

New wage law irks private sector staff in Bahrain

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While government workers await a BD 300 minimum wage set for them by Parliament, their counterparts in the private sector said they were left out of the deal that should help them cope with the rising costs of living. The new wage structure for civil-service personnel, voted into law earlier this week by members of Parliament, was also criticised by union leaders, saying it was a “new blow” to the already restless local workforce in the private sector.

They said the new measure would only widen the gap in terms of income and privileges between a private-sector worker and a public-sector one. “Only government people are happy but not us. Many Bahrainis still do not even receive a BD 200 wage promised by the government,” said Hassan Ahmed, a union member from a construction company.

“This is the reason why everyone wants to go to work in the government. No one is motivated,” he said. The General Federation of Bahrain Trade Union women’s committee chairwoman Suad Mubarak said the wage deal for government workers is only aggravating an imbalance among the local workforce. “The government is saying it clearly: no one can survive with a BD 200 pay but the minimum wage law is still limited to civil-service workers,” she said. “It is a blow to the private sector. How else can they expect Bahrainis to stay in private companies?”

“The law is very selective,” Mubarak said. Apart from wages, the chairwoman said private-sector workers are at a disadvantage in terms of leave and pension benefits. Women workers in government also enjoy better maternity and breastfeeding-hour entitlements.

The wage law will still have to be adopted by royal decree. It may be implemented by year end. Various sectors like unions had earlier called for a sweeping minimum-wage law in the country applicable to both private- and public-sector workers.

Many Bahrainis working in the retail sector — manufacturing, hotels, restaurants — still receive less than BD 200 a month. The wage issue had hounded the public sector over the last two years. Last year, the government raised to BD 200 level the wages of the lowest paid government worker. Bahrainis make up some nine-tenths of the estimated 39,000 workers in the public sector.