights organizations repeatedly criticized the Qa-

tari government. *The Guardian* reported that in the Summer of 2013, some 44 migrant workers from Nepal had died in just two months in Qatar. Dietmar Schäfers, deputy chair of the IG Bau trade union, commented in the *Handelsblatt*: "Seeing that kind of thing makes your eyes tear up."

These incidents surely did not go unnoticed by the higher-ups in FC Bayern. Time and time again, club members and Club Nr. 12, FC Bayern's fan club, criticized the club leadership. They also arranged a meeting with Amnesty International.

The deputy chair for FC Bayern Munich at the time, Karl-Heinz Rummenigge, reacted to the public discussion in December 2015 by saying "We know that we are travelling to a country whose culture is different from that of Germany. We are staying informed. But a training camp is not a political statement. Nobody should mix things up that don't belong together."

## Progress Only on Paper

As of late January 2016, FC Bayern had economic ties to the autocratic emirate Qatar. First through a sponsorship partnership with Hamad International Airport in Doha and as of 2018 with Qatar Airways. Both partners are owned by the state of Qatar. In 2015, Qatar Airways was officially reprimanded by the United Nations for discrimination against female employees and poor pay for ground crew.

After the extent of this economic partnership was revealed, at the next Bundesliga match, fans on the FC Bayern Kurve addressed the issue by holding up a large banner with the proposition "Money > Human rights? — Capital > Morals?" Their answer followed promptly: "Pay attention when choosing sponsors!" Karl-Heinz Rummenigge, on the other hand, told the Munich tabloid *tz* in January 2018 that "football has improved the situation of workers in Qatar". Many FC Bayern fans and members had a different perspective. At the annual general meeting, club members repeatedly stepped up to the podium to criticize the partnership with Qatar. Wenzel Michalski, director of Human Rights Watch in Germany, summed it up by saying "the progress is mostly only on paper".

## Management Plays for Time

But FC Bayern did not even make a commitment to human rights on paper. According to *Sportschau*, in





2019 a motion from team members calling for the issue to be addressed was deemed “invalid” by the club’s management. Objections from fans followed, and a legal dossier certified that the motion was indeed admissible. However, club management played for time so that the motion could not be dealt with at the members’ general assembly.

Yet several speakers raised the issue of the partnership with Qatar at the meeting, as had happened in previous years. Outgoing president Uli Hoeneß complained that 20 to 30 “hooligans” had ruined his farewell event, “under the guise of democracy and freedom of expression”. These words gave an insight into the club management’s understanding of democracy — and almost suggested sympathy for autocratic forms of rule.

Karl-Heinz Rummenigge also spoke up: “Dialogue improves things, ignoring and criticizing, as regularly happens in our country, does not help to change a situation.”

## No Answer Is Also an Answer

Meanwhile, FC Bayern fans opted to rely on the power of dialogue. In January 2020, Club Nr. 12, with the support of the Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung, invited two long-time Nepalese migrant workers to Munich. The two members of the self-organized workers’ network Shramik Sanjal described a reality of life that fell far short of the grandiose promises of the emirate and its partners — a reality that could only be described as inhumane.

FC Bayern management was also invited to the discussion event in Munich’s EineWeltHaus, as well as to a meeting of the city council group of Die Linke in Munich’s city hall, which was also attended by the Greens, the Ecological Democrats, and the Free Democrats. Club management and the board did not respond to the invitations nor did they take part in the discussion. Refusing to give an answer is also an answer — and a clear one at that.

The organizers of the discussion offered the club’s management a closed-door meeting with the migrant workers. The club refused, although its media department released a statement saying it pre-

ferred “dialogue in a confidential atmosphere”. It also said that FC Bayern does not want to take part “if it is only a matter of using chosen discussion partners to draw lines in the sand in a way that attracts public attention”.

