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Migrant workers and class structure in Lebanon

Class, race, nationality and gender

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Abstract

Whilst a few scholars have examined the situation of domestic workers, the issue of migrant labor as a whole (its contribution to the labor market, the status and situation of different categories of workers, and their impact on the resilience of the Lebanese social structure), is largely ignored, whereas the high proportion of foreign workers in Lebanon results in an increasing fragmentation of the working class, and the embeddedness of the Lebanese class structure in globalization.

After examining the legal framework that organizes non-Lebanese workers in Lebanon, this paper discusses the findings of a field research on the labor force in the cleaning and the industrial sectors, by focusing on two case studies.

Our research question addresses the social impact of the imbalance in the labor market between Lebanese and non-Lebanese workers, and the impact that such diversity (of both nationalities and class status) has on labor relations and the structure of the working class.

Eventually, we argue that specific conditions of employment, characterised by the role of labor importing agencies, the so-called sponsorship system, outsourcing, the casualization of work and the ethnic fragmentation of the labor market, result in the segmentation of the labor force along national as well as gender lines. The strategy of many large employers in Lebanon appears to be based on the simultaneous and tactical application of inclusionary and exclusionary processes; i.e. the inclusion of migrant workers into the labor market whilst continuing to exclude them from available benefits as laid out in the Lebanese labor law.

Keywords

Migrant labor, foreign workers, labor market, Lebanon, class, race, nationality, workers' rights

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Introduction

Lebanon's position as a hub for French economic interests in the Middle East, largely precipitated by the growth of the silk industry in the 19th century, development of transportation links including roads, railways and tramways, and the enlargement of Beirut harbor at the dawn of the 20th century, contributed to the emergence of the country's first working class groups and labor unions (Couland 1970). In spite of its mercantile orientation and the hypertrophy of the service sector, the share of industrial workers in the whole labor force was still higher in Lebanon than in neighboring countries (Nasr 1982, Gates 1998, Gaspard 2004). But due to the weight of the small-scale production, and the strength of regional and sectarian identities, class belonging was never the sole point of reference for the identification of most Lebanese (Dubar & Nasr 1976, Picard 2002)¹.

More recently, the civil war (1975-1990) resulted in the disruption of industry; many plants were physically destroyed and forced to close, whilst others relocated to safer areas of Lebanon or even moved abroad, and much of the workforce either emigrated or enrolled in local militias (Makdisi 2004: 44, 62-64). The boom in oil production further transformed the entire region, with oil producing and sending countries becoming rentier economies. Lebanon is a good case in point. The surge in the number of domestic employees employed by Lebanese households is an indication of the transformation of the Lebanese society into a consumer-rentier society (Jureidini, Moukarbel 2004).

By the end of the 20th century, many labor unions in Lebanon had been transformed into 'clientelistic' organizations as a result of the strategy pursued by the Lebanese authorities and their Syrian "godfather" which aimed to put an end to the autonomy of the Lebanese Trade Union movement (Slaiby 1999). A short-lived mobilization of Syrian workers was largely utilized by the Syrian regime as a tool in the general framework of its control of Lebanon (Chalcraft 2008). Today, according to most estimations, around half of the labor force is non-Lebanese, labor unions are helpless and apathetic, and labor struggles are limited to middle class groups, state employees and teachers (Abi Yaghi, Catusse 2011). One notable exception to this assertion is the recent establishment of a union for domestic workers, for which the support of NGOs was crucial to its (relative) success, as well as the fact that these workers do not have competitors in the local labor market.² Despite this exception, the situation remains bleak for foreign workers in other industries and economic sectors, who still have no voice.

Research question

¹One of the very rare studies on the sectarian composition of the labor force was conducted by Salim and Marlène Nasr before the civil war, based on fieldwork conducted in the Eastern suburbs of Beirut. It revealed that although all sects were represented in the workforce, the position of the different sects on the occupational scale was unequal, as well as the distribution of capital in different industrial branches. (Nasr 2013 [1976])

²Announced since March 2014 (See al-Akhbar, عاملات المنازل : في قلبنا كلام كثير 24/3/2014 (online: <http://www.al-akhbar.com/node/203196>, see also, English edition, <http://english.al-akhbar.com/print/19147>, accessed 26/3/2014). The creation of the union was mentioned in a previous issue of al-Akhbar on 13/2/2014, حراك نقابي - مدني (www.al-akhbar.com/node/200560), the creation of the domestic workers union was made public on January 25, 2015, after gaining the support of the National Federation of Labor Unions, and the International Labor Organization (Daily Star, 30 January 2015). But as long as the Ministry of Labor does not recognize it, it is still unofficial.

With the exception of analyses of migration flows to oil producing Gulf countries, most migration studies concern Northern developed countries which have been studied extensively since the 1980s. Studies into the situation of migrant labor in Lebanon are sparse, and whilst a few scholars have examined the situation of domestic workers, the issue of migrant labor as a whole (its contribution to the labor market, the status and situation of different categories of workers, and their impact on the resilience of the Lebanese social structure), is largely ignored.

The high proportion of foreign workers in Lebanon reflects the degree of dependence of the Lebanese economy on a global labor market (similar to that found in Saudi Arabia and many Gulf countries), which should encourage scholars to address the issues of the embedding of the Lebanese class structure in globalization, and the challenges such a condition poses to social protest. It could be said that the conditions of migrant employment in Lebanon, as well as the specific legal status of foreign workers, the role of labor-importing agencies and the sponsorship system act as a means for the state to manage the presence of migrant communities and protect employers against social unrest.

Using this preliminary observation as a starting point, our research question addresses the social impact of the imbalance in the labor market between Lebanese and non-Lebanese workers, and the impact that such diversity (of both nationalities and class status) has on labor relations and the structure of the working class.

