

Towards Shared Interests between Migrant and Local Workers

Project Rationale and Research Outputs



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The project consortium involved

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About the Project

While most of the debates on migrant integration have traditionally centred on cultural adaptation and social inclusion, this project targets their economic and legal situation in particular. In the context of flexibilisation and precarisation of employment, migrant workers have begun to share manifold aspects of their situation with the host country's domestic labour force. Yet, solidarity between migrant and domestic workers is constrained by negative stereotypes and a lack of common platforms in which to share experiences. This project suggests that such a platform can be created by taking a labour rights perspective. Thus, the project contributes to the current discussions of EU citizenship as it concerns social rights and, more generally, the social basis underlying the economic foundations of the EU project. These debates currently take place mostly around the European Pillar of Social Rights.

Our contribution to the debates on 'social Europe' would be mainly from the work and labour perspective of both EU and non-EU citizens, one of the most important spheres of EU citizenship realisation and the main channel of access to the social rights of mobile workers. We believe it is very important that even countries that are out of the Eurozone take part in the European Pillar of Social Rights, which as it stands now should be invited to join this EU project. The prominent component of the project is research conducted in five EU countries (Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Italy, Poland, and Spain) that is focused on the following themes: precarisation and social citizenship, competition and labour standards, and solidarity in fragmented workplaces.

Spanish case study

The Domestic and Care Sector in Spain: An Overview on Precariousness Processes and Organised Solidarity

Author: Valentina Longo

The Spanish case study focuses on the workers employed in the domestic and care sector, paying special attention to organised forms of solidarity that overcome traditional forms within the domain of labour, i.e. trade union participation.

More than 90% of employees in the sector are women, and out of them, more than the half are female workers of foreign origin. Under precarious working conditions and a different employment regime than other sectors, these women experience strong labour segregation according to gender, race, and class. Despite the isolation characteristic of their jobs in flats and houses all over the Spanish territory, they have been able to gather and organise in various forms: Associations and collectives are active especially in the bigger cities of Spain, and they not only focus on labour rights but also in giving each other material and emotional support. The Spanish case study has tracked the experience of Territorio Doméstico, a Madrid-based collective composed of migrant and local women who fight for the labour rights of domestic workers — for instance, for the ratification of the ILO Convention Number 189 — and, at the same time, it is a core part of the feminist movement. Together they have built a network that aims to recognize, both economically and from the symbolic point of view, care and domestic work as a fundamental part of the economy and promote the addition of dignity to such a job.

Italian case study

The Commercial Cleaning Industry in Italy: Overview on Working Conditions, Unionization, and Shared Interests

Authors: Francesca Alice Vianello and Angela Maria Toffanin

The Italian case study focuses on the commercial cleaning industry, examining in particular the history of the industry, the workers' most important problems and claims, and the interests shared between native and migrant workers. The analysis is based on interviews with migrant and native workers as well as on hearings with union officials of a rank and file trade union named ADL Cobas.

In Italy, the commercial cleaning industry is a mixed industry, which still employs a large proportion of native workers (70% of the total). Other specificities of the sector lie in that it is highly feminised, and that workers are relatively old (between 40 and 55 years of age).

The industry has been growing for decades. Since 2008, despite the economic recession, it has continued to expand, but austerity policies and spending cuts have led to a further deterioration in the already poor working conditions. Working conditions depend on the clients' demands, but workers do not bargain directly with them over their wages, tasks, and working hours because they are hired by subcontractors. Clients usually demand great flexibility and low costs, and cleaning companies compete to satisfy these requirements and win the contract by compressing the labour costs and intensifying the working rhythms. For the workers, this means hard but short working days, variable shifts, variable tasks, odd working hours, and little control over how the work is organised. The majority of the workers are also hired on short-term contracts. Despite the difficult working conditions and the vulnerable workforce, there are forms of worker solidarity that overcome ethnic divisions. Unionised workers counteract company policies that aim to continuously reduce their working hours and cut the number of workers by organising strikes, protests, and legal disputes.

Bulgarian case study

Seasonal Workers in the All-inclusive Tourism Sector

Authors: Neda Deneva and Stefan Krastev

The Bulgarian case study focuses on the labour conditions, policy framework, and public debates surrounding the issue of seasonal migrant workers from third countries in Bulgaria. More specifically, it explores the phenomenon of fast-growing numbers of Ukrainian migrants working in all-inclusive tourism on the Bulgarian seaside. In recent years, Bulgaria has been introducing various types of relaxation to the migratory regime applying to the entry of workers from third countries. Since the introduction of the new law on labour migration and labour mobility in 2016, the number of third country nationals (TCNs) in the tourist sector has increased tenfold. Employers have strongly lobbied for the relaxation of labour and migration regimes. The two largest trade unions, Podkrepa and KNSB, have expressed a common position against the relaxation of the labour migration regime for TCNs, warning against social dumping, stagnant low wages, new massive emigration waves of Bulgarians, and a xenophobic backlash against migrants.

