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**Labour Relations Practices and Migrant Workers in Ireland**

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## **ABSTRACT:**

The growth of global economic activity has resulted in a world-wide increase in migration. This economic expansion has been welcome but at the same time has brought new challenges. Ireland, once regarded as a country of emigration, is now an economy dependent on the labour of non-Irish workers. In 2003 over 47,000 work permits were issued. In comparative terms, Ireland's current rate of immigration per capita is double that of the United States. Yet, there are two contrasting images of non-national workers in Ireland. On the one hand, non-Irish national workers are viewed as a source of cheap labour, easily disposable and found in the tertiary labour market. On the other hand there exists the image of such workers as highly skilled and central to Ireland's economic boom of recent years. Despite conflicting media reports, there remains little detailed research on labour relations practices as experienced by non-Irish workers.

The main aims of the research were to subject Irish labour immigration policy to critical scrutiny, and to assess the extent to which employers and unions may facilitate the integration of non-Irish workers into the labour market. The research methodologies were principally ethnographic, including both participant and non-participant observations, interviews with key informant groups (unions, immigration policy experts, employers and managers, and non-Irish workers) as well analysis of documentary sources (such as union policies, state agency and chambers of commerce literature).

The findings show a significant lack of labour market integration and employment exploitation for non-Irish workers. The main explanatory factors include an explicit abuse of employer power coupled with a restrictive legal work permit system. Moreover, the Irish labour market conjures up not an image of a booming Celtic Tiger economy, but rather a reality of near-serfdom and social and economic exclusion. Trade union organising capacity is found to be limited to areas of social justice, owing to state legislation and employer power. In the light of these findings, it is argued that the case for greater labour

market integration and equality cannot rely on voluntarist employer interventions. To do so means profitability and product market contingencies override other social and economic needs. Social justice is itself a valuable objective, irrespective of short-term business demands.

**KEYWORDS:**

Migrant Workers, Ireland, Labour Relations, Immigration Policy.

## **1. Introduction**

The growth of global economic activity has resulted in a world-wide increase in migration. This economic expansion has been welcome but at the same time has brought new challenges. Ireland, once regarded as a country of emigration, is now an economy dependent on the labour of non-Irish workers. In comparative terms, Ireland's current rate of immigration per capita is double that of the United States. Yet, there are two contrasting images of non-national workers in Ireland. On the one hand, non-Irish national workers are viewed as a source of cheap labour, easily disposable and found in the tertiary labour market. On the other hand there exists the image of such workers as highly skilled and central to Ireland's economic boom of recent years. Despite conflicting media reports, there remains little detailed research on labour relations practices and the employment experiences of non-Irish workers.

The research is essentially exploratory in nature. Its main objectives were to subject Irish labour immigration policy to critical scrutiny, and to assess to what extent employers and unions may facilitate the greater integration of non-Irish workers into the labour market. The paper is structured in four main sections. Section two explains the research methodologies employed. The bulk of the paper reports and analyses the findings in section three, specifically assessing the following: the Irish work permit system and the reasons why non-Irish workers have entered the labour market; employer strategies for the management of immigrant workers; a consideration of broader institutional constraints; and an examination of trade union organising activity for non-Irish workers. Finally, the conclusion section suggests that the main cause of labour exploitation and work degradation for non-Irish workers is twofold: the abuse of employer power which is reinforced by state policy and legislation surrounding the work permit system. Arguably, for many migrant workers, the Irish labour market conjures up not an image of a booming Celtic Tiger economy, but rather a reality of near-serfdom and social and cultural exclusion. If the objective is attain a workplace more inclusive for the non-Irish workers and meet the demands of the Irish economy, then policy cannot be left to individual employers responding to opportunistic labour market conditions. Otherwise, the case for equality, justice and inclusion will always be dependent on such factors as the profitability of the firm or nature of the product market.

## **2. Methodology**

Due to the sensitive nature of the study, qualitative research methods were utilised. The data was collected from different counties of Ireland, and an ethnographic approach was employed. This included both participant and non-participant observation among immigrant worker campaigns, working alongside immigrant workers in different service occupations, and through a Chamber of Commerce anti-racism project located in Dublin. During the ethnographic research more than seventy informants helped with the research in various ways. In addition, documentary sources were obtained, such as union policies and various literatures from trade unions, other labour movements, ethnic minorities groups, government and policy-making agencies and in some cases employer groups, such as Chambers of Commerce.