Fieldwork conducted in two companies in the service and industrial sectors will allow us to examine the contribution that non-Lebanese workers have on the labor force. Observations and findings from these field studies have enabled us to secure a solid understanding of the evolution of the labor market in Lebanon, whilst also revealing the role and impact of non-Lebanese workers on the Lebanese labor market, the politics of labor recruitment, and the dynamics of the relationship between employers and employees in Lebanon.

We discuss the legal framework that organizes non-Lebanese workers in Lebanon whilst considering the extent to which these laws are enforced, and we also investigate the market and “work situation” of migrant workers, their qualifications (or lack thereof), levels of pay, and job security. In terms of “work situation”, we will focus on labor contracts, and questions of control, power and authority within their occupation.

This paper will be presented in two broad sections; in the first section, we will discuss the general social and legal framework that the reader should bear in mind in order to understand the context for the employment of foreign workers and their position in the labor force. The second section will be dedicated to the presentation and discussion of the main results of our fieldwork. We will conclude the paper by answering the initial research question, whilst suggesting possible avenues of further research.

I – Demographic and legal framework

The imbalance in the labor market should be considered to have a double dimension, the first being demographic, and the second, legal. It is first and foremost demographic, considering the increasing number of foreign workers and diversity of the nationalities across all the sectors of employment. It is also legal, as the restrictions imposed on foreign workers entail strict conditions of residence and employment that can differ depending on nationality and

sector or type of employment, all of which have important consequences on wages and working conditions.

A labor force composed of a majority of service workers... and an increasing share of foreign manpower

Because of the scarcity of statistics, it is difficult to secure precise and reliable information on the distribution of the labor force across the various sectors of the Lebanese economy. Nevertheless, studies have indicated that between 1974 and 1997, the proportion of agricultural workers in the labor force dwindled from 22% to 15%, whilst the share of the labor force working in industry hovered around 16%, and services witnessed a new boom, which was only moderated by the increasing importance of foreign labor (Gaspard 2004: 155, 247).

According to the Central Administration of Statistics (CAS), of a 2009 sample of 18,526 employed people aged 15 years and above: 6.3% of the labor force was employed in agriculture, 12.1% in industry, 8.9% in construction, 6.8% in transportation and telecommunication, 27% in trade, 36.9% in services, and 2% in finance. Remarkably, almost two-thirds of women, and less than one-third of men were found to be employed in the service sector (see table 1 in Appendix).

The composition according to occupation is not easy to interpret: 12.1% are classified as “professionals” (7.9% among males; 25.9% among females), and 18.6% are classified as “skilled workers” (*ummal mahara*) (22.8% male; 4.8% female). Unsurprisingly, a higher proportion of women than men work as service workers and in occupations that required unskilled workers (see table 2 in Appendix). If we combine economic activity with employment status, we can observe that 20% of so-called industry workers are self-employed, and only half of them are employed on a monthly basis (see table 2 in Appendix).

Broadly, these figures reveal that the current working class is mainly composed of service workers, most likely concentrated in small companies and enterprises, with a large proportion of female workers. The number of non-Lebanese workers is unknown, since the statistics did not include reference to nationality. The same CAS survey registered 354 domestic workers across 13,573 households (2.6%), which the authors consider to be a gross underrepresentation of the reality.

On the other hand, World Bank³ figures suggest that the labor force in Lebanon in 2011 was 1,500,000 (out of a population of 4,200,000), of which 760,000 were foreign workers. Compared to this estimation, the figures released by the Ministry of Labor for the same year, indicate that the number of work permits (new and renewed) issued to foreign workers amounted to 185,000, of whom 75% were listed as domestic workers⁴. If we estimate the number of Syrian workers to be around half of the grand total of foreign workers (i.e.

³ World Bank, 2011, Migration and Remittances fact book 2011, <http://siteresources.worldbank.org/INTPROSPECTS/Resources/334934-1199807908806/Lebanon.pdf>. (accessed 13 Oct. 2013). The source of these figures is not indicated.

⁴ See tables published on the ministry's website : http://www.labor.gov.lb/layouts/MOL_Application/StatList.aspx (accessed June 4, 2015)

380,000), this would leave us with almost 200,000 other non-Lebanese workers who were employed in Lebanon “illegally” (i.e. undeclared, unreported and invisible)⁵.

In summary, in 2011, estimates indicate that around half of the labor force was composed of foreigners (non-Lebanese), with a lower proportion of those workers employed in professional services (mainly education), and a much higher proportion employed in the construction, industry, agriculture, and the service sectors. Importantly, around half of the non-Lebanese labor force was composed (as of 2011⁶) of non-Arabs (mainly from South Asian countries).

Specific laws allow Syrian workers to enter the country with a rather cheap and easily renewable three-month residency permit⁷, and work without a work permit, however, other foreign workers are forced to pay high fees to obtain a residency and a work permit. For this reason, the conditions of employment for Syrian workers and other foreign workers often differ (as we shall see in the second part of this paper), as stricter conditions mean that the latter are more likely to partake in informal, unregistered employment, which greatly increases their vulnerability⁸. The next section will focus on workers’ rights, and how workers can defend themselves within Lebanese society and markets.

The legal status as a tool against workers’ rights

Officially speaking, the law does not formally distinguish between workers according to their nationality, and everyone is subject to the Lebanese labor law. Nevertheless, widespread vulnerability of foreign workers stems from the conditions of their entry into Lebanon, which in practice means that there are vast differences between those who depend on labor agencies to enter the country, and those (mainly Syrians, up to 2011), who can enter and work in Lebanon more or less freely, or at least, with many fewer restrictions.

Like Lebanese workers, foreign workers should not regularly work more than 48 hours per week (and 12 hours in a day), and overtime must be compensated at a rate of 1.5 more than standard time. The maximum working period per week (including overtime) should never be more than 60 hours. Formally, all workers are entitled to one day off per week, and two weeks of paid holiday per year (this becomes three weeks after five years employment in the same company).

