

## Church Times

6 November 2009

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### Gangmasters need tighter controls

***Migrant workers are still struggling in subhuman conditions***, says Richard Harries

When 23 Chinese cockle-pickers were drowned in Morecambe Bay in February 2004, the country was alerted to the existence of gangmasters (News, 13 February 2004). These gangmasters recruited vulnerable workers — mainly migrants, both legal and illegal — with great scope for abuse.

In response to this, the Gangmasters Licensing Authority (GLA) was set up, with a remit covering the agricultural, forestry, horticulture, shellfish-gathering, and food-processing and -packaging industries. There seems to be general agreement that, in these sectors, the GLA has had a significant impact. It licenses about 1230 gangmasters, and has 180,000 workers on its database. Abuses that were once quite common have been greatly reduced.

Unfortunately, between 25 and 40 per cent of gangmasters are still unlicensed. Also, because the GLA is responsible for checking the employment status of applicants and reporting illegal immigrants to the Home Office, many immigrants with unclear employment status do not come forward to be employed by licensed gangmasters, and go to unlicensed ones instead, with all the potential for abuse.

Another significant concern is that the remit of the GLA does not cover the construction, hospitality, and care sectors, where there is clear evidence of abuse. Here are the words of one worker:

I've done jobs in all parts of the country . . . Leicester, Leeds, Manchester. You're taken in the back of a van, and sometimes I don't even know where I've been when I get back. The vans are overcrowded, unsafe, uncomfortable. The gangmaster phones you and says . . . "Come to a certain place. . . certain major road junction at 5 a.m." So you go and wait.

Sometimes you work for a week, including Saturday and Sunday, and might get just £50. You don't get a wage slip — it's cash-in-hand. The transport to and from jobs often eats up most of our money. Often you sleep at the site.

The gangmasters have a way of hooking you in. You work for a week, and they pay you, but next week they won't pay you. They ask you to come back next week, and they pay you for this, but they still owe you one or two weeks' work; so you can't really leave them. . . There is no concern for our health and safety.

There is also abuse in the hospitality sector. As one hotel cleaner reported:

I'm cleaning rooms in a small hotel with 20 rooms. I got the job through an agency when I was still in Spain. The hotel pays me £25 for eight hours' work. They pay me cash-in-hand, no wage slip. I know they should pay me the minimum wage, but what can I do? The agency won't defend me or help me with this.

She records that when she was sick and had to take a day off, she had to pay a friend to do the work. Her accommodation, which she was forced to use, was expensive, crowded, and completely inadequate, she says. She also describes her agency as a big one, on the internet, supplying people to work in hotels all over London. Many hotels no longer employ people directly, but prefer to go through an agency. One union organiser says that the hotels must be aware of the exploitation: "It's happening so frequently, right under their noses, in almost every hotel."

In the care sector, the scope for abuse in the future is growing. The population is ageing, and in 2007, 28 per cent of those recruited to work in this field were migrant workers. There are reports of very long hours, some workers recording 100 hours a week. There is also evidence of debt-bondage, some workers paying up to £2000 for a job in the UK to be arranged.

Abuses in these sectors are meant to be covered by the Employment Agency Standards Inspectorate (EAS), which is currently running a £1.25-million campaign to raise awareness of employment rights among vulnerable agency workers. So far, however, researchers from Oxfam and other organisations have found little or no knowledge among migrant workers of either the EAS or employment rights. Not a single migrant worker was aware of the EAS before the visit of a researcher.

Those who have done most research in this field and the relevant trade unions believe that the only effective remedy for the abuses in the construction, hospitality, and care industries is by extending the remit of the GLA to cover them.

The Bible urges us to have a particular care both for the stranger in our midst and for people who are vulnerable. The Ecumenical Council for Corporate Responsibility has recently published a report on the responsibility of business in this sphere (downloadable at [www.eccr.org.uk](http://www.eccr.org.uk)), and Oxfam has done some important research. But vulnerable migrant workers are a proper focus of concern for all Christians, not least for those who are involved with the hospitality, construction, and care sectors.

We now expect a minimum wage, safe working conditions, and proper terms of employment for all our fellow citizens. If this is right for us, it is no less right for those who are vulnerable because of their migrant status. We need to ensure that employers, enforcement agencies, and government policies are working to ensure that this is the case.

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