Several key themes were devised to inform the research, including respondent experiences and perceptions of labour market conditions, trade union organising capacity specific to immigrant workers, as well as employer strategies in the management and employment of non-Irish workers. The ethnographic approach facilitated a high level of direct interaction with immigrant workers and labour movement activists, thus enabling the collection of in-depth respondent perspectives and experiences. In addition to the direct interactions with twenty-five immigrant workers in different occupations, more formal face-to-face interviews were conducted with four separate respondent groups, including: (i) five union officers, (ii) five immigration policy experts, (iv) four human resource managers, (v) thirty non-Irish workers. All the participants were guaranteed anonymity and asked to grant their permission for audio recording and in some cases for their photographs to be taken.

The coding for the data analysis for this study consisted of allocating sections of transcripts and notes into multiple categories. The process involved carefully categorising data in both pre-determined and emerging themes. The method used was a cyclical design that constantly referred back to the transcripts, notes and documentation in order to refine the categorisation and synthesis of data in an attempt to ascertain the pertinent issues and patterns and isolate key phrases within the framework of the study.

### 3. Findings

#### 3.1. *The rise of a Non-Irish labour force*

*“Immigration is, and will continue to be, essential to how we [Irish] as a society, and as individuals, develop and prosper. Immigration is a relatively new phenomenon in Ireland - we have known the other side of the coin for generations. Even today people continue to leave Ireland to expand their experiences and skills.”* (Fragment of the statement by Minister of Enterprise Trade and Employment Micheál Martin to Seanad Éireann in relation to the rights of migrant workers on Wednesday, 12<sup>th</sup> April 2005)

The growth of global economic activity has resulted in a world-wide increase in migration. Over the last fifteen years, Ireland has experienced unprecedented economic expansion. Since 1993, the Irish economy has grown at annual rates in excess of 8 per cent, and employment grew by about 25 per cent between 1993 and 1998 (Tansey, 1998; O’Connell, 1999).

This expansion has been welcome but at the same time has brought new challenges (Gunnigle et al., 1999). Ireland’s current rate of immigration per capita is double that of the United States, and Ireland is fast becoming a multicultural society comprising many immigrant workers. There are approximately 165 different nationalities represented in the labour force. Once regarded as a country of emigration, Ireland is now an economy more and more dependent on the labour of immigrant workers. It is also a country that is increasingly attractive to asylum seekers as well as foreign nationals seeking employment.