⁵ According to Jureidini and Moukarbel (2002) the number of Syrian workers could be estimated around 2,000 up to 300,000, Palestinian workers 10,000, Egyptians 20,000...they also contrasted the official number of Sri Lankans (22,917 in 1999), and Filipinos (5,788) to the number estimated by their respective embassies (80,000 Sri Lankans and 20,000 Filipinos).

⁶ The massive influx of Syrian refugees, which accelerated in the second half of 2012, has changed de facto the conditions of employment of the Syrians, and the balance between Syrians and non-Arabs. The main characteristics of the labor market discussed in this section concern the situation just before the Syrian crisis.

⁷ Our research was conducted in 2012-13. This is no longer strictly true since January 2015.

⁸ For a discussion of the concepts of illegality or « irregularity », see Nicholas P. De Genova, 2002. If « illegality » is created by state policies, in Lebanon, we might say that it can’t be separated from the delegation of responsibility to the employer for the presence of the foreign workers (the so-called sponsorship, or *kafala* system). See *infra*.

Foreign workers who are employed legally (with residency and work permit) should be registered with Social Security, and the employer should pay for their registration fees⁹. However, foreign workers are only allowed to benefit from the social security protections if their country of origin applies the principle of reciprocity (which, according to the Ministry of Labor, is the case for only five countries in the world: Belgium, France, Italy, the United Kingdom and Syria). As a result of this restriction, in cases of foreign workers originating from any country not included in the above list, the employer is forced to cover the costs of medical insurance for his workers (to cover work accidents and the repatriation of the body in case of death). Palestinian workers were considered like other non-Lebanese until 2010, when a new law exempted them from the requirement of reciprocity and the costs associated with the work permit fee. Importantly, although foreign workers cannot benefit from the indemnity of social security, articles 54 and 59 of the labor law stipulate that they are entitled to end-of-service compensation, something that is often flagrantly ignored by employers¹⁰.

It is not uncommon for employers to avoid declaring the total number of workers they employ, and consequently, they do not pay their dues to the department of Social Security. Moreover, some employers pay medical insurance for only a small number of employees, leaving the rest uncovered in the event of an accident or illness. In fact, our fieldwork revealed that in many cases, female workers in cleaning companies are falsely registered as domestic workers, either because these work permits are less expensive and easier to obtain, or because the workers have left their employment as domestic workers and chosen to work at a private cleaning company without declaring the change to the relevant government department.¹¹

Access to the labor market is further regulated by a series of decrees and regulations issued by the Ministry for Labor, which list a number of occupations reserved for Lebanese workers, as well as stipulating the conditions for the employment of foreign workers. To work in Lebanon, a foreigner must obtain prior approval from the Ministry for Labor, which then issues a work permit to the applicant. The worker will be provided with a three-month residency permit indicating the name of the employer, or so-called “sponsor”. In practice, it seems that “importing agencies” can play the role of the sponsor, bypassing the need for a work request from a future employer, allowing these agencies to import (mostly female) domestic workers under their sponsorship with greater ease (Jureidini and Moukarbel 2002; HRW 2010; Longuenesse & Hachem 2013).

In fact, the issue of sponsorship and the legal structures surrounding its application (Farhat 8 May 2013, LCHR, Young 1999) remain unclear. Although it is often considered as similar to systems found in Gulf countries, the reality is actually rather different. One commonality is the delegation of legal responsibility for the worker to the employer, however, in the Gulf it also

⁹ According to the social security law (Decree No. 13955, 26 09 1963), the employer is supposed to pay for each foreign worker 15 percent of the amount of the salary, instead of 23.5%, for health and welfare, as he is exempted of the allowance of end of service.

¹⁰ L'Argus de la législation libanaise, Publication du Bureau de Documentation Libanaise et Arabe, Quarterly publication, vol. 56, n.1, Code of Labour <http://www.ilo.org/dyn/travail/docs/710/Labour%20Code%20of%202023%20September%201946%20as%20amended.Publication%202010.pdf> (accessed Feb. 10, 2014)

Art 54: « Pending the law on social security, the employer is required to pay the wage earner or salary earner dismissed [...] a dismissal indemnity equal to one month pay per year of service ... »

Art 59: ... « On their dismissal foreign wage-earners and salary earners benefit from the rights accorded to Lebanese workers, on condition of reciprocity »

¹¹ See second part of the paper.

acts as a means of rent redistribution, since most employers are also foreigners, and local sponsors end up taking a share of the company's profit in return for their sponsorship. In the Gulf countries, sponsors can also officially trade visas (Beaugé 1986, Longva 1999). In Lebanon, sponsors are supposed to pay for the work permit of the foreign worker they wish to employ, but in reality, many employers deduct the associated costs from the wages of the employees themselves; importantly, the law does not mention the *kafala* as such. Activists often state, "[i]n the Lebanese law (which includes the *kafala*, or sponsorship system), the foreign worker 'belongs' to his employer"¹²; in fact, this is an inaccurate representation of the truth. The notion of *kafala* is not mentioned in the decree on the employment of foreign labor¹³, although it appears in several articles of the decree related to recruitment agencies¹⁴, and interestingly, in the Information Guide for Migrant Domestic Workers published (in English) by the Ministry of Labor in 2012. In practice, the *kafala* concerns mainly domestic workers in so much as it essentially ascribes the employer with absolute power over the domestic worker (Jureidini 2004), rendered possible by the fact that the labor law does not apply to this sector (whatever their nationality).

