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An Island Gone Polish

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Great Britain has become a prime destination for hundreds of thousands of Central and Eastern European workers. Does the mass migration endanger the position of some of the most vulnerable in British society?

The newspaper stand of a local store in the predominantly Afro-Caribbean Brixton in South London illuminates the difference of opinion within British society at the large-scale labour immigration into the country from Central and Eastern Europe (CEE). A Home Office statement has just revealed that an estimated 600,000 migrants from Central and Eastern Europe have moved to the island since Britain opened its borders to workers from the new European Union members in 2004 and the press, ready to jump on any story in the sleepy summer months, are getting excited. The shop is run by two African brothers; a Polish girl's pronunciation gives away her nationality when she asks for a travel pass, whilst at the back of the store two friends are arguing over whose turn it is to pay for the milk in Slovak. Maybe this is what a smoothly functioning multicultural society looks like.

Queuing up with the Poles, Slovaks and a bundle of papers there appears to be two parallel Britains; the shop surroundings where people of different races and nationalities greet each other and joke about how global warming has given the country a real summer, seems a million miles away from the some of the newspaper headlines: the right-wing Daily Mail screams 'BIGGEST WAVE OF MIGRANTS IN HISTORY', pictures a completely unrelated angry Muslim cleric and still manages to offer the readers a chance to 'learn Italian in only one week' all on one page. In contrast the liberal leaning Guardian is giving its readers a "Specjalny Polski G2" ('Special Polish G2'); a one-off features supplement exploring the lives of the one million Poles now living in the UK.

Migration is a "hot topic" amongst the British public, and whilst some on the right of the political spectrum ready themselves for the battle to save Britain's cultural heritage, its an

obvious trap for liberals and the left to defend migration blindly without exploring the consequences of such large scale changes to the work force. But this might be because labour migration is discussed in the public arena within the context of immigration as a whole. The word 'migrant' has been used negatively so often in the discourse about asylum that, in part due to the 'horror stories' from the tabloid press (for example "Girl raped by 'gay' migrant" from The Sun) that people often associate a foreign accent and strange fashion sense with alleged fraudulent benefit claimants. When defending asylum rights and lambasting the gutter press for its racist reporting, it is hard to keep the debate mature and sensible.

However, the effects of migration into the UK are real, large and do have a noticeable effect; since migration might first of all endanger the position of members of the more vulnerable parts of the British population, whose welfare is the traditional concern of the labour movement and other leftist groups, the flow of cheap workers might in the end be a more severe challenge to traditional leftist ideas than it first appears.

Poles Apart

Migration into the UK is huge; there is no way of avoiding the facts. And it is the Poles who lead the way in numbers; in the period 1 May 2004 to 31 March 2006 the highest proportion of applicants to the workers registration scheme¹ were Polish (61% of the total), followed by Lithuanian (12%) and Slovak (10%).²

There has been large-scale labour immigration into Britain in the past. The Irish have been the biggest minority in Britain for centuries, driven there by famine or tough economic conditions. From 1948 to 1962, Commonwealth citizens were treated as 'technically British' in many respects and so large numbers of people, mainly from the Caribbean and South Asia, travelled to live and work in the UK during the economic boom.

Today's often emotional debate does have echoes of past discussions, which at times was alarmingly inflammatory, most memorably the Conservative MP Enoch Powell's Rivers of Blood speech in 1968, where he outlined his apocalyptic vision of British society which he painted a future picture of the country with large numbers of people with a migrant background. He was referring to visible migrants (due to the colour of their skin) and was sacked for his comments but this idea that the fabric of society was fundamentally under threat still has widespread support in sections of the population.

¹ From May 1 2004, most nationals of the new member states (except Cyprus and Malta) who wish to work for more than one month for an employer in the UK have been required to register under the Worker Registration Scheme. Once they have been working legally in the UK for 12 months without a break they will then have full rights of free movement and will no longer need to register on the Worker Registration scheme. They can then get a residence permit confirming their right to live and work in the UK.

Maybe Poles do not pose a perceived 'cultural threat' to Britain; after all they are white, so Eastern European fashion aside, they are indistinguishable from the 'native Brit'. Furthermore, there have been large numbers of Poles in the UK since the Second World War, but their assimilation is almost seamless, with Polish language and culture almost non-existent in the grandchildren of that migration wave. If it is not the cultural threat which is exciting those opposed to migration, maybe it is the possible economic threat to Britons which is stirring the debate and this might become more prevalent as open borders within the EU become a reality and 450 million people could *potentially* come to work on the island.

The Effect on British Workers

Even if the 'new' migrants are not as immediately recognisable as 'non-whites', the high numbers have meant that their presence is felt in all parts of the country. London is often the first stop for most labour migrants; it is one of the world's truly 'international' cities. However even the smallest and most remote places in the UK are feeling the impact of immigration as increased competition for jobs in the capital forces migrants to travel outside the South East.

