

Migrant workers face brutal conditions at NYU's Abu Dhabi campus

By Isaac Finn and Fred Mazelis
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Controversy and opposition continue to swirl around the construction of the main campus of New York University Abu Dhabi (NYUAD), which is scheduled to open this year. An article in the *New York Times* several weeks ago exposed brutal working conditions for roughly 6,000 migrant construction workers who are building the campus in the capital city of the United Arab Emirates (UAE). The report detailed instances of beatings, arrests, deportations and other abuses.

The university immediately went into damage control mode, issuing an apology to the workers and promising an investigation. NYU President John Sexton said the reports were “troubling and unacceptable ... They are out of line with the labor standards we deliberately set.”

With former US President Bill Clinton already scheduled to give this year's commencement speech to the first graduating class at NYU Abu Dhabi, the timing was appropriate for this master of glib empathy to come to the rescue of his good friend Mr. Sexton. Instead of discussing the significance of the appalling exploitation of the migrant workers, he used his remarks to praise the university.

“When this story came out,” said Clinton, “instead of going into immediate denial, the university did something which reflects the values you have been taught here ... The university, and the government, promised to look into the charges, to do it quickly, to do it honestly ... and if the charges were well founded, to take appropriate, remedial action promptly.”

Many if not most observers will find it hard to believe that NYU knew nothing about the conditions facing these workers. It is also possible that it did not want to know. Just as giant US-based retailers often claim one or more degrees of separation from their subcontractors in countries where starvation wages and deaths and on-the-job injuries are common. Sexton wrote, according to the *Times*, that the campus “was built with the construction contractors working for the Abu Dhabi development entity building it, not directly for NYU.”

NYU started construction of the main campus, on Saadiyat

Island just off the coast of Abu Dhabi, in June 2010 and announced its completion just last month. NYU also expects the completion of other academic buildings, a library, a theater, and indoor and outdoor sports facilities by mid-July.

The NYU administration, prior to the start of construction, had issued a “statement of labor values,” consisting of setting standards for working conditions and benefits for all workers—including construction workers—at the Abu Dhabi campus. As the *Times* report makes clear, numerous violations of these “labor values” have occurred over the past four years.

According to the *Times*, migrant workers—primarily from India, Philippines, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, and Nepal—were forced to pay recruitment fees of up to a year's wages. Many workers also had to turn over their passports to employers, despite promises that they would be able to hold on to them. Some workers had their bankcards confiscated, and had to ask for cash from the recruiter, whom they referred to as “owner,” who had brought them to the UAE.

Eighty-five percent of the UAE's population is comprised of foreign residents, many of whom are migrant workers from South Asia who live and work in conditions similar to those of the workers building the university's campus. Human Rights Watch reports migrant workers frequently have their passports confiscated by employers, an illegal act that is almost always overlooked by the UAE authorities.

Most workers who spoke with the *Times* said that they had to work for 11 or 12 hours a day, six or seven days a week, in order to earn close to the amount originally agreed on. One painter claimed that he initially agreed to 1,500 dirham a month, or roughly \$408, but after arriving found out he would only make 700 dirham, about \$191. With overtime, workers can get as much as 1,000 dirham, or about \$272.

Ramkumar Rai and Tibendra Kota, two Nepali migrant workers who were hired to build the NYU campus, were not paid for their last six months of work. After a discussion with their former employer, Rai said, “they keep saying, ‘We'll send the money; we'll send it,’ but they don't.”

Both Rai and Kota have not been paid in 16 months, their visas have expired, and they cannot afford to fly home.

Despite NYU's "values" that were supposed to include a limit of four men to a room, workers were crowded into labor camps with as many as a dozen men in rooms as small as 200 square feet. The rooms often had exposed wiring, and workers would have to store their own food in the limited space.

Migrant workers have no means of addressing low wages and poor working conditions under UAE law, however. They have no rights to organize and it is illegal for them to go on strike.

When workers at the BK Gulf corporation, which was involved in the construction of the NYU Abu Dhabi campus, went on strike hundreds of workers were arrested and deported back to their native countries.

Mohammed Amir Waheed Sirkar, an electrician from Bangladesh, told the *Times* that after his arrest the police "beat me asking me to confess I was involved in starting the strike."

Recent reports bring out some of the methods by which NYU has evaded responsibility in this whole affair. Mott MacDonald, an engineering firm that interviewed workers to monitor the working conditions at the Abu Dhabi campus, cited only one violation in a report released last month, that of a contractor who fell behind on paying wages for one month. The report also failed to mention the strike of BK Gulf workers.

Margaret Bavuso, the executive director of campus operations for NYU Abu Dhabi, claimed construction workers' wages "are designed to place workers at the top of the range in their respective categories." However, in a separate interview she also stated, "we're not involved in the negotiation of the contracts that the partners are doing, just as they're not in the negotiations of the contracts that we're doing." Bavuso's statement shows that NYU did not know, or care to know, what the various construction companies were paying their workers.

NYU also ignored a report in the British *Observer*—released last December—that exposed the same conditions of migrant workers building NYU's Abu Dhabi campus, as well as at the Louvre Museum's Abu Dhabi branch, reports that were later expanded upon in the *Times* article.

The conditions in Abu Dhabi are part of the frenzied expansion drive of NYU, which has plans for up to 14 campuses worldwide, including campuses with complete degree programs in Shanghai as well as Abu Dhabi. The university has been embroiled for years in a battle with its faculty as well as the neighboring community in Manhattan's Greenwich Village over expansion plans at its main campus in New York City.

The embrace of a corporate model of higher education is part of a much broader trend affecting public as well as private universities in the US. The longtime chairman of NYU's board of trustees is Martin Lipton, one of the most powerful corporate lawyers in New York. Also on the board are other top Wall Street figures like hedge fund multimillionaire John Paulson and Home Depot founder Kenneth Langone. It goes without saying that these men are not naïve newcomers when it comes to "labor relations."

According to another recent report in the *Times*, moreover, NYU's attempt to distance itself from its Abu Dhabi contractor is complicated by the fact that this contractor is run by a member of the NYU board itself. He is Khaldoon Khalifa Al Mubarak, and when he was placed on the board he brought along a \$50 million donation from the Abu Dhabi government.

NYU is not the only institution doing business with the oil-rich UAE. The Guggenheim and Louvre museums also have plans to build branches on Saadiyat Island. Roughly \$27 billion has been invested in Saadiyat Island, in museums, villas, and hotels, as the government attempts to turn the island into a destination for global cultural tourism.

According to Gulf Labor, an organization made up of artists and activists advocating for the rights of the migrant workers in the region, workers building the Louvre branch in Abu Dhabi are facing the same brutal conditions as those building the NYU campus.

The Guggenheim has not started construction on its Abu Dhabi branch, but building practices have already been the cause of controversy. Gulf Labor has staged a series of protests over the past few months at and inside the Guggenheim Museum in New York City.

The conditions faced by the migrant workers are a dramatic expression of the massive inequality throughout this region of the world. A tiny minority controls immense wealth, while the great majority live in poverty without legal rights.

These conditions are in no way separate from those in the US and throughout the world. Whatever their pretensions of concern for workers' rights, the real interest of both NYU and the various museums engaged in UAE ventures is cultivating profitable relationships with the corrupt oligarchy in that country.

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