Young states that foreign workers need to "be guaranteed by a Lebanese employer (*a kafil*)" in order to get a visa and be allowed to enter Lebanon. This means that for the migrant worker, the *kafil* is no more than an employer. Another study specifies that "[t]o enter Lebanon, a MDW [Migrant Domestic Worker] has to be officially sponsored by a Lebanese agency or an individual employer"¹⁵ and adds, "[t]he name of the 'sponsor' is stamped on the three-month visa". The word 'sponsor' is clearly often a synonym for 'employer', but it is not clear whether it is always the case, as some agencies also seem to play the role of a sponsor. What seems clear, however, is that the law transfers the responsibility of the control of migrants' presence in the country to the employers, or rather, to the person or agency that coordinated the migrant worker's arrival in the first place. The fact that the employer is required to cover significant costs as part of this process encourages many to seek out and utilize different strategies to discourage their employees from leaving work once he or she arrives in the country; delaying the payment of wages and confiscating passports or other important documents are just an example of common strategies carried out by employers.

On one hand, the worker signs a contract with the agency in their country of origin, and pays a fee for the trip and for their entry to Lebanon. On the other, the employer also has to pay a high fee to the corresponding agency in Lebanon, which explains why they often attempt to prolong the stay of their employee by a number of extra-economic means.

The paradox is that such a system results in an increase in the illegal employment of foreign workers once they are in the country. The numerous legal requirements involved in the system, including the legal obligation to seek approval from the Ministry of Labor for the recruitment of a foreign worker, the requirement that workers should return to their country of

¹² See the website of the Lebanese Center for Human Rights: <http://www.cldh-lebanon.org/francais/presentation-du-cldh/racisme-discrimination-esclavage> (accessed 30/9/13).

¹³ Diab (2006), gives a list of legal and administrative texts concerning the conditions of arrival, stay and work for activity of foreigners in Lebanon, and never mentions the words *kafala*, *kafil*, sponsor, or (in French) *garant*.

¹⁴ Both published on the website of the Ministry of Labor: see <http://ahdath.justice.gov.lb/law-nearby-Foreigners.htm> and http://www.labor.gov.lb/layouts/MOL_Application/Cur/ (accessed: March 12, 2013)

¹⁵ Human Rights Watch, 2010, *Without Protection: how the Lebanese justice system fails migrant domestic workers*, Human Rights Watch, probably quoting Jureidini (2002)

origin in order to obtain a new visa, and the high financial costs to the employer mean that both parties are encouraged to seek ways to bypass the laws, in spite of the risks involved.

II –Work conditions and socioethnic differentiation: Two case studies

For this paper, our primary research concern was to identify the various conditions of employment of foreign workers in different economic sectors and the “division of labor” between different nationalities: how do employers “play” with this variable; the extent to which nationality affects the status of the worker in different types of enterprise; the degree of interaction between foreign workers on the one hand, and their interaction with Lebanese workers on the other, and the perception of the ‘other’ by each national group.

To that end, we chose to focus on two case studies: a cleaning company in the service sector, and a beverage company in the industrial sector. The fieldwork was conducted in Beirut during the winter of 2012-2013, and consisted first of extensive open interviews (conducted mainly in English and Arabic) at the worksite with employees of the cleaning company, and with human resource managers in client administrations contracting with the company. Several meetings (conducted in French and Arabic) were held with the director of the beverage company. Further Arabic language interviews/meetings were held between the authors and the following individuals: two workers (one Syrian worker and one Lebanese union activist) and one Lebanese commercial director in a regional branch of the beverage company, several other Lebanese union activists outside the company, and a few foreign workers of different nationalities employed in small industries of different sectors. In spite of our efforts, we did not succeed in meeting any member of the executive staff of the beverage plant.

Whilst our sample is of course too small to be formally representative of the workers of any company, our aim was to obtain exemplary stories and experiences from concerned individuals on different work sites. Our material is clearly of a qualitative nature and the reliability of all recorded information was checked via systematic comparison and appraisal between the declarations of different actors and parties. We were also able to secure complementary information about the two companies through administrative documents and commercial websites.

The cleaning company: an extreme diversity of nationalities and status

Aside from the companies in charge of cleaning public spaces (of which Sukleen is the most famous), more and more companies in Lebanon today offer a diverse range of cleaning services to private and public organizations. In the past, most private organizations and public institutions tended to employ full-time contractual workers for such tasks, however, more recently, the tendency is to employ staff from cleaning companies, generally on service contracts. This option affords employers more flexibility and reduces costs by shifting the management responsibility of cleaning staff entirely to the service companies.

Observations of the composition of these service companies clearly demonstrate a complex ethnic segmentation of labor. On the whole, and generally speaking, administrative workers tend to be Lebanese, whilst employees working in cleaning or similar roles are generally non-Lebanese (mainly from India, Bangladesh, Nepal, Ethiopia, Cameroon, and other non-Arab countries, although there are a small number of Lebanese women employed for this task outside of Beirut). “Supervisors” (or foremen) are found to be primarily Lebanese or Egyptian,

but it is not uncommon for supervisors to be drawn from the Asian workforce, including Indians.

Let us clarify the situation by reference to the following portrait:

“A” is 30 years old, and he travelled to Lebanon from the south of India in 1998. He paid \$3,500 to a labor agency in order to come to Lebanon, and has been working in the same company for the last 15 years. “A” has a degree in commerce, and worked in an industrial plant in India. He is married, and four years ago his wife joined him in Lebanon, working at the same company, however his two four year old daughters remain in India, looked after by their grandmother.

His working day starts at 6.30am, and lasts until 9pm. In the morning, until 10.30am, he works for an administration company in Beirut, after which he takes a half an hour break before leaving to Jounieh (a Christian coastal city north of Beirut), where he works from 1pm until 4.30pm. “A” then returns to the administration company where he works from 6pm until 9pm. His colleagues who finish work at 4pm or 5pm are paid \$270 for 46 hours work per week, and those who, like him, work overtime, are paid \$370. Although his employer does not consider himself to be breaking the law, the workers indicate that because they spend their breaks on the work site or travelling from one worksite to another, they often work continuously from 6.30am or 7am until 4pm or 5pm, which is 10 hours instead of the legal eight, or until 9pm (14 hours instead of 11).

