

ECCR open debate

‘Migrant workers in the economy: rights and responsibilities’



ECCR’s 2008 public panel debate took place at Friends House, London, on 20 November 2008. Chaired by Lord Harries of Pentregarth, former Bishop of Oxford and ECCR’s Patron, the panel featured speakers (l-to-r in photo with Lord Harries centre) Eamon O’Hearn Large of the GMB trade union; Rev. David de Verny, former Ecumenical Chaplain with New Arrival Communities in SE Lincolnshire; Lord Harries; Barbara Storey of SoS Polonia migrant workers project; and Paul Whitehouse of the Gangmasters Licensing Authority.



The debate covered a range of issue including the dependency of the domestic UK economy on migrant workers, the challenges such workers face, how they are assisted, and the responsibility that a range of stakeholders have in helping them confront their exploitation and reduce their vulnerability.

Rev. Raymond Singh, ECCR’s Vice Chair, welcomed the panel and the audience to the event and introduced Lord Harries of Pentregarth. Lord Harries expressed pleasure at renewing his long association with ECCR and welcomed its recent merger with the Christian Ethical Investment Group. Stating his belief that the churches have a responsibility and ethical duty to consider migrant workers, he introduced the speakers and their presentations.

Barbara Storey, SOS Polonia: ‘East Side Story: migrant workers – blessing or invasion?’

Polish-born Barbara Storey established SOS Polonia (www.sospolonia.net) in 2004 as a support organisation for migrant workers in the Southampton area.

Joining the EU in 2004 was, for Poland, a joyous occasion. For the first time Poles were free to travel and to work. They became partners rather than recipients of charity, illegal immigrants or asylum cases.

The arrival of Polish migrants in the UK raised many questions. Why so many? Because Poland is a large country. Why the UK? Because of the opportunity to get jobs and ‘build a house on the rock’ rather than on the sand, and because of Britain’s reputation as a free and fair country. Who came? Mainly the young, many with qualifications.

Yet many arrived with a poor grasp of English and found unexpected challenges. The system in the UK was unfamiliar, and they were vulnerable to exploitation and abuse. Many migrant workers experienced such ‘seven deadly sins’ as lack of written contracts, payment in cash without payslips, below-minimum wages, being made to sign papers they do not understand, unsafe transport to work, and abuse of their lack of English. Many were prepared to accept these conditions, however, because they were desperate for work.

SOS Polonia conducted a survey of 2,500 migrant workers in 2005. It found that 52 per cent had to pay to be brought to the UK. And of those 2,500, only 14 people found jobs that matched their qualifications acquired in Poland. Some suffered greatly from family separations, although others brought their children with them.

SOS Polonia organises English classes, a document reading service seven days a week, extra classes for children, adult and children's football teams, and a range of other activities to encourage integration and cross-cultural communication.

Barbara argued that it is too late now to tell Polish and other migrant workers to leave the UK, having invited them here to work. So attempts should now be made to facilitate their access to services, promote understanding between communities, and help them make their contribution using the skills and qualities they have brought with them for the benefit of their new country.

Rev. David de Verny, former Ecumenical Chaplain with New Arrival Communities in SE Lincolnshire: 'Safeguarding the welfare and interests of migrant workers'

If it were not for migrant workers, the UK economy would collapse, David de Verny asserted. Most of the UK-origin vegetables on sale in British supermarkets had been picked and packed by migrants. In Lincolnshire, no factories he knew had a majority indigenous workforce. In fact, usually more than 75 per cent of the workforce comprises migrant workers.

Migrants earn very little, however, and many work double shifts or have a second job. The trade unions have low visibility in rural areas where migrant workers are especially vulnerable. The GMB has been the only union to employ migrant workers, although they are no longer present in Lincolnshire. While the unions say the right things, it is harder to find evidence of their solidarity on the ground in such areas.

The Gangmasters Licensing Authority has proved itself an effective and worthwhile body. But David questioned the make-up of its board, in particular the heavy representation of business interests.

Migrant workers are not just present in factories and fields. They are also present in the workforce of restaurants, hotels, engineering companies and more. These industries would also be threatened with collapse if it were not for migrant workers.

There has been talk recently about migrant workers returning to their home countries. But there are important differences according to people's background and country of origin. From Poland, for example, many workers who arrived in the 'first wave' post-2004 have now returned; they tended to be young, educated and from urban areas that have become more prosperous.

Workers who arrived in the past two or three years, however, are more likely to remain in the UK. Many are older, less well educated and from rural areas where unemployment is still high.

It is shocking how many untruths about migrant workers abound. For example, that they each only contribute 'the value of a Mars bar' to the economy. Labour MP Frank Field's suggestion that there should be a cap on the number of immigrants settling in Britain is unhelpful. It is important in discussions about migrant workers to look at the rural areas, where the situation is different from, and often worse than, in the cities.

Eamon O'Hearn Large, GMB: 'The trade union movement as a natural home for migrant workers'

Research and Policy Officer in the GMB (www.gmb.org.uk) National Organising Department, Eamon O'Hearn Large said that the trade union movement needs to engage in honest and open debate, including about its own history, if it is to best support migrant workers in its membership. Unions endeavour to support all workers who need their help, but their capacity can be restricted by a lack of resources. GMB is not as resource rich as some other unions and needs to target its

resources carefully in order to avoid making promises to potential members, especially migrant workers, that it cannot deliver.

Unions are moved to act on a broad range of diversity issues, including ethnicity and nationality. When they respond, they always seek to act collectively. However, there is a balance to be achieved between supporting individual need and developing and maintaining a collective voice.