FIGURE 1

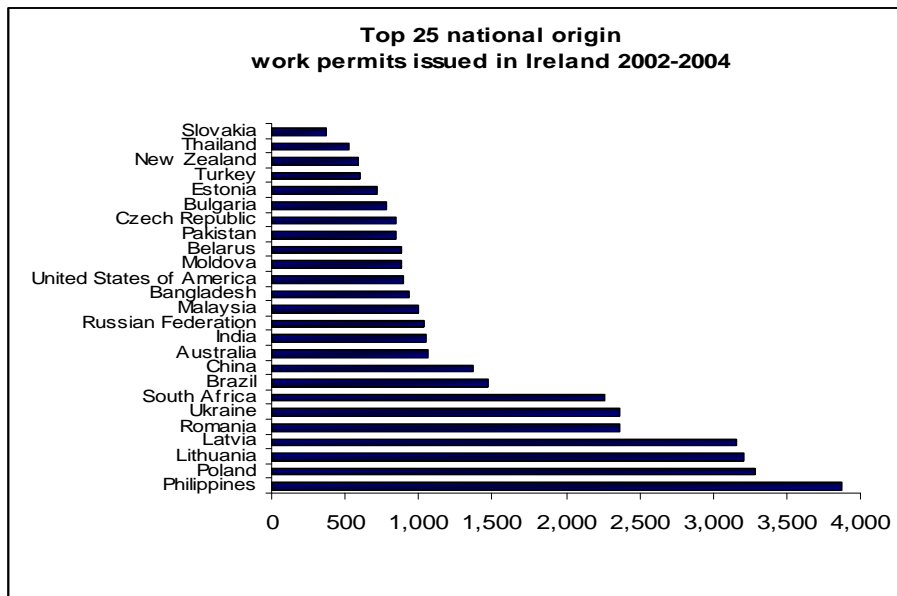


*Data Source: The Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment.*

As reported in Figure 1, the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment (DETE) issued 47,551 work permits in 2003, 40,321 in 2002, 36,436 in 2001 (DETE, 2003). This compares with 6,528 issued in 1999 (FAS, 2001). In 2004 34,067 work permits were issued. This reduction is due to the fact that one of the largest regions of labour supply to Ireland was the block of Eastern European Countries which are now members of the EU since 1<sup>st</sup> May 2005 (see also Figure 2). Thus although the reported incidence of work permits issued fell slightly, the rate of foreign workers entering the Irish labour market continues to rise.



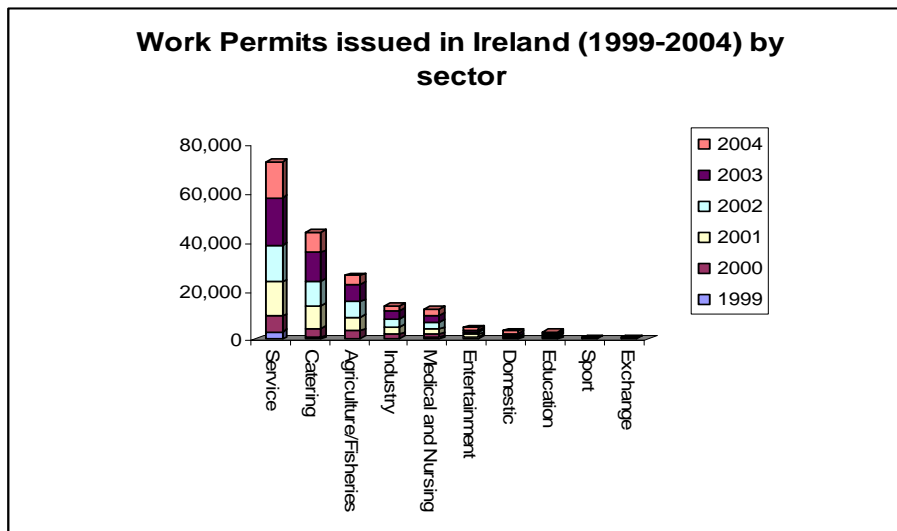
FIGURE 2



Source: Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment.

Figure 3 provides some information as to the distribution of foreign workers according to industrial sector across the Irish economy. The majority of work permit holders are concentrated among some of the lower paid occupations in services, catering and agriculture and fisheries. In contrast, the medical and nursing professions did not experience any significant variation in numbers compared with the previously mentioned sectors in the period 1999-2004. This sector is associated with the high representation of nursing practitioners from the Philippines and medical staff from Middle East and South Asian countries.

FIGURE 3



*Data Source: The Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment.*

In Ireland, statistics related to foreign nationals are dispersed across both public and private sources (Barry, 2000). There are no reliable statistics readily available on the numbers of European Economic Area (EEA)<sup>1</sup> nationals in Ireland. The reason for this data deficit is that EEA nationals are not obliged to report their presence in Ireland to the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform, and prior to the current census (2002), nationality and ethnicity had not been measured.

It is a lawful requirement for every non-EEA national resident in Ireland to have a residence permit whether as a refugee, asylum seeker, non-EEA national under a work permit, non-EEA national with a work visa<sup>1</sup>/work authorisation<sup>2</sup> or as a student under

<sup>1</sup> Work permits are issued to employers who employ non-EEA nationals to fill specific vacancies that they have not been unable to fill from within the EEA. The employer is required to undertake an economic needs test. This in effect means that they must advertise the particular employment position for four weeks with Ireland's national employment service, FÁS, before offering the job to a non-EEA national (Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment, 2005)

<sup>2</sup> Working visas or work authorisations were introduced to allow greater access to the labour market for non-EEA workers in possession of skills deemed beneficial to the Irish economy. These skill categories include professionals in the areas of: health and medicine, information computing technology and construction professionals, including, for example, architects, engineers and town planners. Unlike work permits, working visas and work authorisations are issued to the individual and not the employer. Recipients of working visas or work authorisations are free to change employment within the economic sector of their visa. In addition, working visas/work authorisations are granted for 2 years and can be renewed thereafter by the immigration authorities.

the student visa scheme. Residence permits are renewed annually by the local Garda immigration office. The Work Permit Section in the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment examines applications from employers. Employers are required to prove that the vacancy cannot be filled by an Irish national, an EEA national or other person for whom a work permit is not required. The employer should demonstrate reasonable efforts to recruit people at national and EEA levels.