Glossop is a small ex-cotton-industry town surrounded by hills in the north of the country; people often travel out of the town to work, especially to Manchester which is only 20km away, but it is rare for people to migrate to the town for work, apart from the surrounding villages. However, this year two workers from Eastern Europe arrived looking for employment. Knocking on factory and shop doors they soon both found themselves jobs in an independent butchers. The owner could not be happier, 'I used to employ two locals who often turned up late, sometimes drunk and were crap at their jobs. But I didn't have many options; the best of the lot from around here work in Manchester. So before these new lads came I had no choice but to keep the ones I had.' The two workers that came, both Polish males in their mid-twenties are according to their boss both hard workers and fast learners.

A report from the Oxford University suggests that this feeling is widespread, "In general employers were extremely positive about migrant workers. It was not simply that they offer a "good enough" solution to otherwise unmanageable recruitment difficulties, or that migrants are simply providers of labour for basic jobs, but that they are perceived to be 'good workers'. They are high quality workers for "low skilled" jobs. In practice, such "low skilled" jobs typically involve low-waged work."

But who benefits from this arrangement? The two Eastern Europeans who have found themselves a job are happy. The butcher is pleased as he has improved the quality of his workforce. However the two locals who lost their jobs are certainly not winners. The local

² Accession Monitoring Report (May 2004 – June 2006), Home Office and Department for Work and

butcher wants to employ 'the best' workers he can find. However, this still leaves the unskilled workers in Glossop without a job. This pair might not be every employers dream employees, but it is not better for society if they are gainfully employed rather than sitting at home receiving benefits?

It must be noted that a study from the Department for Work and Pensions concluded, "that overall, the economic impact of migration from the new EU Member States has been modest, but broadly positive, reflecting the flexibility and speed of adjustment of the UK labour market. Despite anecdotal evidence, there is no discernible statistical evidence which supports the view that the inflow of A8 grants is contributing to a rise in claimant unemployment in the UK." Unfortunately, however, the perception still exists. Massaged government figures, taken from the official national statistics, show a rise in unemployment, "The... rate was 5.5 per cent, up 0.3 over the quarter and up 0.8 over the year. The number of unemployed people increased by 93,000 over the quarter and by 280,000 over the year, to reach 1.70 million." The logic is simple in people's minds, even if it is wrong: fewer jobs + more migrants = migrants are taking the jobs.

Moreover, nobody wins if people cannot find work. Unemployment has an impact far beyond those individuals unable to find work. If we use completely market based arguments then it might be 'better' to employ more productive workers, however we exclude other arguments at our peril. To exclude those who are not perceived as 'good workers' is dangerous, especially in a country with a growing 'underclass', where generations of families live on run down estates with no culture of employment. It is among those who have been failed by the system that the dangerous arguments (such as "immigrants are stealing our jobs") used by neo-fascists find the most fertile ground.

Impossible Competition

Aneta, 23, from a small town next to Gdansk and she is typical of the Polish migrant: she came six months ago with no job lined up beforehand, she was however armed with the determination to find a job as quickly as possible and start making money. Her English, though good, could not have found her qualified work despite her being a university graduate and so, like many migrants she took up a lowly paid manual job. A government report shows that the vast majority (79%) of registered workers from the new accession countries earn £4.50 - £5.99 per hour, barely above the minimum wage.

Aneta reported how she works "whatever hours I can as a cleaner" in the evening or early morning whilst her boyfriend works as a removal man during the day. They barely see each

other; they work such long shifts that their life consists of either working or sleeping. They have seen none of London outside the flat of the cousin with whom they stay and because “there’s no time to be a tourist.”

Nigel Worthing who runs the cleaners agency Aneta works for, employs and now actively targets migrants and believes that, ‘Maybe there is a certain sort of resourcefulness which people need to come to a foreign country and find work. It shows certain character.’ Character is an interesting choice of phrase, as it might also include the ‘character’ to work long shifts, the ‘character’ to never take time off and the ‘character’ to always be willing to work overtime.

British workers cannot compete with the character of such labour migrants. How can the mother who can’t work weekends because she needs look after her children, or the worker who has to travel in evening to look after his sick mother compete with the ‘flexibility’ offered by young Poles with no family commitments or desire for a social life? The willingness to work under such conditions prices the British worker out of the market.

A Flexible Future

The conditions which allow migrants to easily slip into the lower qualified end of the job market are facilitated to a large extent by Britain’s ‘flexible’ economy. Flexibility, the current administration claims, brings jobs as a flexible economy is more likely to encourage investment. Flexibility means that jobs appear and jobs disappear, but this is not a worry for a temporary labour migrant: they desire fast money not stability. ‘Flexibility’ allows a company to ask workers to ‘opt out’ of the EU 48-hour maximum working-hours directive, so whilst in other countries workers are not allowed to work such long weeks in a bid to curb employer’s exploitation of their workforces, in Britain workers are not ‘restricted’ in this way.

Which suits the temporary migrant who often wants to save up as much money as possible and then leave: they don’t want their working hours restricted. ‘Flexibility’ means that compared to countries like France, which has strong labour laws, companies can operate for less cost and ‘restructure’ more easily, but again to a temporary labour migrant the long term future of a company is of little consequence: if the work in an area dries up then they can move on.