The issues that migrant workers face at work are almost always the same as all workers and should be confronted as and when they arise. This is a slow process, which takes a lot of work.

At the European Social Forum, the GMB argued that no workers are illegal.

The UK's current immigration policy - the new points-based system - is politically prejudiced and not value neutral. Based on the Australian points-based system that was introduced by a far-right government, it has proved ineffective and socially divisive in Australia. Since its introduction in 1996 Australia's skills shortage has increased.

Paul Whitehouse, Gangmasters Licensing Authority: 'Safeguarding the welfare and interests of migrant workers'

GLA (www.gla.gov.uk) Chair and Chief Executive Paul Whitehouse responded to David de Vorny's observation about the make-up of his board by saying that it is important to understand the GLA's history. In the 1990s it became clear to trade unions, workers and retailers that there were considerable problems with the way migrant workers were being treated. Most migrant workers worked illegally and were therefore subject to exploitation.

This concern led to the establishment of the Temporary Labour Working Group, which developed a code of practice and enabled employment agencies to obtain a certificate to demonstrate that they were treating workers fairly. However, the coalition realised that there was need for statutory support and for an enforcement agency, and thus a Private Member's Bill was introduced.

The Bill was in Parliament in February 2004 when the Morecambe Bay tragedy happened, involving the death of 23 Chinese cockle pickers. As a result, the legislation was speedily adopted, with the inclusion of the shellfish sector. The GLA's board was written into the Act and includes *inter alia* farmers, trade unionists, employment agencies and retailers. The board has never had to take a vote, because the parties have never disagreed on a way forward. All see a commonality of purpose.

Seventy-five per cent of migrant temporary labour in the UK falls outside of the remit of the GLA - for example, in the cleaning, catering, construction, chamber-maiding, and college lecturing sectors. There is an increasing call for the extension of the GLA's mandate.

Seventy-five licenses have been revoked so far. Workers, as well as others, provide intelligence upon which GLA inspectors can take action. It is usually not necessary for workers to give evidence. The GLA can revoke licenses or arrest gangmasters operating without a licence. Of the licence holders, most are 'good', and the GLA will help them to be better.

The GLA's board does not have the power to decide whether its remit should be extended, but extension would be good thing. People can contact their elected representatives and encourage them to push for an extension.

Questions and discussion

Questions and observations from the audience, with responses from the panel, followed.

In Kings Lynn we have established a small charity, King's Lynn Area Resettlement Support (KLARS - www.klarskl.org.uk), with Lottery funding, to improve community cohesion in an area where there are many migrant workers. Migrants have suffered from considerable racial abuse in the area. The churches have responded by initiatives such as this charity.

David de Verny (DdV): This is a very good example of the community taking action. However, the churches need to do more to support migrant workers. Community cohesion is going to become an even greater challenge if the current economic crisis means that people who would not normally want the jobs that migrant workers do start to feel that they are in competition with them.



There is a continuing problem with migrant workers getting confused in the media and public perception with asylum seekers.

DdV: The organisation Migration Watch deliberately confuses the issues.

Eamon O'Hearn Large (EOL): The migration system has become politicised. There is a strong need for an organisation representing migrant workers collectively to defend their position and respond to negative and incorrect reporting.

In Westleigh money has been found and work is being undertaken with the media to correct some of the misperceptions about migrants.

Barbara Storey (BS): In Southampton there is a group that meets with the media every six months to discuss issues related to migrant workers and to help dispel myths.

Is sexual exploitation different to migrant work?

Paul Whitehouse (PW): Trafficking for sexual exploitation is a significant problem. Thirty per cent of the Serious Organised Crime Agency's time is dedicated to dealing with trafficking.

What responsibility do supermarket retailers and food producers have for tackling the exploitation of migrant workers?

PW: Two main groups buy most of the produce from the fields: supermarkets and the food service industry. The GLA has been working closely with all the big supermarkets including Asda, Sainsbury, Tesco and Morrison's and is about to sign a protocol with them to agree to pass information down their supply chains about how to address problems relating to the treatment of migrant workers. The GLA is encouraging the food retail chains to agree to joint inspections so that they can see the problems first hand. It is working with companies' technical compliance departments, which have very effective systems for quality control and health checks but need assistance to be aware of labour concerns.

What are the prospects for the extension of the GLA?

DdV: It is very important that the GLA's area of responsibility is extended. Gangmasters are starting to move out of inspected areas into those that are not covered by current licensing arrangements.

PW: The chances of extension depend on the political will of those in government. The GLA will shortly meet with the Minister of Employment to discuss this.

How many organisations are there like SOS Polonia, and do trade unions and the GLA work closely with them?

BS: There are not very many similar organisations, largely because of a lack of funding. SOS Polonia works closely with union representatives, who come to the office every week to run a drop-in advice centre. SOS Polonia also works with the GLA, which is much appreciated.

DdV: There was a need to recognise the difference between rural and urban locations. In rural areas it is rare to see a union official.

PW: The GLA works closely with migrant worker organisations. It also visits the countries from which migrants have come to raise awareness of what potential migrants will face.

EOL: The GMB now employs three officers who are Polish and has sponsored recent Polish celebrations. It has sought to avoid appearing to be only interested in quick membership gains, because it wants to develop long-lasting relationships and to prove its commitment to the workers and their communities.

Lord Harries closed what had been a very stimulating and constructive debate, thanking all for their contributions.

Report by Sunniva Taylor.

ECCR's forthcoming research report on migrant workers in the UK and Ireland will be published in spring 2009.

www.eccr.org.uk