The rhetoric of the `good worker' versus the realities of employers' use and the experiences of migrant workers

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Aims

The article aims to develop an understanding of the attitudes and strategies of employers as they develop their use of migrant labour, the mechanisms by which active recruitment strategies are pursued, and the rhetoric used by employers in terms of the perceived attributes of these workers. This case study is drawn from a larger project conducted in 2005 and 2006, exploring the social and economic experience of new arrivals in Barnsley, United Kingdom.

Methodology

The research was a case study of an employer using large numbers of migrant workers in low-paid low-skilled employment, in Barnsley, South Yorkshire. The data was gathered using interviews with the management of the firm [managing director, general manager and training manager], 10 employees and local trade union representatives. The employees interviewed were all migrant workers, originating from Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Albania and Portugal. The employees interviewed had a wide range of tenure levels with the company, ranging from one day to 4 years; most had work experience in their home country.

Key issues

The study points out that employing migrant workers has significant benefits for the employer as it is mostly cheap labour force and migrants are often known for their strong work ethic. On the other hand, working long hours for minimum pay is mostly seen as a temporary situation and means to an end for migrant workers. However, wage differentials in migrants' home countries and the UK make this kind of employment beneficial.

Conclusions

The study highlights how management focused their recruitment policy on groups of workers who were lacking in power within the labour market. The availability of new sources of labour in the form of migrant workers, especially post 2004 and the European Union enlargement, allows employers to continue to rely on the low road route to competitiveness based on employees working maximum hours for the minimum wage.

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