With many private companies taking over the role of the state, through out-sourcing or complete privatisation, new jobs, paying less than their state equivalents now exist and migrant workers with a temporary mindset are happy to take jobs that previously many British people would not accept. Nigel Worthing with his cleaners agency knows this and so do many of his migrant work force, “These are not conditions I would want to work in forever,” agrees Aneta, “there is no sick pay and no pension plan here. For instance there is a

woman working with us who will retire in a few years and she has nothing to retire on apart from the state pension, and I don't think that it will be enough to survive. It's sad really."

Temporarily Permanent

Most migrants claim that their stay is temporary, and although this may in the long run not be true, the temporary-mentality still has similar implications in regards of the acceptance bad working conditions any type of 'worker solidarity', as Sean Bamford , a Policy Officer for the Trade Union Congress in the UK concedes, "I think when you have got a group of people who think they are going to be here for a matter of months it's hard to get them to commit to any long term commitments, and this includes joining a trade union."

The Unions have an almost awkward position in the immigration debate. On the one hand they support migration, migrant rights and actively oppose the racists and xenophobes who attack immigrants. It has been a long standing tenant of the labour movement in Europe that workers are workers, regardless of what language they speak, where they work or where they are from. However, migrants in Britain are threatening many of the central pillars of what the unions have fought for, as they offer themselves to employers in certain sectors as the perfect employee.

"Yes it's tolerable, but not right, to work for 60 hours per week for 6 months or a year but I doubt many people will choose to live like that for 20 years. This attitude has been picked up by some employers and they say, 'well their attitude to work is better than the indigenous British people' and consequently they are actively targeting migrant workers. Agrees Sean Bamford, however he also sees change in the future as migrants realise their stay is no longer permanent, start having families (or bringing their families to Britain). He can see why a young Pole or Czech might say "well I'm gong to work here for five months and to a large extent I don't care so much about conditions the main thing is that I save as much money as possible to take back home'", but he believes a normalisation process will start to take place as the new migrants gradually become integrated.

However government statistics show that a vast majority of workers are young and single, 82% of workers were aged between 18 and 34. 94% of registered workers had no dependants living with them in the UK, and only 4% had dependants under the age of 17 with them. Furthermore there does not seem to be any immediate let up in workers coming to Britain willing to work in the lowly paid jobs with long hours and limited working conditions. Every year there is a new group of Polish graduates or school leavers who look at the conditions around them and decide to jump on a bus to the UK.

This is not to say that migrants don't unionise or become involved in improving working conditions around them as a rule. In fact the opposite is true in many cases, "Afro-Caribbean women are some of the most heavily unionised people in the country" reports Sean Bamford and it was overwhelmingly women of South Asian origin who led the tough and heavily employer-attacked Gate Gourmet strikes at Heathrow airport in 2005, and this can be starkly compared to the common sight of South Asian women (new to the country and desperate to work) crossing the picket lines in buses during the bitter miners strikes in the 1980's. Rather it is that the short term nature of the employment, similar to students who work temporary summer jobs, which helps to sustain poor working conditions.

For example the Oxford University study revealed that when asked about why employees have turned to migrant labour it was reported that, "Long hours, anti-social hours and unpredictable hours were... factors identified as contributing to recruitment difficulties. Almost fifty per cent of hospitality employers surveyed felt that unpredictable shift patterns affected recruitment." The problem of undesirable working conditions should not be solved by taking advantage of the understandable willingness of a migrant to accept the work, but by improving the working conditions: inflexible maybe, but much fairer on the average worker.

A Change of Heart (and Headline)

In the same south London newspaper store a month later, the headlines tell a different tale. Alistair Darling, the trade and industry secretary, announced that the government would implement a "managed" migration policy in response to the next wave of expected labour migrants which would come with the possible entry of Romania and Bulgaria into the EU in 2007. The right-wing anti-migrant tabloid *The Sun* reacts in a predictable fashion welcoming the move but feels the need to restate its often stated and unsophisticated position that, "The folly of the open-door policy is now laid bare. Around 662,000 people poured in. And while some have benefited our economy, the tidal wave has overwhelmed schools and hospitals — and cost UK workers their jobs."

Despite the problems outlined above it would be harsh and unfair to hold labour migrants responsible. Essentially there is the question of individual rights; specifically the right to migrate 'internally' to look for work. There is a tension between the individual freedoms which come hand-in-hand with democratic governance (in this case within the confines of the EU-wide supra-state) and consequences for those who are affected by the choices such individuals all make. More concretely, there is a tension between the choice to work where one wishes and the effects on the workers in the area where one migrates to. The issues which arise are accentuated by the temporary nature, or at least the temporary mindset, of many of those who have migrated from CEE.

However for Aneta, a young liberal Pole living with Catholic dominance, oppressed by oversensitive 'potatoes' and high unemployment, life in other parts of Europe seemed attractive. Labour migrants from CEE are not quitting their countries forever however, but rather taking a break until conditions improve. But this temporary mindset creates tensions for British workers and ultimately, this affects migrant and British workers alike as it is they who are working in the most precarious and lowly paid jobs; it is not a problem which can be resolved by being 'anti' or 'pro' immigration, the root cause essentially lies in the system which creates and sustains unacceptable working conditions.