### *3.2. Worker expectations and a Celtic 'fantasy'*

According to the results of this research, it seems that most migrant workers were not aware of what their situation would be in Ireland or underestimated the difficulties of their experience abroad before undertaking migration. There were also significant differences in migration goals and their relative fulfilment. There are socio-economic reasons for different departure characteristics, which can be organised to present a typology of migrants. Portes and Rumbaut (1996) classified immigrants into four types: labour immigrants, professional immigrants, entrepreneurial immigrants and refugees and asylum seekers.

This research identified several reasons why participants chose to emigrate, and why they chose Ireland as a destination. These included the expectations created by the successful stories of those fellow countrywomen/men who emigrated and who either returned home creating new economic opportunities for themselves and their local communities or who decided to stay abroad and have achieved a stable legal status, economic solvency, freedom of traditional cultural patterns, and in several cases, foreign partners with whom they have built a family abroad:

*You heard stories from these places were everything is shiny and bright, where to get money is so easy, where there is a job for everyone who wants it [...] you see the pictures they post, you see the presents they bring when they go home in Christmas [...] you see their clothes and cool electronic things [...] you see how their parents managed to refurnish their home [...] everyone talks about ways how to send and to get money from the ones that are working*

*abroad [...] and it seems that outside things are easier than at home.*

(Romanian, male, 28, kitchen porter)

In Ireland, every person who is not a national of the European Economic Area (EEA) or Switzerland needs either an employment permit obtained by an employer, or must obtain a work visa/authorisation to be able to enter employment in Ireland. Workers from outside the EEA/Switzerland are confronted with a variety of exclusion and marginalisation factors, including lack of information, exploitation by recruitment agencies and traffickers, exploitation by employers, inadequate access to legal redress, social segregation and differential treatment in public services such as hospital attention charges and third level education fees. As one of the Latvian female worker's explains:

*I didn't know how the system worked here [in Ireland], I get paid less than the Irish do in the same cleaning company [...] every time I go to the tax office they seem to ignore me, they don't try to understand me... they just don't listen to me [...] Sometimes I think it is because of my English, but most of the times I think it's because I am not Irish (Latvian, female, 21, cleaner).*

Generally migratory chains are started by an external factor, such as recruitment networks based on family or on neighbourhood which help to provide shelter, work and assistance in coping with bureaucratic procedures and support in personal difficulties on arrival. The figure of the recruitment agency, either formal or informal, appears to be a constant element present in the process of migrating to Ireland. Recruitment agencies abroad are not regulated in Ireland. It was found in this study when interviewing four Philippine workers who came to Ireland on employment visas, that a fast food company with a recognised global brand name contracts the services of a recruitment agency with several branches in Southeast Asian countries. This agency charges the job seeker in those countries a fee equivalent to €1000 plus €500 for the employment permit fees for the first year with the guarantee of finding a job in Ireland in the fast food company. The fee has to be paid in advance. In case the job seeker's application or visa is refused, it can take several months to return 80% of the applicant's fee. For those whose application is successful and who obtain regular

employment (such as in the hotel or catering industry), this means having to work for more than a year and half to repay recruitment agency fees. Many immigrant workers interviewed explained that as a consequence, they have to borrow money from their relatives in the hope they can send back money in the future. Again, in the words of some of the immigrant workers:

*For our families, even when they miss us, to be abroad is a matter of pride [...] So when one gets the opportunity of leaving the country, our parents and other relatives lend or give us the money for the tickets and some money for the travel [...] they know as soon we start earn in Euros we'll send their money back to them [...] it is like an investment for them [...] and they feel proud talking to everyone what they did (Malaysian, male, 30, chef).*

