

# 'Day laborers' fulfill market demand despite the law

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By Ben Garcia

At six in the morning you'll find them sitting on street curbs in Bneid Al Gar, Hawally, Salmiya, Farwaniya, Shuwaikh and areas of Kuwait. They gather around and wait until a vehicle pulls up, a job on offer. They argue and negotiate until a deal is reached, then one, two or maybe several hop in and are taken by the driver to their job for the day. This might be a construction site, a private house, a farm in Wafra.

These are the day laborers of Kuwait and though the work is largely illegally it's in much demand in the country.

According to Kuwait's Private Sector Labor Law, foreigners may only work for their kafeel (sponsor) and any employee caught working outside can be penalized and deported. In Kuwait, part time work is allowed but only under certain conditions. Workers must secure necessary approval from their sponsor and authorization from Kuwait's Manpower Public Authority. But most either can't or don't. While the majority of the laborers Kuwait Times spoke with had valid visas some also are illegal residents who rely on the day labor to survive.

In recent months, there have been reported cases of raids on some companies here and workers caught working with other companies other than his/her employer are arrested. The move was implemented by the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labor and Ministry of Interior, for a number of reasons but most particularly to stop and protect Asian workers from bogus companies and visa trafficking. Kuwait is home to 2.9 million expatriates who make up 70 percent of the country's 4 million population.

Kuwait Times found many temporary laborers, mostly men in the streets of Hawally and Salmiya. The demand is high for day laborers for many reasons. First they can be hired for relatively low wages. Secondly, some companies or individuals may have difficulty sponsoring laborers or have need for them only during short periods of the year. Many are used for construction projects or for remodeling projects that are one off jobs and require only a few days of extra labor.

"We are here to accept job from people who need our services whatever job available; say helper, gardener, cleaner, whatever it is, we are ready to accept and render our services," said

Sunil, one of many laborers standing in one of the streets in Salmiya.

Sunil used to wait for a temporary employer as early as five in the morning till six. "I accept even KD 6 or KD 10 per day. I've been doing this for the last two years now after resigning from a restaurant job," admitted Sunil who is in his late 40s. "I have a family to feed back in India so I am working whatever job available so long as I am earning money. I will do whatever it takes," he added.

The reality is that Kuwait's private sector does need part time and day laborers. There is a real market and demand and though the laws limit the availability, the market needs must be met.

Egyptian duo Shaaban and Ahmad were at the 'laborer street' in Hawally waiting for their transportation to bring them to the construction site where they temporarily work. The duo is armed with some construction tools/equipment which they carry with them almost every day. "We are friends and we are heading to Farwaniya for a job in a construction building there; we've been on this job for about five months now, the job is almost complete, so we will soon look for another place to work," Shaaban said.