

# Thinking Outside the Box? The British Trade Union Strategy for Organising Polish Workers

Ian Fitzgerald Northumbria University

Jane Hardy University of  
Hertfordshire

# Two faces of migration and trade unions in the UK

2008

## Opening centre for migrant workers

### 'One-stop shop' for migrants

#### Language courses on offer

MIGRANT workers have been put on the path to overcoming language barriers with the opening of a new education facility in Thetford.

Nearly 100 Portuguese and Eastern Europeans have benefited from the Timmy McLean Community Learning Centre, on courses run by the GMB Union.

The community facility at Thetford fire station, off Norwich Road, was opened in August in

memory of the five-year-old boy who died in a house blaze.

Steve Walker, regional co-ordinator of the GMB, said the centre had enabled the union and its learning representatives to run English Speakers of Other Languages courses for migrants.

There were plans to expand the courses, which have been well received by learners and does met with a 100pc completion rate.

#### New education facility helping with English

Dozens of migrant workers have been put on the path to overcoming the language barrier after the opening of a new education facility in Thetford. Nearly 100 Portuguese and Eastern Europeans have so far benefited from the Timmy McLean Community Learning Centre, thanks to courses run by the GMB Union.

The community facility at Thetford fire station, off Norwich Road, was opened in August in memory of a five-year-old boy, who tragically died in a house blaze in the town.

Steve Walker, regional co-ordinator of the GMB, said the centre had enabled the union and its learning representatives to run English Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) courses for migrants to help them overcome exploitation within the workplace and marginalisation.

He added that there were plans to expand the courses.



# Two faces of migration and trade unions in the UK



January 2009



# Background



- Only UK, Ireland & Sweden opened labour markets
- 2004-2008 2 million Poles left to work in Europe
- 600,000 to 1m. came to UK
- 60 per cent of A8 workers in UK Polish
- Young & more feminised

# Driving Factors

- Uneven development
- Labour shortages
- Flexible labour markets



# **Boom to Bust**

## **2004 to 2008**

- UK had reasonable rates of growth, lower levels of unemployment
- Migrant workers central to UK economy according to government
- Widespread redundancies
- ‘Promise’ of large scale cuts in public sector

# Unemployment in selected countries 2005 to 2009

% of EU 27 average GDP per capita

	2005	2006	2007	2009	% of EU 27 average GDP per capita (2008)
Ireland	4.5	4.2	4.6	12.5	144
United Kingdom	4.6	5.0	5.5	7.8	117
Latvia	9.1	7.6	6.4	17.4	55
Lithuania	9.2	6.4	4.6	16.7	61
Poland	18.0	16.8	10.3	7.8	65

# Areas of Employment

Sectoral Profile of A8 workers, 2009

Sector registered	Number of A8 workers registered
Administration, business & management	379,730
Hospitality & catering	176,635
Agriculture	93,380
Manufacturing	66,615
Food/fish/meat processing	45,385
Retail	40,950
Health & medical	39,305
Construction & land	36,750
Transport	23,710

According to a public policy advisor 'The idea that migrant workers comprise a marginal segment of the UK workforce that is dispensed of when times are tough is clearly wide of the mark' (Churchard, 2009).

Migrants choosing to stay in adopted countries rather than return home despite high unemployment and lack of jobs.

# (Official) Union responses

## National

- Inclusive (actively organised Polish workers)
- But some tensions in this strategy:

“I’m not convinced this (the move to vulnerable workers strategy) will help unions organise effectively. It is important to address migrant workers not as vulnerable workers, but as a specific ‘migrant worker’ group” (T&G)

- Campaigned (Gangmasters legislation);
- International collaboration.



# (Official) Union responses

## Regional

- TUC supported a number of regional projects to drive and support Polish migrant engagement;
- Support a number of English Speakers Other Languages and learning projects;
- Engaged with Regional Development Agencies (regional governance organisations);



# (Official) Union responses

## Local

- Construction
  - Labour market

Approx 202,407 firms (2008) over 87% less than 8 employees and 39% one employed;

Type of employment (significant A8 self-employment – estimated over 400,000);

- On-spec movement both Poland to UK & in UK;
- Agencies direct to building sites;
- Sub-contractors directly.



# (Official) Union responses

## Local (cont)

- Construction (unions difficult relationship)
  - Union responses (trust of Poles vital)
    - Ucatt (officials go between sites to try to engage);
    - Gangmasters Licensing authority;
    - Posted Workers.



# ‘British Jobs for British Workers’

Raises a set of important issues regarding;

- Trade unions (responses both external & internal);
- How labour markets operate? (Flexibility – growth of periphery > core)
- Xenophobia (local jobs for local European people?)
- Neo-liberalism (restructuring of state & labour relations)
- State regulation of labour (dis-intervention > political intervention)