*Chinese parents think that to go abroad and to learn how other people live and to learn their language makes our character stronger [...] they feel proud because they think I come to Ireland, and when I go back, I would be able to afford to give them a better life (Chinese, female, 23, English language student and part-time worker in a fast food restaurant).*

For many respondents in this study, the experiences of every-day working life in Ireland's booming Celtic Tiger economy is more akin to work intensification, degradation and the needs of survivability than an image of enhanced economic and social prosperity. Several factors explain the vulnerability of many immigrant workers, both the physical and psychological exploitation encountered in the workplace. For example, one Bulgarian woman reported receiving a contract of employment with favourable conditions including accommodation and an employment permit to work in Ireland as a kitchen porter. When she started work, she discovered that she was not paid the agreed rate, the days off were irregular, her daily shifts changed constantly, her breaks were not paid, she had to share her accommodation with other non-Irish national woman in poor living conditions located in the countryside without the possibility of socialising with people other than her co-

workers. She raised the situation with her employer, who told her that if she was not happy her employment permit would be cancelled. Significantly, similar incidents and stories were reported during the course of this research. Due to economic pressures, Ireland's work permit system and family and self-generated expectations, migrant workers experience a system of near-serfdom, as another Argentinean worker explains:

*I was earning €3.20 per hour, and I heard that the minimum wage is above €6, but because I didn't have papers I couldn't tell to anyone, and I couldn't change my job [...] nobody would give me a job because I didn't have papers [...] I came here because my country didn't require a visa to enter Ireland, and then I decided to stay because I met a guy from Slovakia [...] when his country gained access to the EU, we got married and now I can work legally [...]*  
(Argentinean, female, 26 chambermaid)

### *3.3. Employer strategies and migrant workers*

The position of migrant workers and Ireland's legal system described above ultimately served to protect managerial control and power over vulnerable groups of people. Significantly, many employers devise their own particular systems of labour supply. For example, in the fast food and hotel industries it was found that clusters of people with the same nationality and usually from the same region in a particular country make for a readily available supply of cheap labour. Many share the same language, have emotional and cultural bonds that facilitates recruitment through social networks. Migratory movements generally arise through the previous existence of links between sending and receiving countries. According to the findings of this research, most workers from outside the EEA had some connection with each other before their arrival in Ireland. They describe the relationship between themselves and their co-nationals either as relatives or as a friend of a friend. Basically, there is a pioneer from a certain region in a specific country who opens the "road" for her/his relatives and friends. This offers the employer the possibility of recruiting further

labour. Clusters of workers of the same nationality tend to identify and socialise with one-another, both in the workplace and outside of it. This was especially in the case for Filipino, Latvian, Lithuanian, Polish and Chinese workers, where they share accommodation with people from the same country, sharing rooms with as many as four people to save money.

This social behaviour arising from informal recruitment networks has contradictory impacts. Even when this behaviour seems to be adaptive because of the social and emotional support which it provides, the lack of contact with the Irish environment, culture and society can have as a consequence a cycle of self-perpetuated victimisation and inter-cultural dependency. It was found that some employers use the justification of a lack of proficiency in English to explain the absence of promotion for non-EU workers. Interviewed migrant workers expressed that the major limitations to upgrade their job conditions are language barriers. This is compounded by work intensification in the form of long hours and a work-permit system that shackles non-EEA workers to a single employer. Very few managers were prepared to recognise the qualifications of migrant workers or provide supportive workplace training programmes. The social and behavioural outcomes lead to a distinctive ‘them and us’ divide, not just between capital and labour but among Irish and non-Irish people:

*They (Irish people) don't understand why I work so hard [...] Latvian people are well know in Ireland for being very good workers [...] last year Latvians were attacked in Dublin [...] some Irish think we are going to steal their jobs [...] bosses like hard workers, but other people get angry and don't like us [...] they don't understand, or they don't want to know that if I work so hard it is because I need the money (Latvian, female, 25, waitress).*

#### *3.4. Institutionalising labour market serfdom?*

The current work permit scheme in Ireland does not allow non-EU nationals to change employers. Consequently, the Irish State is the gatekeeper for continued

employer control over migrant workers' lives, both inside and outside of their place of work. In practical terms, this means that local managers have the discretion to decide whether a non-national worker can remain in Ireland or not. The power to exercise such discretion is often subject to the acceptance of managerial prerogative and the acquiescence to employment conditions dictated by local managers. It is the general perception among non-EU workers that security is dependent on the work permit system and dictate of managers, not on their performance in the job. On several occasions during this research it was explained that the work permit system is used by employers as covert threats in the context of continued employment. For many workers, the economic pressures associated with maintaining an income make it difficult to say "no" to even the most "friendly question" to work extra hours.

