



## **Developing Information for Migrant Workers through Transnational Trade Union Cooperation – Summary Report**

**Workshop Meeting, 8<sup>th</sup>-9<sup>th</sup> of April, 2014  
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The present project cooperation is an important way to protect migrant workers from exploitation, tackle discrimination and develop relationships with both sender and receiver countries. From 2004 'Employment Rights' information has been produced by the TUC, consisting of rights that ought to be expected in employment and covering a wide range of topics such as contracts, basic wages and the rights of workers. A 'Living and Working in the UK' booklet has also been produced, providing practical information and advice on employment, finding accommodation, possible exploitation by landlords and how to open a bank account. These booklets were distributed on the 'Workers Registration Scheme' (the government registration scheme for A8 workers), which meant that every worker registered in the scheme was provided with employment rights information. Additional support to migrant workers was also provided through the Union Modernisation Fund which funded project workers in unions to work specifically organising migrant workers. However, neither forms of support are now available as the Workers Registration Scheme ended in 2011 while a change of government in 2010 ended the Union Modernisation Fund.

The TUC believes that in the coming decades, Europe will have a greater need for migration. Therefore migration ought to be a fundamental concern of the Trade Unions. Migration policy should therefore not be framed as a stand-alone issue, but part of a large context of exploitation and labour market stratification.

Exploitation of workers is on the rise in the UK and which migrant workers are particularly susceptible to. Such is the extent of exploitation that many migrant workers are left with no benefits at all and are without accommodation or work. Vulnerable contracts have a detrimental effect on the context of labour and create a vulnerable workforce. Exploitative 'zero-hour contracts' which, until recently, did not exist in other EU countries are becoming more and more common, as are 'bogus' self-employment contracts which release employers from having to accept any liability for those workers. This especially affects migrant workers from Romania, who are only allowed to work in the UK under self-employment.

There has been a freeze in pay in most sectors, both public and private; low wages and insufficient offers of work hours has led many to involuntarily take on second and part-time jobs. The problem is compounded by the rate of inflation which is outstripping this pay: both poverty and the cost of living have increased. Workers are vulnerable at the moment, with the number of workers

covered by bargaining historically low. Migrant workers are particularly vulnerable in this context as the majority earn less than British workers, with employers often offering them less pay than is required by the legal system.

Migrant workers have become a media scape-goat for the economic problems in Britain today. Trade unions need to challenge these propagandist notions and in doing so refocus the blame away from migrant workers and onto government and employer exploitation of all workers through poor employment practice and policy. The trade unions need to challenge media stereotypes about who migrants are, where they come from and why we value some over others (white migrants, such as those from Australia or the US, are rarely portrayed as problematic in the media).

Arguments often focus on what the cost of the migrant workforce is, when in fact they contribute to the overall prosperity of the UK. Generally migrant workers are young, 18-34 year old, have finished education, and are healthy and ready to work. However, the UK is not effectively utilising the human resources offered by migrant workers. In the UK, 67% of A8 migrants with university degrees are working in manual labour. This situation is not improving, and the level of education of migrant workers is increasing as time goes on. The types of jobs that most migrants are working do not match their skills and abilities; therefore we are at risk of a sustained pattern that erodes human resources which will have negative long-term consequences.

Unions need to work on the question of how to organise migrant workers. There is an absence of a tradition of organisation amongst migrant workers, which is related to the conditions in which most migrants work. Many migrants, such as those who work in food processing and agriculture, are likely to be situated in remote locations, making it hard to consolidate these workers into a collective force. One approach has been to engage directly with areas of local communities in which migrants are most likely to operate such as Polish Churches and community centres. Targeting these spaces means that information on employment rights is now more accessible and available from within the very communities that migrants are likely to be a part of.

A step that can be undertaken on the national scale is to develop a network of support, designed to answer the specific needs of migrant workers. This would entail inclusion in the form of agreements with national centres in numerous countries, recognising mutual trade unions and pledging support and political solidarity. The value of online resources should be explored more fully; not only as a means of disseminating advice on practical employment rights to workers, but also as a platform that enables an online forum where different trade unionists can share their expertise, in an effort to overcome the various barriers facing migrant workers, leading to greater political and economic support of migrant workers.

Despite the lack of funding, unions in the UK are still the largest civil society organisation. The ability to mobilise people through these organisations, and the support gained from them, is more significant than funding. We need closer links with the trade unions of those countries where migrants arrive from, as the European congress does not do sufficient work to render services

in, and connect with, these communities. Setting up migrant resource centres, and recruitment venues would be a mutually beneficial step for both the trade unions of this country and its migrant workers; it would also help in informing migrant workers about the trade unions themselves and could lead to engaging migrant workers in much more active union roles at leadership level.

In order to engage with migrant workers more effectively we need to recognise these issues on a local level and answer the specific needs of the migrant workers in specific areas. One to one levels of communication are immensely important, but we need to do so from a stance that understands and accounts for cultural divides and the particularities specific to migrant workers. Meeting migrant workers people face-to face is of utmost importance as, at the moment, there is a lack of information available to migrant workers in the UK. Such information might effectively inform migrants of their working rights; some of this information is available online but in many cases migrant workers do not have access to the internet or computers, which is why personalised engagement is so significant. What information there is, in the form of brochures, leaflets and online resources, must also be available in a range of languages if they are to be fully accessible to migrant workers.

Furthermore, trust can be an issue for migrants from countries where the trade unions have a bad reputation as a result of internal corruption and mafia-links. We need to advertise the good-will of unions in the UK and stress our non-exploitative nature. Further cooperation between unions and the creation of a communicative network will be greatly beneficial in achieving these ends.

Further recommendations can be attained by wide-scale adaptations of policies which are practised in particular unions. The NUT has developed an internal protocol with regard to migrant workers, meaning that people within the NUT are equipped with the knowledge of how to settle a migrant worker into the UK. There is also the concept of a ‘trade union passport’ that would ensure automatic union representation for migrant workers in their receiver countries and vice-versa; such a policy already exists in the form of an agreement between UNISON and a German trade union. Trade unions should also look into the possibility of providing English language lessons for migrant workers (this is something that was once funded, but no longer is). Many migrant workers have expressed a desire for English language lessons, and we should understand that the ability to speak English as a migrant worker empowers that individual in the workplace.