The conditions for migrant and local workers in the all-inclusive sector are comparable, and in most cases, in the large resorts, irregular labour and employment contracts are not respected. Both categories include service sector workers in low-skilled positions who receive wages slightly above the minimum salary, work approximately 3 to 4 months per year, and receive free accommodation and food. The main drawbacks are similar for both local and migrant workers:

- (1) seasonality of the job without an alternative for the rest of the year (with a few exceptions for local workers);
- (2) low salaries (a bigger disadvantage for the local workers and a potential future problem for migrant workers);

- (3) short-term and interrupted social security due to the seasonal character and temporary contracts;
- (4) secluded life on resorts, big distance from friends and family, and thus a high toll on family and social life;
- (5) no possibility for professional development in the resort — the majority of jobs on offer are low-skilled;
- (6) no organization or unionisation of workers because of the temporary nature of contracts and presence;
- (7) negotiation stakes are kept low — migrant workers are used against Bulgarian workers in order to keep salaries low. Nonetheless, migrants and local workers have contrasting experiences and expectations. While for the migrants this is an opportunity to make more money and enjoy a stay at the seaside, for the local workers this is considered a last resort job taken out of desperation and due to a lack of alternatives. The main differences between migrant and local workers that explain the disparities in experience are age and background: The Ukrainians tend to be university students in their 20s, while Bulgarian workers tend to be middle-aged women with low levels of education and skills. This, combined with the difference in living standards between the two countries, makes the experiences and expectations of the locals contrast markedly with those of migrant workers.

Polish case study

In Search of Solidarity among Ukrainian Migrants: Food Production, Cleaning Services, and the Transport Industry

Authors: Myroslava Keryk and Ben Cope

Our project focuses on the fact that the en masse arrival of migrants from Ukraine to work in Poland is coinciding with deep changes in the nature of work. Legislative, economic, and technological changes are combining to cause work to become mediated, fragmented, subject to new modes of supervision, and demanding of entrepreneurial ingenuity on the part of workers. To investigate these changes, we tracked how changes to modes of organising work are impacting work across very different sectors. On the production lines of a multinational food company, the widespread use of agency labour constitutes the lion's share of the workforce. It is the agency workers that do the harder work, with trade union representation reduced to team building for the few who work directly for the firm. A driver works for a transport company who leases him and his van to a firm that carries out cargo orders across Europe which have been subcontracted from bigger firms. As a van driver, the driver is subject to less stringent checks than lorry drivers and negotiates his life on the road between varying legislative and infrastructure configurations. The final example is that of a cleaner who works for an internet platform that connects clients and cleaners. The company uses typical rating systems to reassure clients of the reliability of its cleaners, while offering cleaners the freedom to construct their work schedules as they wish. All three examples testify to the serious structural obstacles of developing shared interests that confront Ukrainian migrants. In addition, Ukrainian workers' disillusionment with the social provisions of their own state and the difficulties they face in legalising their stays in Poland mean that entrepreneurial self-reliance in a fragmented labour landscape become key to their self-perception. Our research argues that analysing migrants' work biographies is key to understanding the difficulties facing the development of shared interests. Confronting these difficulties is an urgent challenge for contemporary societies.

Czech case study

Workers in Supermarkets: Boundaries, Precarity, and Solidarity in Fragmented Workplaces

Authors: Yuliya Moskvina and Michal Trčka

This study not only brings attention to the wage difference but also to the level of working standards in the international super and hypermarket chains operating in the Czech Republic. Despite the popularity of these chains among customers and the employment of large numbers of people, working conditions in this sector have not been a topic for public discussion until recently, when it gained substantial media attention and has even been capitalised on politically.

This study provides insight into the managerial strategies of dividing workers and the possibilities for common struggles at the workplace. It also analyses various division lines between employees hindering solidarity among them (e.g. fragmentation caused by type of contract, presence of mediated employment, reciprocal stereotypes among workers).

Some of the key issues are the excessive power of management and their exploitative attitude towards migrants; the blurred lines between core employees and temporary workers; and fragmentation, often with the absence of any affiliation to the working place, which has a negative impact on the degree of solidarity and on the possibility of collective action. The migrants' origin and temporality of work goes hand-in-hand in the supermarkets: While full-time workers are usually Czech, temporary workers are very often migrants, mainly from Ukraine. The stressful and exhausting environment robs workers of energy that would allow them to form new relationships or deal with individual or collective problems. Moreover, there is also an absence of common space to meet and discuss shared problems. All the above-mentioned issues lead to the precarisation of the job in supermarkets despite the latest increase in pay.



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