The crux of the matter is Irish immigration legislation. For example, this 'allows' that after three months in Ireland a person who has a work visa/authorisation can 'apply for permission' to bring her/his family members to Ireland. In most cases such 'permission' is granted, although it is not guaranteed. However, family reunification rights for non-EEA workers are further restricted, especially in the sense that spouses and siblings of non-EEA workers have no right to work. Non-married partners, persons in same-sex relationships or parents who depend economically on the migrant worker have no formal rights. Migrant workers and their families therefore have to struggle to survive on a single low salary.

In addition to work permit legislation, the findings show evidence that migrant workers face numerous other barriers in the labour market, many of which further reinforce a system of single employer dependency. Some of these problems are connected with objective disadvantages, such as inadequate education and training, lack of access to social networks, non-recognition of qualifications gained abroad and inadequate command of the host country's language. However employer responses are quite variable. Some have established administrative actions that, in their judgement, facilitate immigrant workers' adjustment in the workplace. Some employers value immigrant workers' diligence, reliability and willingness to work hard for low pay, while yet other employers appear satisfied to remain recipients of a system that consolidates their position as a bearer of labour market power while maintaining a low cost base.

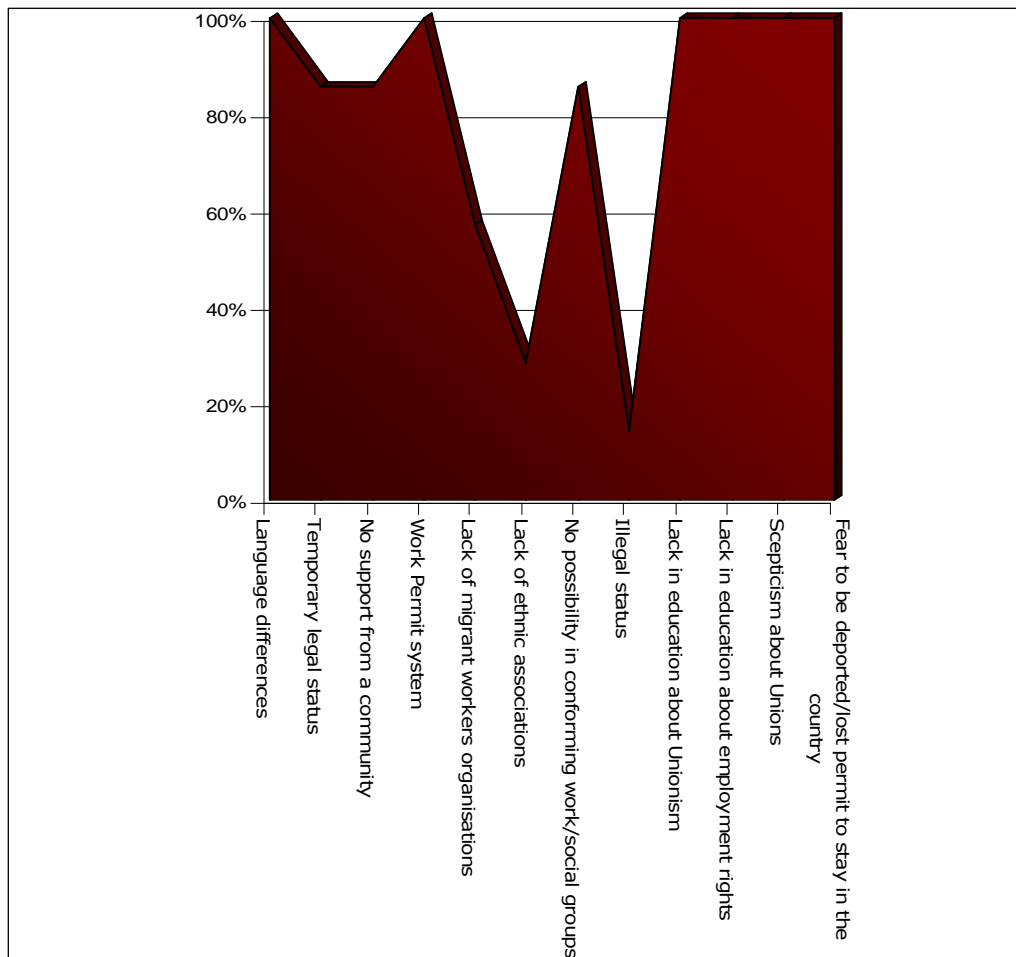


According to the Chambers of Commerce (CCI, 2001), explaining why employers recruit foreign workers, 63 per cent said that the main reason for recruiting foreign staff was that non-Irish nationals happened to be the best candidates in relation to their experience, training and education for the positions. Thirty per cent of the employers interviewed said that Irish national candidates have unrealistic pay expectations and little interest in certain kinds of jobs. Another reason was that certain jobs require specific foreign language skills, which are not available among Irish candidates (CCI, 2001). As one union official explained the matter:

*The work permit system in Ireland establishes an unhealthy relationship because the non-EU worker is not legally allowed to change employment if they feel they have been abused or exploited ... or if they just want change jobs ... the employer can control the worker with the explicit or implicit threat to deny the renewal of the work permit ... or, even more critically, they fear the loss of the permission to stay in Ireland if they are fired by the employer ... they (immigrant workers) believe that they have to make their employer happy. If not, they will have to return to their country of origin (Union officer).*

