In World Cup Run-Up, Qatar Pressed U.N. Agency Not to Investigate Abuses

March 11, 2023

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The New York Times

<https://www.nytimes.com/2023/03/11/world/europe/qatar-world-cup-ilo-labor.html>

With a series of raids and arrests this winter, the Belgian authorities unearthed what they said was a dirty deal at the heart of the European Parliament. Politicians are charged with pocketing money to praise the tiny Gulf nation of Qatar and downplay its labor rights abuses in the run-up to the World Cup.

Well before any cash is known to have changed hands in that scheme, however, Qatar embarked on a yearslong campaign of political maneuvering that helped turn the International Labor Organization, the United Nations workers’ rights watchdog, from critic to ally, an examination by The New York Times found.

The campaign included free travel for a labor leader; an intense and divisive lobbying effort to head off an investigation; a parliamentary hearing with planted questions; and a $25 million Qatari contribution to the labor organization as part of a package of promised changes, according to documents and interviews with more than a dozen current and former labor officials. Finally, on the eve of the World Cup, officials with the Qatari labor ministry asked the U.N. agency to refrain from any commentary that could overshadow the tournament.

Hosting the World Cup was part of a long, expensive effort by Qatar to cultivate its global image. But the bid was [tainted by bribery accusations](https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/06/sports/soccer/qatar-and-russia-bribery-world-cup-fifa.html) and drew attention to Qatar’s exploitative labor system. Even now that the tournament is over, the new revelations involving a U.N. agency highlight the secretive ways some rich Persian Gulf monarchies, authoritarian governments and strongmen continue to use their wealth to influence global institutions.

The Belgian authorities see Qatar’s campaign at the International Labor Organization as a key part of its efforts to shape public opinion, particularly among European lawmakers, according to an official close to the investigation, who spoke on condition of anonymity because he was not authorized to discuss the case. Qatar has denied any wrongdoing. There is no indication that the labor organization is under investigation.

A confidential report by the International Trade Union Confederation, which sits on the U.N. labor agency’s governing body, found that the confederation had “operational, financial, constitutional, and political” vulnerabilities to corruption. The report, obtained by The Times, cited an urgent need to protect against “threats posed to the global trade union movement.”

The International Labor Organization can investigate governments, take them to court and label them as rights abusers — acts that can jeopardize foreign investment and damage reputations.

By the time the World Cup kicked off, the agency had quieted its criticism and withdrawn a complaint accusing Qatar of forced labor and exploitation. The agency said it won important concessions and did nothing differently in response to Qatari lobbying. But behind closed doors, these moves were divisive, current and former officials said.

“It is possible for countries with power and money to manipulate the system by bullying others,” said Marie Clarke Walker, a Canadian unionist who was part of the International Labor Organization’s governing body.

Labor officials say they have acted with integrity. What some might see as soft-pedaling criticism, agency officials say was diplomacy in action. They say the $25 million — one of the largest single contributions of its kind, and one that was not announced when [the deal was publicized](https://www.ilo.org/global/about-the-ilo/newsroom/news/WCMS_592473/lang--en/index.htm) — did not buy influence. They and Qatar described it as a sign of the country’s commitment to improve.

“Rather than going to McKinsey, they decided to trust the I.L.O. expertise,” Corinne Vargha, director of the organization’s standards department, said of Qatar.

Indeed, several current and former employees said the labor organization often treated Qatar more like a paying client than a country under scrutiny. The Qatari contribution funded the organization’s office in Doha and provided millions for its general administrative costs.

“Qatar engages with the I.L.O. through the same official channels used with other U.N. agencies,” the government said in a statement. It added, “The fact that the I.L.O.’s decision to adopt a nuanced and objective stance, aimed at effecting positive change on the ground in Qatar, has been met with cynicism and distrust is, while sadly unsurprising, completely absurd.”

