

# Migration



# Rights of Passage

By Kay Parris

**For as long as they have travelled, people have migrated in search of more or better work. But in the last 20 years the global workforce has become more fluid than ever. This is due to the development of faster, cheaper transport, industrial deregulation and globalisation which brought the easing of border restrictions within free trade areas.**

**W**ith the enormous growth in global trade, private transport companies are vying to move goods, parts and services around the world. Some struggle to find enough skilled workers, while most are endlessly searching for ways to cut costs and compete. In this environment, it is not surprising that skilled workers in some poorer (and cheaper) countries are in great demand.

Transport companies are outsourcing functions, setting up operations in lower cost countries and recruiting migrant workers from those countries to work in wealthier nations.

Legal migration has increased following the liberalisation of the borders between countries within regional trading blocks – such as the European Union – and, to a lesser degree, the Economic Community of West African States and the Southern American Common Market (Mercosur).

Thousands of transport workers from poorer countries inside these blocks have gained access to the labour markets of other member countries. They have secured new jobs, often at better rates of pay and with better conditions than in their home country. However many others find themselves open to exploitation, with fewer rights and worse conditions than domestic workers. This problem is much worse for workers from outside open border areas who migrate illegally and have no voice or recourse to protection at all.

Meanwhile nationals in the host country may lose jobs to their cheaper foreign peers, or find that pay and conditions are driven down by the influx of cheap labour.

Trade unions play a vital role in this difficult situation, despite a potential conflict of interests between members in different countries. Increasingly, by



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sticking with their fundamental goal to defend all workers from exploitation, unions are finding that they can work for the common good of migrant and domestic labour.

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Transport unions affiliated to the International Transport Workers Federation are beginning to strike cross-border agreements. In Central America, civil aviation, road transport and dockers' unions from Guatemala, El Salvador and other countries are working to strengthen their education and organising activities. They have created a coordinating body and will launch a bulletin to inform transport workers of activities and encourage them to join a union.

In Europe, the German union ver.di is strengthening cooperation with Solidarnosc in Poland and OSD in the Czech Republic. Ver.di and Solidarnosc

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are also partners in a “Baltic Road Transport Trade Network” which also includes ITF affiliates from Great Britain, Sweden and three Baltic states.

The Motor Transport and Road Workers Union of Russia has signed a federal industrial agreement with the Employers’ Association, under the terms of which, employers have to consult with the union if they plan to recruit foreign workers. The union has agreed to cooperate with the employers’ body to help prevent the illegal employment of foreign workers and to encourage stricter controls over their engagement.

Migration can also create problems in the “sending country”, where pay and conditions may be kept at a low level in order to ensure that workers remain competitive in the international market. The National Union of Transport and Allied Workers in Zambia for example reports that its members have been recruited into jobs in South Africa, Botswana and Zimbabwe.

Andrew Banda of NUTAW says: “Employers in those countries are convinced that hiring Zambian workers is cheaper. They don’t accrue any long term benefits, most of their employment is on short term contracts and they can be fired at any time without any representation. These drivers are denied union membership as a condition of employment using threats and intimidation.”

In Great Britain, the Transport and General Workers Union (TGWU) has many years’ experience of working with migrant workers and is keen to acknowledge the contribution they have made to the British economy and transport system.

Following enlargement of the European Union, the union reports a new influx of bus drivers from eastern European countries, and they have been successfully organised. But the union disputes employer claims that a skill shortage has forced it to recruit from outside the UK.

TGWU press officer Andrew Dodgshon explains:

*“Bus operators have taken advantage of privatisation and deregulation to drive down pay and conditions. Equally our negotiators have warned that*



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*recruitment from low-cost labour areas is no reason to hold pay down."*

In a string of recent cases employers have attempted to replace workforces with cheaper migrant labour. Companies side-step any obstructive national labour legislation, plead financial difficulty and demand wage cuts and redundancies. Existing workers are shown the front door, while cheaper migrant replacements are ushered in the back.

Gate Gourmet, the catering company serving British Airways, was in talks with the TGWU over threatened redundancies, when news came in August 2005 that around 130 temporary workers from Eastern Europe were to be brought in. Nearly 700 employees gathered in the canteen, demanding an explanation. They were ushered into the car park and sacked by megaphone. A settlement saving 400 jobs was reached

following strike action backed by solidarity from ITF affiliates.

Irish Ferries offered generous redundancy packages to buy out home country workers in 2005. However union protests during the period of notice made management nervous – to the extent that they attempted to storm one of their ferries with security guards, to force out crews and replace them immediately with hired labour from Latvia. A compromise was reached, but the issues raised by the dispute are still ongoing.

In 2006, employees of North West Airlines in the United States challenged the airline over its request to throw out collective bargaining agreements with the unions and pave the way to replace 30 per cent of flight attendants with foreign workers.

"What one carrier does, all carriers will surely follow," said Dianne Tamuk, a United Airlines attendant and president of the AFA New York local.

Migrant workers make an enormous contribution to the economies of their host countries and their country of origin. ILO says that migrant workers contribute eight million US dollars a day to US taxes alone, and send 120

billion dollars more a year to their countries of origin than the total of overseas development aid.

But unions rightly protest that the workforce is not a commodity to be exchanged in bulk for a cheaper variety and that remittance flows should not be treated as development assistance that may substitute for Official Development assistance (ODA). Industrialised countries must continue to meet their development assistance commitments – particularly to reach the United Nations target of directing at least 0.7 percent of gross national product to ODA. Remittances are the private earnings of migrant labour who contribute to the survival and livelihood of their families and communities at home and should never be treated as a long-term development strategy on a par with foreign direct investment.

Unions are also supporting efforts to make money transfers easier for migrant workers. In 2005 the Universal Postal Union (UPU) introduced an International Tele Money Order System that opens up access to more than 600,000 post offices worldwide where migrant workers can make affordable money transfers. A special trade union project supported by the International Labour Organization, UNI Global Union and the UPU on remittances is also being developed.

Global Unions also argue that the rules of competition and migration of labour need to be regulated to ensure basic employment protection. Recognised international standards – the two ILO conventions, number 97 (Migration for Employment) and 143 (Migrant Workers Convention) and the UN convention on migrant workers – provide for the right of migrants to equal treatment at work and need to be more widely promoted.

Trade unions in the sending countries must educate their members about their rights overseas. Those in the host countries must find ways to recognise, welcome, include and protect migrant workers.



