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Polish migrant workers in Northern construction

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Presentation at the CLR

Labour in 'neverneverland'?: Regulating the situation for migrants in the British construction industry

Seminar at Westminster University 7th December 2007

Projects:

- Based on projects in the North in particular in North East & North West construction (client TUC – worked with Ucatt on 1st project);
- Method - key informants & action research
 - Over 60 key contacts, visits to NE sites, meetings (reps and mass meeting);
 - Involvement in research networks and dissemination events;
- Aims of research in construction:
 - Identify main routes into employment;
 - Highlight main Polish worker issues.

Extent of Poles (A8s) in the North

- No clear data – difficult to estimate (cars, coaches, planes, and trains)
- But NINo growing number of Poles in North – over 40,000 applied in 2006/07 (18.3% of UK Poles) - 38.2% of all Northern migrant workers
- WRS more A8s registered to scheme in North (nearly 138,000 registered since May 2004) than London and South East
- Increasing number of A8s in North since accession

Extent of A8 workers in construction?

- Estimated 100,000 building workers with English as a second language
(Considerate Constructors Scheme survey - 2004);
- Since accession major influx of A8 workers;
- Difficult to ascertain numbers but WRS...;
- Only 29,075 registered in UK construction sector (70% Poles - rising) (4% of 714,735 overall total):
 - North 5,450 (18.7% of sector total);
- Overall though sector 19,490 (labourers – 67%);
5,165 wood trades (18%); 1,690 bricklayers (6%).

Findings (routes into employment) – none on WRS

(1) On spec:

- Balch et al (2004) highlight site level ‘informal’ migrant networks as significant;
- In studies: NE not seemingly important;
- Although, perhaps too early to say in NE as Following 1st project Ucatt noted move away from NE to NW (migrant worker networks);
- In NW significant in context of Poles moving to UK, then going to agencies (discussed later).

Findings (routes into employment cont.)

(2) Direct company recruitment in Poland:

- In studies - major role in NE with at least two main labour only sub contractors;
- Not significant in NW (agencies);
- NE companies have Polish ownership;
- One advertised in newsagents in Poland and Poles came over using own cars.

Findings (routes into employment cont.)

(3) Agencies:

- In studies - in NE not a major factor. But at least one violent labour only agency;
- In NW major route, 1st Polish wave through agencies & 2nd via friends & family (F&F) route (permeates through all routes – ‘anchor role’);
- NW agencies based in Eire.

Findings (main Polish worker issues)

“...a colleague in Poland started to send people over because it was so bad. There were people left without money, there were people left without work” (Sub-contractor interview);

“...Poles came to me and basically said ‘we’re getting stuffed,’ as they are not stupid and know that they are being screwed” (Ucatt regional official).

Findings (main Polish worker issues cont.):

- Catalogue of abuse ranging from accommodation issues, through basic employment rights, to violence!;
- Wages - of 23 all under minimum wage (skilled and non skilled);
- Accommodation – Poles thrown out after wage dispute;
- Took 6/7 months to begin to change (Ucatt) with the assistance of main contractors;
- Still occurring now.

Conclusions

- Lack of regulation (free entry into sector little policing of regs, movement of gangmasters?);
- Often undercutting both the WRA and the National Agreement for the Engineering Construction Industry (NAECI);
- Unions often firefighting rate; but Yorkshire wage transparency agreement;

Conclusions (cont.)

- Main contractor short-term approach to skill and recruitment needs – crisis management leads to clear profiteering, site unrest and disputes, cohesion and integration issues;
- An unstable, non sustainable crisis led industry?