This debate about the line between diplomacy and influence shopping is familiar inside U.N. agencies and other international organizations. Groups including [Interpol](https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/22/world/europe/interpol-most-wanted-red-notices.html), the [International Maritime Organization](https://www.nytimes.com/2021/06/03/world/europe/climate-change-un-international-maritime-organization.html) and the [World Health Organization](https://www.nytimes.com/2020/11/02/world/who-china-coronavirus.html) have come under scrutiny for policies that benefit authoritarian government members or corporate partners.

Labor rights in Qatar have improved since the International Labor Organization opened its Doha office in 2018. Qatar set a minimum wage and said workers could switch jobs without their employers’ permission. Labor officials said they won those improvements through delicate negotiations. Criticism, they said, would only have undermined that progress.

But labor advocates, human rights groups and some politicians said they were stunned by what they saw as one-sided public statements that minimized problems. State Department [reports](https://www.state.gov/reports/2021-country-reports-on-human-rights-practices/qatar), for example, cited continued examples of forced labor. Migrant construction workers and housekeepers were trapped in long-term debt by employers who confiscated their passports and bank cards and withheld their pay — conditions that some human rights groups have likened to modern slavery.

European lawmakers used the labor organization’s positive statements to justify their own posture toward Qatar. The labor organization in turn [amplified the politicians](https://twitter.com/MargSchinas/status/1594003922292613121?s=20), creating an echo chamber of rosy commentary.

“I.L.O. said Qatar is a front-runner in labor rights,” Eva Kaili, a Greek politician, said at the European Parliament in November. Three weeks later she was [charged with corruption](https://www.nytimes.com/2022/12/11/world/europe/eu-parliament-bribery-qatar.html).

“​​Qatar was very effective at controlling not just the narrative but the framing,” said Mustafa Qadri, a human rights researcher who wrote an early report on labor abuses tied to the World Cup. “There was a lot of being very much a cheerleader for the reforms and giving the government an ‘A’ rating without them having been actually implemented.”

For the global labor rights movement, the fallout from the World Cup has been severe. In interviews, more than a dozen people in the International Labor Organization and its partners said their organizations have been stuck in suspended animation as the corruption investigation in Brussels unfolds.

The trade unionist Luca Visentini was arrested in Brussels late last year and went on leave. Though he was not charged, it was revealed that his successful campaign to lead the International Trade Union Confederation was financed partly by a nonprofit group run by a former lawmaker who has since admitted acting as an agent of Qatar. The internal report obtained by The Times shows that the Qatari government paid for Mr. Visentini to fly there in October.

[In a lengthy statement](https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/23698450-statement-of-luca-visentini-on-qatar-investigations-21122022-1?responsive=1&title=1), Mr. Visentini denied any wrongdoing and said the donation was never tied to any policies on Qatar. He is awaiting a decision on whether he can return to his job.

“It’s a huge damage to the entire labor rights movement,” said Houtan Homayounpour, the former head of the I.L.O. project office in Qatar.

Things began quite differently.

In 2014, as migrant labor fueled a multibillion-dollar World Cup building boom, international union representatives filed a complaint to the International Labor Organization, accusing Qatar of rights violations.

“From the moment migrant workers begin the process of seeking work in Qatar, they are drawn into a highly exploitative system that facilitates the exaction of forced labor by their employers,” the representatives said.

When complaints are issued, the organization can begin a formal investigation. Current and former labor officials recalled Qatari officials crowding the agency’s negotiating rooms in Geneva, urging them not to investigate.

The I.L.O. is the only United Nations agency composed not just of governments but also of groups representing workers and employers. Qatari diplomats rallied employers and countries with Qatari business interests to oppose an investigation, according to Luc Cortebeeck, a Belgian unionist who led the agency’s workers’ group.

The proposed investigation, known as a commission of inquiry, never materialized.

“The unprecedented lobbying campaign succeeded,” Mr. Cortebeeck wrote in his 2020 book “Still Work to Be Done.”

The labor organization instead sent a delegation to Qatar in 2016 and ultimately did win concessions. In exchange for dropping the complaint and the proposed investigation, Qatar said it would enshrine some worker protections into law, promised more changes in the future and made its big contribution.

