Out of sight, out of mind: the exploitation of migrant workers in 21st-century Britain

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Aims

To highlight the exploitation of migrant workers in the United Kingdom and to provide policy recommendations in this field.

Methodology

The article is a summary of the findings of 4 separate, but related, research reports on the living and working conditions of migrant workers in the UK, 2 of which relate to the Yorkshire and Humber region. These reports were based on research conducted in the UK between 2004 and 2010, undertaken by a team at the University of Hull, documenting the experiences of

organisations working with migrant workers operating on the national, local, statutory and voluntary basis together with testimony from several hundred of migrant workers.

Key issues

- The Gangmasters Licencing Authority [GLA] does not have sufficient resources or remit to be able to prevent exploitation of migrant workers.
- Widespread exploitation is taking place, particularly in the construction, care, hotel and hospitality and cleaning sectors. Exploitation in the temporary labour sector and for undocumented migrant workers is particularly severe.
- The UK government has shown little in regard to the exploitation of the migrant labour force, and has prioritised immigration control and the penalisation of illegal employment.
- The labour market is one of low levels of inspection and enforcement, limited regulation but a highly complex system of rights and entitlements
- The limited enforcement of labour standards is a contributory factor in exploitation.
- That conditions have worsened since the start of the financial crisis in 2008.

Recommendations

The article concludes with a range of policy recommendations. These include:

- The remit of the GLA should be expanded to other sectors of the economy where migrant workers are particularly vulnerable to exploitation [ie construction, hospitality, social care], and they must investment in more staff and resources.
- The creation of one single enforcement agency responsible for regulating all agency labour across every industry in the UK.
- Undocumented migrant workers need to be regulated and incorporated into the formal labour market where their contributions should be acknowledged and their rights better protected. To assist this, the UK government should institute a one-off programme of regularisation for undocumented migrant workers, to mimic approaches from Greece, Italy and Spain.

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Migrant Group
EU migrants
Non-EU migrants
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Work and education
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Migrant workers
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