“A” also works on Sundays cleaning buildings and private houses; this work is conducted of his own accord, and not linked to any company or organization.

His wife works part time, from 3pm until 9pm. Together, they pay rent of \$250 per month, as well as \$50 for electricity and other charges. They also have to pay for their residencies, work permits and insurance fees in addition to travel expenses.

(Interview, 22/2/2013)

This story is just one of the stories told to the authors by 15 workers, men and women, who are employed by the cleaning company that we investigated. His situation is by no means the worst that we encountered, and undoubtedly, the presence of his wife by his side contributes to easing the strains on his life as a migrant worker in Lebanon.

The cleaning company in question was founded in the 1970s, just before the outbreak of the civil war, and it now has branches in Kuwait and Qatar as well as Lebanon. According to the founding manager, the company employed around 6,000 workers in 2012, of which 1,500 were Lebanese. While those figures are relatively difficult to verify, according to a source from the Ministry of Labor, the company obtained 404 work permits for foreign workers in 2011 (187 new permits and 217 renewed ones), which is significantly fewer than the figure quoted by the founding manager. There are numerous possible explanations for this discrepancy: a) the figures may be incorrect, b) some of the workers may be registered as employed by private employers, or c) some of the workers may be residing in Lebanon without regular residence and work permits. Our source at the Ministry of Labor was unable to provide us with information regarding the nationality of the workers, but of the 16 workers we interviewed, including three foremen, there were five Indians, three Bangladeshis, three Filipinos, two Ethiopians, one Nepalese, one Egyptian and one Lebanese. One of the two sites observed (where the cleaning company sends workers to clean), an embassy compound representing a foreign country, had mainly south Asians with a high proportion of male workers. The other site, a private university, employed more women and they were of generally more diverse nationalities.

When asked about the nationalities of their fellow workers, most of the cleaners mentioned that there were Indian, Bangladeshi, Sri-Lankans as well as Sudanese and Egyptian. The women on the second site also mentioned the aforementioned nationalities, but also included Filipino, Ethiopian and Nepalese. Some mentioned that there were also Lebanese, but pointed out that they were mainly supervisors working at a higher administrative level.

The company has also developed a special service for cleaning hospitals, which requires a more skilled workforce. A young Lebanese professional who is the head of the hospital division, states that the company provides 140-150 cleaning staff to the hospital, including Bangladeshi, Lebanese and Filipino workers, headed by Egyptian supervisors. Aside from the head of the team, only the stretcher-bearers are Lebanese.

Interestingly, no Syrians are mentioned by any of the staff we spoke with.¹⁶ According to the director of the company:

In the '60s and '70s, we had Syrians, but when the civil war started, Syrians were not welcome in the Christian neighborhood.¹⁷ As a result, things changed. We brought Sri Lankan first, and now, the number of Bangladeshi is higher. As for the supervisors, most of them are Egyptians, they are smarter, maybe because they are Arabs and they understand the mentality better, making it easier for them to deal with the Lebanese. (Interview, 26/2/2013)

It is also interesting to note how nationalities are perceived and the prejudices towards them:

Clients don't like the Syrians...in the past we had Lebanese, but you couldn't ask the same from them...they were a problem. They wouldn't come on holidays. We had to pay for somebody else to replace them. So in the end the client himself preferred foreigners. (Interview with Lebanese head of section, 5/12/2012)

The Lebanese only want to be drivers. They wouldn't work as cleaners. They think it is...I don't know what they think - it's a job like any other...the Egyptians, they get paid twice as much a driver, because they know how to work... (Interview with the company director, 26/2/2013)

If nationality is a factor of differentiation, gender is even more so. Female workers are more often than not, found to have no legal status in Lebanon. Six of the ten women we interviewed had previously worked as domestic workers and left their initial employer to work for the cleaning company. This means that many of the women interviewed were working under the name of their previous employer and sponsor, having not renewed their work and residency permit. As the company director explained, one reason for employing these 'irregular' workers was that other than domestic workers, it is more difficult to secure work permits for women than it is for men. His estimate is that one third of his employees (numbering around 2,000) have left their previous employer (household head), leaving their

¹⁶One Indian foreman mentioned that the number of Syrians was increasing due to administrative problems with the embassies of the migrants who started to demand that [the company] pays for the work permit for its migrant workers, and because Syrian workers were not submitted to the same laws as other migrants. But we found no concrete evidence of such a trend, at least in the company we were studying.

¹⁷ Because of the oppressive presence of the Syrian army, and the hatred that resulted and included the workers, seen as possible spies or agents of the Syrian regime.

passport behind in the process (Interview 20/03/2013). The paradox is that the onset of such an “irregular” situation actually seems to imbue the women with more freedom than they previously had in their former employment.

The employer is supposed to pay for the residency permit as well as health insurance, although this is not taking place at the cleaning company we investigated. The workers we met complained bitterly that their employer takes a portion of their monthly wage to pay for the residency permit and insurance. A source close to the client company informed the authors that he suspects the company pays a lump sum fee to the insurance company to cover a number of workers, although that number is apparently much fewer than the real number employed by the company.

Workers also complained that the outsourced company holds their passports (which prevents them from quitting work), frequently pays their wages one or two months late, and that the wages are particularly low, compared to other companies. Nevertheless, “A” reports that a group of Bangladeshi workers at the same company had recently quit and were in the process of trying to get their passports back with the help of their embassy.