“The government had demonstrated a clear commitment to major labor reforms,” Gilbert F. Houngbo, the I.L.O. director general, said in a statement this past week. He said the complaint was handled like any other.

It’s not uncommon for countries to resolve complaints, and some labor officials saw this as a good deal. The Qatari government said it was the only country in the region to engage with outside groups to improve working conditions. Its deal with the I.L.O. “is not illegal, nor is it unusual, and similar agreements exist between other governments and U.N. agencies around the world,” its statement said.

Coming on the heels of intensive lobbying, some inside the organization were disappointed that the complaint was closed without a formal investigation.

“I truly believe that we needed a commission of inquiry to be able to better protect the workers there,” Ms. Clarke Walker said. “We have a process to deal with it. We should have used that process.”

Ms. Vargha, the I.L.O. labor standards chief, said the agency pressed Qatar to make good on its promises. “The Ministry of Labor was not at the point where they could deliver on what we agreed,” she said. Eventually, the country took steps to criminalize forced labor and abolish its “kafala” system, which tethers workers to their jobs.

Enforcement of these policies has been inconsistent and abuses continue, rights groups and the State Department say. Bhim Shrestha, a Nepali who worked in Doha as a migrant from 2013 to 2021, said the changes offered the most protections to workers linked to World Cup projects. Retail and domestic workers, he said, were left behind.

Rather than use the World Cup stage to highlight those abuses, the labor organization and its affiliates frequently struck a positive tone.

In its internal investigative report, circulated among labor leaders this past week, the union confederation concluded that its change “from harsh critique to qualified praise” was made in good faith. Mr. Houngbo said that even when [the I.L.O. praised Qatar’s progress](https://www.ilo.org/global/about-the-ilo/newsroom/news/WCMS_863118/lang--en/index.htm), it made clear that more work was needed.

Last November, Qatari influence was on display at a European Parliament committee hearing about labor abuses.

One witness came from the International Labor Organization’s office in Doha. Committee members said they had no idea that the office was funded by Qatar itself.

A second came from the International Trade Union Confederation, whose soon-to-be top official, Mr. Visentini, had received free travel to Qatar and taken a campaign donation from a Qatar-linked donor. The donor was Pier Antonio Panzeri, a former lawmaker who was since pleaded guilty to corruption charges and is cooperating with investigators.

The third witness was Qatar’s labor minister. He had been prepped by Mr. Panzeri, who also planted friendly questions with the committee, according to evidence disclosed [by the German newsmagazine Der Spiegel](https://www.spiegel.de/international/europe/a-secret-meeting-in-suite-412-inside-the-european-parliament-corruption-scandal-a-af0228b9-3557-47ca-8184-7e355ad151c3).

What’s more, the committee chairwoman had also received undisclosed trips to Qatar. She has since resigned her committee seat but denied wrongdoing.

“The whole thing felt off,” said Minky Worden of Human Rights Watch, who kicked off the hearing by describing wage abuses, illegal recruitment fees and deaths that had not been investigated.

Then the tone shifted. One left-wing lawmaker, Miguel Urbán Crespo of Spain, described it as bizarrely optimistic. In retrospect, he chalked that up to Qatar’s “caviar diplomacy.”

“It’s not moral,” he said. “It’s structural damage for all United Nations organizations.”

Shortly before the World Cup kickoff, as part of a regular meeting with the I.L.O., the Qatari government had a request, one that one labor official described as casual, almost off-handed: Could the agency let Qatar have its soccer spotlight without any distracting commentary?

The agency says it did not soften its message at the government’s request. But with the eyes of the world on Qatar, the agency’s public statements during the World Cup made no mention of persistent labor abuses, opting instead to applaud its cooperation with the government.

The agency even posted on Twitter a photo of [its top official enjoying the tournament](https://twitter.com/ILOQatar/status/1599076244271689729?s=20).