## In Cramped Spaces

Already the year before, in March 2019, Bayern fans together with the socio-pedagogical Fanprojekt München had organized a screening of the documentary film *The Workers Cup*, followed by a panel discussion on the topic “Qatar — Human Rights — The Role of Football”. The event was supported by the City of Munich as part of its International Weeks Against Racism events. FC Bayern chose not to participate. If this is the case, then how credible are the club’s campaigns that bear titles like “Red against Racism”?

Meanwhile, migrant workers in Qatar continue to be confronted with systemic disadvantages. At the meetings with the Nepalese guests, the speakers reported that some workers still have their passports confiscated and sometimes do not receive their wages for months, that they have to live with unhygienic conditions in extremely cramped mass accommodation, and that they are only allowed to change jobs and leave the country with their boss’s permission. They also reported that workers from Nepal and other coun-

tries have to pay high recruitment fees.

## Sportswashing Champions

Uli Hoeneß spoke of “an endless scandal” in February 2021, and Karl-Heinz Rummenigge felt “fooled”. However, the FC Bayern executives were not talking about the “army of migrant workers exploited in Qatar, literally hundreds and hundreds of whom have worked themselves to death”, as a recent issue of *Blätter* described it, but instead about the ban on night flights in Brandenburg. After their match in Berlin, the Bavarian millionaires were only able to take off in their Qatar Airways plane a few hours later for the Club World Cup in Qatar. They made no mention of the issue of human rights at all. FC Bayern continues to engage in “sportswashing”, even with new CEO Oliver Kahn.

But why does it have to be Qatar of all places that is chosen as a partner? Because “the training conditions are excellent there”, Uli Hoeneß answered in January 2019. How these conditions are created, and who suffers as a result, is a question Hoeneß does not seem to ask himself. Instead, we should recall what one of the Nepalese guests said: “Football has the power to bring people together, but it is crucial that we as fans are informed about how the game we love is brought to us.”



The author has been active in the critical FC Bayern fan scene for years. He wishes to remain anonymous.

# The Illusion of Equality

Women in Qatar often have to seek permission from a male guardian. But the ruling house propagates the narrative that Qatari women are strong and successful compared to their Western counterparts. Journalist **Ronny Blaschke** on the influence of football.

In December 2020, the women football players from the top club Washington Spirit travelled to Qatar for a sporting excursion. Among other things, the team visited the National Museum and Education City, a campus of international universities, in Doha. In a friendly match, the Americans faced off the Qatari national women's team. Meshal bin Hamad Al Thani, Qatari Ambassador to the US, described this encounter as an important way to kick-off the Qatar–USA 2021 Year of Culture: “Not only is Washington Spirit a top team, they also serve as an example of the explosive potential of strong women for girls in Qatar and in the US. They have so much to offer both on and off the field.”

Members of Qatar's ruling family exalt the narrative around strong women and incorporate it as an essential feature of their activity. “Many people in Western societies imagine Qatari women as being oppressed and veiled”, says Anna Reuß, who researches the foreign policy of the Gulf states at the Bundeswehr University in Munich. “The Qatari state wants to reverse this stereotype and paint a nuanced picture of empowered women. Images of sweaty female footballers with ponytails holding each other after scoring a goal can help. The state promotes female empowerment. The only question is to what end this is being done.”



## Many Female University Graduates Feel Alienated

In the conflict-ridden Persian Gulf region, Qatar is seeking to diversify its economy due to the fact that oil and gas resources are finite. Qatar depends on functioning networks with Europe and North America to compete with its rivals Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. To avoid jeopardizing these alliances, the emirate focuses on the promotion of women in various initiatives. In interviews or reports, the ruling house repeatedly points to female leaders in administration, business, and culture. Almost 75 percent of the students in Education City are now female.

But these figures are deceptive, writes cultural theorist Mashaël Muftah in a blog from Georgetown University in Doha: “The education of Qatari women is a superficial endeavour, used by the Qatari state to push its soft power agenda. Educated Qatari women are being used to generate the illusion of a modern Qatar.” For her dissertation, Muftah studied “The Paradox of Qatari Women’s Education”. One insight that emerged from this research was that many female university graduates feel alienated from the rest of society. They are confronted with different social norms as soon as they leave the liberal campus.