Although the cost of the work permit is supposed to be \$300 dollars, some women say that in practice they pay much more than this, indicating that they are paying additional fees, either to their official sponsor (i.e. their fictitious employer), or to the office that brought them in the first place and is acting as their sponsor. As for their housing conditions, we discovered a variety of situations, as workers seem to develop different strategies, depending on the amount of money they send to their family. Some live in groups of 10 in a small apartment, paying \$500 per month for the entire apartment (\$50 per person); others live in groups of two per room, paying \$200 per month for the room (\$100 each). “A” and his wife are charged \$250 per month for a small apartment. On the whole, excluding a few exceptional cases, the migrant workers we spoke with pay anything from \$50 to \$100 per month; electricity and water are occasionally included in this price.

The amount paid to agencies to secure a contract and travel to Lebanon ranges depending on the agency and the originating country, for example an Ethiopian woman can expect to pay around \$500, whilst an Indian man can expect to pay around \$2000. Typically, foreign workers in Lebanon will send their families back home between \$100 and \$300 per month. Considering that the average wage for foreign workers is around \$370 per month (working the maximum number of hours), it is hardly surprising that they look for additional work on Saturdays and Sundays.

Again, though, situations appear to differ according to nationalities: an Egyptian foreman working for the cleaning company in one of the client universities reports that his wage was raised to \$450 when he was promoted to supervisor, and that this was later increased to \$650. Whereas, an Indian foreman asserts that his wage did not change, and his work still includes duties similar to other workers, despite the fact that he is now a foreman.

In 2012, the minimum wage was raised by law from \$330 to \$450, although many companies never applied it, even to their Lebanese workers. The cleaning company we investigated did apply the new minimum wage to its Lebanese employees, but not to employees of other nationalities.

There is a clear hierarchical system that operates in the workplace between the different nationalities. Although the director asserts that Lebanese women are occasionally employed to clean banks or offices in small towns, of the few Lebanese that we met – men and women

alike – were all supervisors or head of divisions. As previously noted, some of the supervisors at the company were Egyptian, and considered by the company director to be “more intelligent” than the Indians. Furthermore, whilst some Indians were found to be foremen, they had worked at the company for a number of years, and in these cases, the team of workers they were responsible for tended to be smaller in size.

The above cases clearly demonstrate that by employing migrant workers, employers can avoid paying the minimum wage, as well as the fees for medical insurance and social security, at the same time as lengthening the working day/week. Moreover, because of the ever-present possibility that migrant workers could be deported, they often fear losing their job or livelihood, and so very rarely seek legal or occupational redress for their workplace grievances. /

Under these work conditions, the outsourced companies end up benefitting from a more flexible workforce as well as a lesser financial and administrative burden; i.e. work is more often than not, done on time (no absenteeism) at minimal cost. For the outsourcing company, the benefits are reaped by the fact that they operate in a lucrative market, by offering a compliant workforce and dealing with minimal controls by the state. For the workers, the situation is ambiguous. Instead of a typical dual relationship with an employer, migrant workers in this system deal typically with around three players, if not more, including the office that ‘imports’ the workers, the embassy of their country, and the Ministry of Labor. The complexity of the network makes it all the more difficult for the workers to address their complaint, as we shall see later. However, some authors suggest that contrary to common belief, migrants themselves have their own agenda, they are aware of the constraints they will have to deal with, and they have made the decision that they are willing to deal with them (Chalcraft 2009).

The beverage company: Lebanese, Syrian and others¹⁸

In a 2007 report, the Ministry of Industry listed 4,033 establishments employing five workers or more, and only 32 employing more than 250 workers (representing 16.5% of the industrial workforce, but 18% of the total number of the wage-earners). Half of those establishments are located in the district of Mount Lebanon. The main industrial sectors are food and beverages, metal products, chemicals, rubber and plastic products, electrical machinery and apparatus, wood and furniture, printing and media. The main industrial zones (and the largest proportion of plants with more than 20 workers) are located in the southern and eastern suburbs of Beirut (part of the district of Mount Lebanon) (Verdeil 2007).

Although there is not yet any clear and reliable data on this matter, it is generally observed that migrant workers (mainly Syrian) are increasingly replacing Lebanese employees, and particularly so in large industrial plants. However, we also found employees from India working in small enterprises in Mount Lebanon; in many cases, these workers arrived in Lebanon in the middle of the civil war (as early as 1980’s) to replace Syrian workers. A number of Bangladeshis have followed more recently.

¹⁸Remarkably, Michael Young does not even mention the industrial sector as a sector of employment for foreign workers (p. 5). Neither does Chalcraft. The industrial sector was largely destroyed or disrupted during the civil war. It is more and more marginalized, in what is now a rentier economy dominated by the service sector. We argue though that the invisibility of industry, as well as the absence of labor protest in the private sector, is partly due to the fact that the workers are non-Lebanese.

In the food and beverage company we investigated, we discovered that they were using what is in Lebanon a relatively unconventional method of hiring workers: the use of outsourcing companies. This method enables the 'end/recipient' employer to recruit on a day-to-day basis, with no time limit in the workday, which could last up to 12 hours a day without including an overtime component. Similarly there are perks for the workers too; for instance, it allows the employees to work intermittently, and stop for an indefinite period, possibly to visit family in Syria. The story of "M" is a good illustration¹⁹.

"M" comes from a small village in Syria near *Deir Ez-zor*. He first came to Lebanon at the beginning of 2000, and as a Syrian, he was given a 6 months residency and a work permit. He worked in a chicken factory for some time, alongside around 300 other workers, mainly Lebanese and Syrians, who were all paid the same (\$270 a month). After a few months, the company went bankrupt and "M" returned to Syria. He came back to Lebanon just one month later, and worked for some time in the construction sector. From 2004 to 2011, "M" worked in the warehouse of the beverage company that is under study for this paper. After a short break of two months back in Syria, he returned to Lebanon, changed his position at the company. He started to work as a helping hand for four technicians who were Lebanese, in the division that deals with the preparation of the beverage. Nowadays, "M" is officially considered an employee of an outsourcing company, which puts him in the same position as several of his cousins who are working with him.