Figure 4 shows the most common vulnerabilities among non-Irish workers as reported to trade unions. Three-quarters of the union officials expressed the view that immigrant workers are perceived in the labour market as a cheap labour force. Nearly a quarter expressed the view that employers perceive immigrant workers, first and foremost, as a labour force with manual skills as opposed to knowledge. Only one of the union's had experienced immigrant workers in the context of a high level of education. This can be attributed to the fact that this particular trade union represents professionals in a sector in which Ireland has a shortage of practitioners, the health sector.

FIGURE 4



N= 7

### 3.5. Immigration and union organising

The traditional functions of trade unionism are multi-dimensional (Flanders, 1970). On the one hand trade unions operate to protect a vested interest, in particular the economic position and well-being of their members. Yet at the same time, trade unions have a history of being at the vanguard of emerging social and political movements; what Flanders termed the ‘sword of justice’ purpose. From this research it appears that Irish trades union are directing their attention and resources towards a (marginal) ‘sword of justice’ function with regard to migrant labour. In contrast, union movements in other countries, notable the US and in particular the State of California (Milkman, 2000), trades union have taken the sword of justice principle

much further and devised specific mobilising and organising activities to recruit and protect the concerns of migrant workers.

The sword of justice principle in Ireland can be evident through several union responses to the challenge of immigration, mainly through creating an atmosphere that seeks to celebrate cultural diversity and raises awareness about racism through workshops, posters and leaflets at the workplace. There is one campaign run by ICTU appealing for the early ratification of the UN Convention on the Rights of Migrants and their families. If adopted and implemented this could protect immigrant rights by allowing partners and spouses the right to work in Ireland, and for immigrants to have access to education and training. Perhaps not surprising therefore, there is no evidence that union membership in Ireland has increased among non-Irish workers.

While there is some evidence about the direct union mobilising activity, such as the SIPTU case on behalf of a non-Irish worker earning €1 per hour on Irish Ferries, or the strike at an Irish brick factory in 2001 in support of a pay parity claim for Czech workers, in general Irish unions organising attempts are considered secondary to traditional union concerns, such as wages and working conditions. In this regard two paths to promote social justice can be identified from this research. The first is trade unionism as an agent in the provision of support services. These would typically include free legal information and assistance in the case of discrimination, in obtaining PPS (Personal Public Service) numbers and some support for language training. The second justice role is as a conduit for greater labour integration through awareness and anti-discrimination campaigning more broadly. Activities along this mobilising trajectory tend to be more long-term, and include the promotion of education about social values among existing members, anti-racism training, the prevention of different forms of discrimination, and an awareness of multiculturalism and the value of diversity in the workplace.