## Oppression Often Leads to Depression

In a 94-page report published in March 2021, Human Rights Watch outlines how the Qatari state encourages these norms. The human rights organization examined 27 laws along with various regulations, guidelines, and standards. Seventy-three interviews were also included in the research, including 50 conversations with Qatari women.

Some of the findings included that Qatari women often have to seek permission from a male guardian to do various things. This includes when they want to get married, work a job in the public sector, study abroad on a scholarship, or get their driver's license. In addition, women apparently have to provide proof of their marriage in order to receive gynaecological examinations. These

restrictions violate both international law and Qatar’s constitution.

“Male guardianship reinforces the power and control that men have over women’s lives and choices,” says Rothna Begum, senior women’s rights researcher at Human Rights Watch. “It can encourage or fuel violence and leaves women with few options to escape abuse at the hands of their own families and husbands.” Quite a few women told Human Rights Watch about the psychological repercussions, which include depression, self-harm, and suicidal thoughts. Women who raise these issues on social media face interrogation and cyberbullying. Independent women’s rights organizations do not exist in Qatar. This also prevents the diversification of the economy, argues Rothna Begum.

## Women’s Football as a Fig Leaf?

The Qatari ruling house tries to paint a different picture. Sheikha Al Mayassa bint Hamad Al Thani, sister of the reigning emir, serves as the chairwoman of Qatar’s museum agency — without having a degree in art history. *Time* magazine listed her as one of the hundred most influential people in the world, and *Forbes* saw her as one of the hundred most powerful women.

With reports like these, Western media play into Qatar’s facade, says political scientist and sociologist Tina Sanders, who studies women’s rights in the Gulf region: “Qatar’s government abuses the high level of education amongst women and the high number of women working professionally in science and technology. This is because Qatar wants to present itself as a nation that promotes women and shed its ultra-conservative reputation.”

Women may be a majority in universities, but things look different on the job market. Seventy percent of Qatari men are employed, compared to only 37 percent of women. And the World Economic Forum’s 2020 Gender Gap Index, which rates a total of 153 countries, also shows a more nuanced picture. In terms of women’s education, Qatar ranks 83rd, landing it in the lower end of the spectrum. In economic participation and economic opportunities for women, Qatar ranks 132nd, in

female health 142nd, and in political empowerment 143rd. Tina Sanders concludes: “These women are only apparently emancipated and therefore serve as symbolic fig leaves for politics just like women’s football, which suddenly appeared on the scene.”

## Women at the Olympics Only as of 2012

Sports illustrates the tension between the official political claim to “modernity” and conservative social norms. It was not until 1998 that the Qatari Athletics Federation organized a major competition for women for the first time. Two years later, Musa bint Nasser al-Missned, the second wife of the emir at the time, initiated the founding of the Women’s Sports Committee. According to its own statement, this organization was intended to “work for gender equality in sports”. At that time, Qatar was increasingly opening up to international investors and seeking to host international sporting events.

Even then, the main goal was to host the World Cup. But FIFA also requires applicants to provide evidence of support for girls and women. On 18 October 2010, the newly founded Qatari women’s football team played its first international match against Bahrain. Six weeks later, the hosting of the 2022 World Cup was awarded to Qatar. International media interest increased — and so did the pressure to reform. Women represented Qatar at the Summer Olympics for the first time in 2012 in London. Shooter Bahiya Al-Hamad carried the Qatari flag at the opening ceremony. But could social change keep up with this pace?

## Activists on the Run

In the years following the World Cup, Qatari women competed in football matches against teams including Palestine, Syria, Afghanistan, and Jordan. For a long time, however, they were hardly active and were not listed in the FIFA world rankings. Is the women’s team being tokenized to make the men’s World Cup possible? Monika Staab nods in agreement.