During the first few years of his employment, "M" was employed by the beverage company itself, and used to work eight hours a day, six days a week, for one dollar per hour, and he was paid fortnightly (\$96 a week). After several pay rises (including the most recent, in February 2012), he is now paid \$2.50 per hour, but his legal situation has changed, as the company decided a few years ago to employ non-Lebanese unskilled workers through an outsourcing company. In contrast, Lebanese workers are employed directly by the beverage company and are found working on highly automated production lines.

At the time of the interview (March, 2013), "M", like the other Syrian workers, was employed by the outsourcing company on a daily basis, according to the needs of the client (in this case, the beverage company). He did not have a work contract, but had to sign a blank paper when hired. M has to leave the country every three months²⁰, as work permits for longer periods are only issued for special reasons.

When asked if he has a work contract, he replied:

"Yes, but a formal (*shakli*) contract... the contract is for three months, after that, they tell you to leave work to avoid the obligation of signing a legally-binding contract."

If we consider such breaks, it will mean that on average M. worked seven months a year and had a five months break. His yearly average income would then be no more than \$5,600 (around \$460 a month). During his break on Sundays, he would rest in a small flat close to his place of work, which was shared with four cousins working in

¹⁹ Our experience showed that it is much more difficult to investigate industrial firms than service companies. In spite of our repeated demands, we never could meet neither the director nor any executive of the company we chose to investigate. For the same reason, workers are far more difficult to reach than service workers. The control of the company is much heavier, and the risk of losing their job probably real. We completed two long in-depth interviews with one Lebanese and one Syrian worker of the company, one with a commercial manager for north Lebanon, and several other interviews with union activist, and with Asian workers employed in small plants. In spite of this scarcity, the resulting material appeared to be rich enough to warrant analysis.

²⁰ The first permit is usually for 6 months and then it is renewed for 3 months.

the same factory for around \$170 a month. At the time of the interview, “M” hadn’t seen his family for eight months. Probably, this could be explained by the crisis in Syria.

(Interview, 1/3/1013)

The beverage company under question is a local franchise of an international firm, founded in the 1950s. It has a factory for the manufacturing and bottling of fruit juice and soft drinks in the southern suburbs of Beirut, and many warehouses in various regions in Lebanon. The majority of the 1,000 workers are non-Lebanese: about 400 Syrians are employed under the same conditions as “M”, and around 100 Bangladeshi and Sudanese workers are employed mainly for cleaning through another outsourcing company. The Bangladeshi and Sudanese employers work 10 hours a day for a wage of \$330 dollars a month. The Lebanese are primarily either qualified production line workers, or lorry drivers.

In contrast to the foreign employees, the Lebanese production line workers enjoy higher wages (between \$660 and \$800 per month, for eight hours a day, six days a week); they also have more favorable social benefits, and bonuses whenever they have to work overtime. But they rarely stay in the plant until the age of retirement, due to the difficult nature of their work. In fact, the number of qualified production line workers has been steadily decreasing for a number of years, as the managers are increasingly choosing instead to invest in better technology and machinery, in an attempt to reduce labor costs. In the year 2000, 200 workers were dismissed, followed by a further 22 in 2011.

At the core of the manufacturing process is the laboratory where the ‘mix’ for the various drinks is prepared, followed by the bottling process; this process is monitored by two Lebanese controllers who alternate every hour. The Syrian employees work at the end of the line, putting the bottles in boxes and placing them on storage/transportation pallets. Each day, 36,000 boxes are filled in 10 hours. It is estimated that it would take four men to fill 2,000 boxes per hour and have one hour rest every four hours. The Sudanese (and sometimes Bangladeshi) women are employed for cleaning. Bangladeshi men are employed for loading and unloading the boxes onto the lorries.

According to our Lebanese informant, a union activist, the hardest job is done by the Syrians, who are compelled to keep up with the speed of the production line without stopping; “[i]magine...2,000 boxes per hour, how can you do that? The Lebanese worker...you ask him to do it and he will just leave...the Syrian works for 4 hours, then he rests for one hour. I tell you what: he is brave...he has to be!” (Interview, 1/11/2012)

Workers are also employed in the different regions for distributing the end product to the shops. In North Lebanon, there are four commercial managers covering four districts, as well as a supervisor for the warehouse; under their authority are 132 further employees, including 60 lorry drivers and 60 laborers who are employed to load and unload the boxes. Laborers and guards are employed through an outsourcing company on a day-to-day basis, but according to the regional manager, neither Syrians nor Palestinians are employed: “...because the lorry drivers have money on their way back, there is a risk of robbery; Syrians could go to Syria, and Palestinians could hide in the camp, which means it would be difficult to chase them legally...” (Interview, 31/3/2013).

It is difficult to compare the situation of Syrian workers to that of non-Arab (mainly south Asian) workers. We did not manage to interview anyone from the same beverage factory and received only indirect information. There are differences in the type of work done by the non-Arab workers, as well as the contracts they hold, not least because they generally come

to Lebanon with the intention of staying for several years. They too, are not directly employed by the organization where they work, but they are contracted by a different outsourcing company to the one that outsources the Syrian workers. More importantly, as “M” stated, and in contrast to the Syrians, the non-Arab workers are paid on a monthly basis, and have long-term contracts which are renewable each year. The type of job they do tends to be less physically demanding than the jobs held by the Syrians, but their wages are lower. The relation of subordination is in some way more binding, and is related to the dynamics and constraints of the global labor market, whereas their Syrian counterparts circulate on a regional market, and are more dependent on the particular relations between Syria and Lebanon.

