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Report urges companies to care for vulnerable workers

by Ed Beavan

Supermarkets and food manufacturers should do more to reduce the injustice experienced by vulnerable migrant workers in the food-production process, the latest report of the Ecumenical Council for Corporate Responsibility (ECCR) recommends.

Vulnerable Migrant Workers: The responsibility of business urges companies that use migrant workers, often in seasonal or temporary jobs, to accept their moral responsibility towards these members of the 'flexible' labour force.

It calls on food companies to introduce codes of conduct for its suppliers, and to increase awareness of rights among all their staff.

The first part of the report gives an overview of the current situation in the UK, and states that in the last labour-force survey there were 3.8 million non-UK-born workers in the country, representing 13 per cent of all domestic employment.

The report says that these workers are often in 'temporary, poorly paid jobs, where workplace rights may be violated', and that they are 'characterised by seasonal and temporary work, commonly sourced through agencies that may pay poorly for long hours'.

It adds that a Home Office survey of 500 employers found that many of the respondents preferred migrant workers, and commended 'their reliability and work ethic'. The report highlights how these employees often work long and irregular hours, and have little access to support and training.

The report says that their vulnerability is exacerbated by the absence of a comprehensive rights-enforcement system, and that very few migrants are represented by trade unions.

The second part of the report analyses the policies and practices of nine food-production companies and supermarkets: Northern Foods, Sainsbury's, Tesco, Premier Foods, Kerry Group, Unilever, Greencore Group, Associated British Foods, and Morrisons. It assesses how well these companies identify and mitigate vulnerabilities faced by migrants in the workplace.

The performance of each company was given a rating of up to 24 points. Northern Foods received the top score of 17; Sainsbury's and Tesco both received 14; and Associated British Foods and Morrisons scored four.

The report says that, out of the nine companies, only four appear to have considered the potential vulnerability of migrant workers in its supply chains; and only two have shown that they communicated information about rights to their workers.

It finds little evidence of how the nine companies monitor and respond to workers' grievances.

The report makes ten recommendations, and urges those companies that have not done so already to sign up to the Ethical Trading Initiative. It also urges all companies to carry out their own audits of the work conditions of suppliers.

A researcher for ECCR, Sunniva Taylor, said that the use of flexible labour in the supply chain could be of benefit to companies' profits. 'Companies and investors therefore have a moral

responsibility to reduce the incidence of vulnerable work throughout their business and supply chain.'

Paul Whitehouse, who chairs the Gangmasters Licensing Authority, the government body set up to protect migrant workers in agriculture, said that the report 'recognises that better enforcement of existing laws is required'.

Full report at: www.eccr.org.uk

BARBARA STOREY came to England from Poland 28 years ago, and set up the SOS Polonia drop-in centre in Southampton in 2004 as a response to the influx of migrants from Eastern European countries. Many of them struggled to cope with British bureaucracy, and were vulnerable to exploitation.

The centre is supported by Churches Together in Southampton, and has about 80 people coming through its doors each day, seeking information on their employment and residential rights in the UK.

It welcomes people of all nationalities, and currently has a large number of Slovaks and Hungarians coming for help.

Mrs Storey, who is married to an Englishman, said the ECCR report was an important document that spoke on behalf of people who are 'utterly voiceless'.

She described it as the 'first and only work that I have ever read that addressed this issue properly, fairly, and professionally.

'It is an eye-opening and conscience-shaking document that should be a 'must-read' for all companies, investors, and policy-makers, as well as consumers.'

She said it asked 'uncomfortable but very important questions about business ethics on behalf of the voiceless, powerless army of invisible workers whose right to decent employment is often sidelined by the corporations' desire for profit and consumers' satisfaction'.

The report was proof to the thousands of migrant workers in the UK that 'someone does care' about their welfare.