The coach won the German championship four times with the 1st FFC Frankfurt around the turn of the millennium before working in developmental aid mainly in African and Asian countries, including Qatar in 2013 and 2014. “We were on the lookout for young talent in schools”, says Staab. “But we lacked a long-term strategy and support from the very top.” Staab has since become the coach of Saudi Arabia’s first national women’s team.

In Qatar, the national women’s team and the women’s football league, which was founded in 2012, are not part of the Qatar Football Association, but the Women’s Sports Committee, which is an unusual arrangement for international sports. There is no mention of the women’s league on the official website of the Qatar Football Association.

In their official statements, leading politicians strive to promote successful and internationally presentable female athletes, says political scientist Tina Sanders, but the cultural environment makes it difficult for women to actually succeed in this regard. On several occasions, feminist blogs and Twitter accounts have been blocked. “Some activists have been arrested or are on the run,” says Sanders. Women sometimes try to find a “safe space” in universities that allows them to play football. However, due to low participation, this mostly happens in the smaller indoor variant, futsal.

## The World Cup as a Chance for Nuanced Campaigns

From a European perspective, the awakening may seem slow, but considered from a regional perspective, the changes have been remarkable. “Women’s physical movements do not have the same meaning in the Gulf states as in Western societies”, says researcher Anna Reuß. “There are few spaces where women can exert themselves without traditional clothing.” In Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates, people are more likely to suffer from obesity or diabetes. In Doha, for example, the number of gyms open exclusively to women is growing.

However, women’s football is even less accepted in Qatar, says Anna Reuß: “In Qatar, the family is

usually considered the smallest collective social unit. Even if the woman makes a large contribution to the family's income, she is not seen as the head of the family, but as a mother. Many people fear the erosion of these traditional forms of identity and reject women's right to wear loose clothing. Women football players are also often perceived as

masculine. Therefore, progressive women also often stay away from football."

The 2022 World Cup offers an opportunity to take a critical and nuanced look at women's rights in Qatar. "The few Qatari women's football teams could network with female ultras from Europe," says Tina Sanders. "This could lead to sol-

idity campaigns and discussion events. Open letters on the subject could also raise awareness." For many years, groups like Wadi, Discover Football, and Right to Play have used football to strengthen women's rights, including in the Middle East and the Gulf region. The 2022 World Cup is also an opportunity for these groups.



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# Prioritizing Profits

Qatar holds shares in several DAX companies, which is another reason why the German government withholds criticism. **Michel Brandt** of DIE LINKE demands mandatory human rights policies from World Cup hosts and FIFA.

Football World Cups are known for outstanding sporting performances, a lively atmosphere, and human rights violations. Unfortunately, the latter is just as much a tradition at major sporting events as is the carrying of the Olympic torch or the kick-off whistle. The 2022 World Cup in Qatar is no exception. How can these obviously systemic problems be addressed? Who can and must be held accountable?

Sport likes to consider itself as a vehicle of peace and diplomacy amongst nations. Through recourse to values such as “fair play” and tolerance, major sporting events are supposed to bring people from different countries together on neutral ground. Unfortunately, the increasing commercialization of sports is pushing these ideals further and further into the background. How much neutrality is possible at a stadium whose construction cost countless workers their lives?

## Violating International Conventions

Major sporting events could also be seen as a magnifying glass for the intermingling of political and economic interests. On the one hand, there are big sports clubs and sponsors who earn billions in revenue from these events. On the other hand, for a host like Qatar, the World Cup can lead to a strong media presence and boost a country’s economy. With a good marketing strategy, the host can put itself in the international spotlight and gain prestige through “sportswashing”. The scandal around the awarding of the hosting for the World Cup show how politically significant the event is — and how corrupt FIFA is.

Football is a key strategic pillar of Qatar’s foreign policy, which the

country uses in an attempt to distinguish itself from the other Gulf states. For this reason, football has less to do with sports and more with transnational economic interests and an image campaign. In order to present a flawless image from the first kick-off, massive infrastructure projects such as stadiums, hotels, and public transportation are being built at a rapid pace — all at the expense of human rights. NGOs report a lack of labour rights, inhumane accommodation, starvation wages, and forced labour. Thousands of migrant workers are reported to have died at World Cup construction sites.