In summary, the contrast between the work conditions of the local workforce (highly paid, qualified and small in number), and those of the non-Lebanese workers (occupying unskilled jobs, getting paid far less than the national minimum wage, and large in number) is enabled via the use of a variety of ‘tricks’ (outsourcing, no contract with workers, long working hours, payment on an hourly basis and no social benefits). These ‘tricks’ are probably best described as a strategy adopted by the management to “survive” in a highly competitive market in a context of the absence of any state policy to protect the national markets and industry as a whole.

Asian workers are also present in the labor market in smaller enterprises in small towns and villages located in Mount Lebanon. We interviewed several of these Asian workers who were employed a plastic factory, a stone factory and a wood factory; some of them have been in Lebanon for more than 20 years, often irregularly. In many cases they reported that they had initially entered Lebanon overland via Syria, and since succeeded in regularizing their presence by securing a residence permit with the help of their employer. Like other foreign workers, their situation is precarious and their social life is poor, but their relationship with their employer can be said to be more paternalistic. They tend to live in a common area, and are well known to each other. In their case however, their work pressures are lighter because they produce for the local market, and their work condition is slightly closer to that of their Lebanese counterparts.

In lieu of a conclusion

Our aim in this paper has been to explore the contribution of foreign manpower to the Lebanese economy, the position of the migrant workforce in labor relations, and its role in the fragmentation of the working class. We chose to focus on large firms in two sectors -service and industrial- through two qualitative case studies. We are conscious that in so doing, we left out important sectors, perhaps most importantly the construction sector where Syrians represent an overwhelming majority, but also small workshops that may reveal quite different situations and work relations, with almost as many foreign workers of different nationalities. One of the most influential characteristics of Lebanon is the coexistence of a fierce capitalist logic with many aspects that appear somewhat pre-capitalist, whilst both are in fact complementary (Lautier 1998). Our concern was to shed some light on an often-ignored aspect of society in Lebanon: the articulation of the complementarity between different categories of workers, whose presence is purely accidental or temporary.

In a globalized world economy, of which Lebanon plays an increasingly integral part (as much through ties of debt and aid, as international trade, consumption and the import of labor), reducing the cost of production is often the main concern for employers, as they fight to

survive in a competitive and largely unregulated market; this is even more true considering the lack of government policy to protect local production or the national labor force. In the industrial sector, these conditions have resulted in the emergence of a two-dimensional strategy: automation of production on the one hand, and the replacing of qualified (expensive) local workers with cheap migrant labor (when automation is either impossible or not perceived to be as profitable). In the service sector, automation is rarely an option, meaning that the only way to reduce costs is to cut wages and avoid paying workers' social benefits and other due taxes; many employers find that the strategy of employing workers through outsourcing companies is the easiest way to achieve this aim.

This profit-seeking strategy does not necessarily receive blanket support however, as many portions of the Lebanese workforce view the employment of non-Lebanese to be an unfair encroachment on the local market; many consider that foreign workers compete on unequal terms with the local labor force, particularly because they are more willing to accept poorer working conditions and lower wages. Although some Lebanese are indeed aware that defending foreign workers' rights to fair wages, social protection and good living conditions would indirectly serve the interest of Lebanese workers, the corruption and clientelism that characterize the labor unions (Slaybi 2001) remain an important obstacle to any solidarity movement for a common cause with foreign workers. Still however, the greatest obstacle is the ever-increasing size of the migrant workforce, and the huge diversity of their status and work conditions, which don't help them to develop a sense of common interests.

Simply put, the strategy of many large employers in Lebanon appears to be based on the simultaneous and tactical application of inclusionary and exclusionary processes; i.e. the inclusion of migrant workers into the labor market whilst continuing to exclude them from available benefits as laid out in the Lebanese labor law. This tactical and undeniably discriminatory (some would even go so far as to say exploitative) interplay between inclusion and exclusion is made possible by the specific conditions under which the migrant workforce is admitted into the Lebanese labor market, and is heightened by the introduction of a third party – the outsourcing company or the sponsor – which distorts the traditional class relationship between employer and employee. Finally, the system is supported by broader political and social mechanisms, and is something of a 'vicious circle', in that the greater the level of deprivation or exclusion migrant workers in Lebanon experience (i.e. the more they are deprived of their social and political rights), the more attractive they become to profit-seeking employers, and thus their inclusion in specific increase concurrently.

Beirut, June 2014

Appendix

Table 1 Labor force according to economic activity

Economic activity sector	Sex		
	Women	Men	Women & Men
Agriculture	5,7	6,5	6,3
Industry	7,5	13,4	12,1
Construction	(*)	11,5	8,9
Trade	21,5	28,7	27,0
Transportation, post and Telecommunication	(1,4)	8,4	6,8
Services	60,2	29,9	36,9
Financial intermediation and insurance	3,2	1,6	2,0
No response	(*)	(*)	(*)
Total number (Sample)	100% 4269	100% 14257	100% 18526

(*): Number less than 25 cases

Table 2 Labor force according to occupation

Occupations	Sex		
	Women	Men	Women & Men
Legislators, senior officials and managers	6,5	16,3	14,1
Professionals	25,9	7,9	12,1
Technicians and associate professionals	12,3	4,6	6,3
Clerks	11,5	4,8	6,4
Service workers and shop and market workers	18,6	10,9	12,7
Skilled agricultural and fishery workers	5,2	5,4	5,3
Craft related trade workers	4,8	22,8	18,6
Plant, machine operators, assemblers, drivers	(*)	10,9	8,4
Elementary occupations	14,5	8,4	9,8
Armed forces	(*)	8,0	6,2
No response	(*)	(*)	(*)
Total number (Sample)	100% 4267	100% 14256	100% 18523

Source: Central Administration of Statistics, CAS_MICS3_12_Economic Activity, table EA12 and EA14)

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