Some of the details about justice awareness are nonetheless significant factors that shape and influence contemporary labour relations practices in Ireland. For example, the first “Equality-Diversity” award was launched by SIPTU, who invited Sections Branches and Regional Committees or individual SIPTU members to nominate someone who they considered to have done particularly important work countering

racism and promoting racial harmony and inter-culturalism. In the “Anti-Racism at the Workplace” Week, SIPTU appealed to all workers to find out if their workplace was being cleaned by a reputable contract cleaning company which guaranteed that the work was being carried out by people who were being paid at least the statutory minimum rate and who enjoyed all other statutory conditions of employment. As one union officer explains:

*There are good examples of innovation and particular attention to the needs of migrant workers such as a one-day training on anti-racism and multiculturalism, cultural morning-breaks with African music and singing in the canteens of two factories. Persons were nominated whose individual work had impacted positively on the integration of immigrant workers, with actions such as contacting employers and agencies on immigrants’ behalf, making sure that they were treated equally and fairly; writing a letter in their native language to each immigrant worker informing them about their rights, welcoming them to the Irish workforce and to SIPTU and offering translation for any grievance letters; assistance with issues such as housing, transport, access to medical attention; and submitting claims to the Work Permit Section and the Labour Inspectorate of the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Union officer).*

For the most part, the mobilising capacity of Irish unions appears to be constrained by the same state regulations experienced by migrant workers. While it was reported that immigrants who have experience of trade unionism from their home countries are more likely to be unionised, many more face covert threats from employers about the status of their work permit should they seek union representation:

*Traditional union mechanisms such as strikes can persuade for rights (such as minimum wage, holidays, health and safety, etc.). However, due to the work permit scheme, if immigrant workers strike, they have the underlying threat of dismissal, the consequences of which might include the loss of their permit to stay in Ireland or deportation. (Union officer).*

Overall, therefore, the response of unions in Ireland in relation to integrating immigrant workers go beyond their membership. In Irish trade unions, some positive friendly steps have been made concerning the day-by-day activities in the workplace. However, there has not been any specific coordinated mobilisation as evident in other countries (see for example, Milkman, 2000). Nor are any immigrants or ethnic minorities included in union structures, and no evidence was found relating to foreign-born organisers or union activists. Furthermore, it was found that attempts to reach out to non-national workers have not had a significant impact on the membership of any of the unions interviewed.

#### **4. Summary and conclusions**

It could be said that trade unions in Ireland are potential agents and promoters of social justice and diversity issues relating to immigrant workers. Some indications were found that the issue of immigrant worker representation and multicultural awareness is beginning to be addressed. However, it is also evident that institutional forces and state practices serve to regulate and control the ability of unions to expand membership services among non-Irish sections of the labour market. Significantly, employer power and the prerogative to withdraw workers' work permit is indicative not of a booming Celtic Tiger economy, but rather an underworld of serfdom, exploitation and work intensification. Arguably, there is strong evidence of the need to address the scepticism about the role of trade unions and labour movement in general among nationals from former communist countries or countries with high levels of labour organising coercion using educational programmes such as workshops to share experiences of successful union intervention dealing with cases of non-Irish workers. Given the short history of the immigrant workforce in Ireland and the challenges that it poses, rhetoric commitment is perceived in the generation of policies and the promotion of practices to prevent the manifestation of racism and the unequal treatment of immigrant workers.

Nevertheless, there is a need for the development and adoption of a strategic long-term plan for the integration immigrant workers and reform of the immigration policy

in Ireland. In order to achieve this, Ireland could learn from other experiences, particularly from those that are seen as “immigration countries”, where integrative policy approaches have been undertaken. Key Irish industrial relations actors have acknowledged that legal status, language differences, job segregation and a lack of social support constitute major limitations for the integration of immigrant workers. Even so, there has not been enough strategic action to redress the imbalance of power inherent in current employment system in Ireland for immigrant workers. As a result, the integration of immigrant workers into Ireland labour market economy remains marginal at best and exploitative at worst. If the effort to make a workplace more inclusive for the non-EEA national is left totally to individual employers responding to the diverse labour market, any business case for equality and justice will always be contingent on such factors as the profitability of the firm or nature of the product market.

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