Qatar’s poor human rights record extends well beyond the World Cup. There are no trade unions, press freedom is limited, and there is no independent judiciary. In addition, the rights of women and the LGBTQ community are regularly trampled over. Qatar violates many international conventions to which it is a signatory, whether they be the United Nations human rights treaties or International Labour Organisation (ILO) conventions.

## Slow Implementation and Reactionary Forces

In response to the international outcry, the country showed a willingness to cooperate and brought about reforms within a short period of time in a manner that generated public attention. The reforms made to the controversial *kafala* system, whereby employers act as sponsors for migrant workers, are particularly noteworthy. The reforms should allow workers to leave their employers and lodge complaints more easily.

Qatar is also the only country in the region to have signed a framework agreement with the ILO. Thus,

from a Western perspective, the country has become a model country in the Gulf region.

But reforms are of little use to those they are supposed to assist if they hardly extend beyond empty words and promises. The reforms clearly contain considerable oversights and their implementation is sluggish. Employers who work closely with the regime still need not fear any consequences, and without trade unions, a free media, or an independent judiciary, workers hardly have any way to assert their rights. Moreover, reactionary forces in the country are already trying to roll back many of the reforms.

## Germany’s Reluctant Criticism

Despite the significant shortcomings of the reforms, the German government has viewed them largely positively. In its answer to our written inquiry, the federal government reported that German Human Rights Commissioner Bärbel Kofler (Social Democratic Party, SPD) had travelled to Qatar in May 2021. At a meeting with the Qatari ambassador, “Member of the German Bundestag Kofler acknowledged steps toward reform being taken in terms of workers’ rights”.

Overall, the German government’s level of criticism remains very restrained, and discussions on human rights conditions only take place behind closed doors. They cite economic interests as the reason for this. After all, many billions of euros flow from Qatar to Germany.

In 2018, the emir of Qatar promised Chancellor Merkel investments of ten billion over the next five years. Qatar holds shares in DAX companies such as Volkswagen, Deutsche Bank, and Siemens. FC Bayern is also co-financed by Qatar. As is so often the case, the timid action of the German government is the result of prioritizing profit motives over human rights. This is incompatible with a human rights-based policy.

## The Irresponsibility of FIFA

FIFA, the organizer of the World Cup, is a key actor whose influence over these matters cannot be

underestimated. It is responsible for the World Cup bidding process and it has extensive power over the host country through its association agreement. For example, FIFA can require the host to pass certain laws. It is also the biggest financial beneficiary of the World Cup. For the tournament in Qatar, it expects revenues of 3.3 billion euros.

FIFA has no direct human rights obligations, because such obligations only exist for states. That said, the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights adopted in 2011 stipulates that economic actors also have a responsibility to respect human rights. On the grounds of respecting the Guiding Principles and due to international pressure from fans and sponsors, FIFA has adopted a Human Rights Policy, which it is required to implement through ongoing due diligence in all its activities.

In addition to a number of non-transparent “multi-stakeholder initiatives”, the success of which is uncertain, the policy led to the establishment of the Supreme Council for Organization and Sustainability in 2016 in the context of the World Cup in Qatar, which was to ensure that the rights of stadium workers were respected. However, Amnesty International claims that this process is not going well. The NGO stated that workers at Al Bayt Stadium had their wage payments delayed by up to seven months.

## Mandatory Due Diligence for Sports

The reason for the poor implementation of human rights is the non-compulsory nature of the regulations. Industrial crimes such as the collapse of the Rana Plaza textile factory in Bangladesh have painfully demonstrated the failure of any voluntary implementation of human rights. However, ongoing social pressure is generating a lively debate on how due diligence could be legally regulated. After a long struggle, Germany also passed a supply chain law in June 2021, albeit one that is far too weak. A comprehensive directive is soon to be adopted at the EU level.

In Switzerland, where FIFA’s headquarters is located, a legal arrangement is still being negotiated. Although the so-called “corporate responsibility initiative” failed to pass by a narrow margin, a weakened counter-proposal from parliament is likely to come into effect in the near future. However, the size of FIFA makes it questionable whether or not it will be implicated by the law, since its scope will probably be too narrow. This means that Switzerland is not sufficiently fulfilling its human rights responsibilities.

## More Pressure Needed

Sports associations like FIFA must be compelled to respect human

rights. Something important in this context is the fact that in October 2021, the sixth round of negotiations of the United Nations Convention on Human Rights and Transnational Corporations took place (after the editorial deadline for this brochure). This so-called “binding treaty” could close existing legal gaps and also hold sports associations like FIFA accountable.

People must not be exploited, let alone die, for the sake of sports. Unfortunately, human rights violations are the norm at major sporting events like the World Cup. That is why the international community must exert more pressure on the host countries. Human rights must be made into a mandatory foundation of sports.

As long as profits and economic interests take precedence over football, we in Die Linke will continue to fight for justice together alongside fans, trade unions, and civil society. One thing is certain for me: although I am aware that the awarding of a World Cup will never be completely free of human rights controversies and that there will always be other interests at play, as a passionate football fan this will be the first World Cup that I will not watch.

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# Good Solutions in a Bad System

In football, sponsors and hosts increasingly come from authoritarian states. How can fans and clubs in Europe constructively advocate for human rights from a distance? Journalist **Ronny Blaschke** formulates some approaches.

Since 2010, or for more than a decade, it has been certain that the 2022 World Cup will take place in Qatar. But calls for a boycott have only recently become much louder, especially in Western European countries like Norway, France, and the Netherlands. In Germany, fans, activists and academics are working together in the Boycott Qatar network.

For now, the focus is on Qatar, but we should broaden that perspective a bit more: whether FIFA or UEFA, whether Real Madrid, Hamburg SV or FC Arsenal — many federations and top clubs have received and still receive millions from the state-owned airlines in Doha, Dubai, and Abu Dhabi. Important sponsors increasingly come from China or Azerbaijan, i.e. from non-democratic countries.

## The German Economy Profits from Qatar

In globalized football, everything is connected to everything else. The 2022 World Cup will take place in Qatar. There is likely to be a long list of profiteers in Germany as well: sporting goods manufacturers with better sales, public television broadcasters with higher ratings, and manufacturers who would like to sell more cars, planes, and machinery to the Gulf countries. German exports to Qatar have exceeded 1 billion euros per year for quite some time. Qatar holds shares in several DAX companies. In the long term, more medium-sized companies wish to cooperate with the emirate. They all see football more as an economic opportunity than as a human rights issue.

What would it look like to take an approach based in *realpolitik* rather than discussing the utopia of a boy-

cott? How could German clubs like FC Bayern use their soft power to wield a positive influence over the human rights situation in Qatar without losing out on financial deals with the emirate? These questions are new to football, but not to business. The United Nations, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), and the Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) described in great detail the responsibility companies bear towards human rights at home and abroad years ago.

The German government's new Supply Chain Act is also meant to oblige companies to pay greater attention to labour rights and environmental standards in all their operations. As of 2023, the act will apply to companies with more than 3,000 employees and starting in 2024 to companies with more than 1,000 employees. However, German professional clubs have fewer employees than that.

## Cooperating with NGOs at an Early Stage

The German Football League (DFL) brought up the issue in its reform debate during the pandemic. It wants clubs to have policies for implementing human rights. Measured against the UN Guiding Principles, this would mean a basic commitment to the protection of human rights (for example in club statutes), a dialogue with all employees, critically taking stock of all business relationships, including with sponsors, media partners, and training camp hosts. It would also involve making a self-critical documentation of all grievances and early cooperation with external groups, human rights organizations, trade unions, and so-

cial institutions. The UN Guidelines do not mention boycotts.

Overall, the aim is to reduce the risk of being implicated in human rights violations. Implementing such a policy requires expertise and implies staffing costs. But most clubs have followed a more traditional path in recent years. FC Bayern has played dozens of charity matches to support struggling clubs. In 2005, the Munich-based club founded FC Bayern Hilfe, a non-profit association that collects and distributes donations. In 2015, FC Bayern donated one million euros to aid refugees.

## Social Policy and Commerce Need Not Be Mutually Exclusive

But a contemporary social and human rights policy is not about companies donating part of their profits to charity — it is about how they generate and use those profits in the first place. Many of FC Bayern's approximately 1,000 employees are involved in marketing and business expansion, especially for markets in Asia and America. Annual turnover was recently around 700 million euros. The club could therefore set up a department for sustainability which prioritized the topic of human rights alongside climate protection, diversity, and health.

FC Bayern could set up a department with a budget of five or perhaps even ten million euros allocated for material resources and twenty employees including human rights experts, social workers, and cultural workers. This department could have a direct link to the board of directors which is interlinked with all other departments. Then FC Bayern could document its partnership with Qatar Airways and its training camps in Doha in more detail, for example with a more nuanced exchange with migrant workers or with women's rights activists. Social policy and commerce need not be mutually exclusive.

## Qatar: A Model for the Future

FC Bayern must rely on partners outside the ruling family for any credible exchange. Qatar has no independent media, NGOs, or trade unions, but it does have recognized universi-



ties and cultural institutions. FC Bayern could benefit from the experience of other German organizations: Deutsche Bahn is involved in the expansion of railway lines in Qatar. The Dresden State Art Collections has collaborated on art exhibitions. The German Archaeological Institute carried out survey expeditions.

Business and culture involve large sums of money, yet FC Bayern is under increased scrutiny. In foreign policy, an equal exchange with non-democratic states is regarded as diplomacy, in economics as expansion. In the idealized world of football, on the other hand, people speak of “selling out one’s own values”.

As cynical as it may sound, it was only through football that Europe became aware of dead migrant workers. By European standards, where unions have developed over generations, Qatar is backward. By the standards of the Gulf region, which is less familiar with workers’

movements, Qatar is a model for the future. Saudi Arabia allows less outside interference.

### More than Nurturing a Moral Conscience

Russia, Qatar, soon the even stricter China — football has big tasks ahead of it. The DFL could make the gradual implementation of human rights policies a condition for a Bundesliga licence. Other interest groups do not have to wait for this: club members can submit applications, establish supra-regional networks or reflect on their own behaviour, such as reconsidering trips to non-democratic states, the purchase of jerseys from low-wage countries in Asia, or the use of multinational betting providers and pay TV stations. Fans could approach sponsors or bring the issue to the attention of their constituent MPs.

In the months remaining until the World Cup in Qatar, books, documentaries, and conferences will be produced on the subject. Therein lies an opportunity to achieve more than the cultivation of a moral conscience in Europe. The information in this brochure is intended to make a contribution to such reflection.

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For more information visit  
[www.rosalux.de/en/fairplay](http://www.rosalux.de/en/fairplay)

The venues of major sporting events are often sites of exploitation, oppression and environmental destruction. The fold-out map *Blowing the Whistle for Human Rights* provides an overview and background information.



Never before has a major sporting event been so controversially and emotionally discussed as the 2022 World Cup in Qatar. The rights and living conditions of more than two million migrant workers are the focus of these discussions. But the rights of women and queer people are also being curtailed in the Persian Gulf, and there is no freedom of the press, free elections, or any critically engaged civil society in Qatar. In this brochure, the Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung uses football as a magnifying glass to take a closer look at politics, society, and sports in Qatar in a subtle, critical, and solution-oriented manner. The brochure is accompanied by events, videos, and an informative world map. More information is available at:

[www.rosalux.de/en/fairplay](http://www.rosalux.de/en/fairplay).

