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## Bitten by the Celtic Tiger: Immigrant Workers and Industrial Relations in the New 'Glocalized' Ireland

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*The growth of global economic activity has resulted in a worldwide increase in migration. Despite the growing interest in migratory labour flows, there remains little detailed empirical research about the labour relations practices experienced by immigrant workers. In this article, three general areas are examined from data collected in the Republic of Ireland: (1) what are the experiences of non-Irish national workers employed in different sectors of the economy; (2) do trade unions facilitate the integration of migrant workers in the Irish labour market; and (3) what are the strategies undertaken by trade unions in response to the challenges of immigration? Ethnographic and qualitative research methods were employed to address these broad research objectives. The evidence shows that many immigrant workers have experienced a system of near-serfdom that perpetuates social, economic and cultural exclusion on a large scale. The conclusion argues that an emerging 'glocalization' of the world economy creates a labour market dynamic underpinned by neoliberal policies of the nation-state. The evidence suggests that traditional views of migration and industrial relations theory are found wanting when seeking to explain the concerns of migrant workers. A number of implications arising from this are then discussed. Keywords: immigrant workers, industrial relations, Republic of Ireland, trade unions*

### **Key words**

Immigrant workers, industrial relations, trade unions, Republic of Ireland

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

The growth of global economic activity has resulted in a world-wide increase in migration (Borjas et al, 1996; Castles, 2002; IOM, 2006; Massey, 1999; Rodrik et al, 1997; Salazar-Parreñas, 2000; Stalker, 2000; Taran & Geronimi, 1997). Ireland, once regarded as a country of emigration, is now an economy dependent on the labour of non-Irish workers (CCI, 2001; Mac Einrí, 2001). In comparative terms, Ireland's current rate of immigration per capita is double that of the United States. There are two contrasting images of foreign workers in Ireland. On the one hand, there exists an image that such workers are highly skilled and central to Ireland's economic boom of recent years. On the other hand, however, non-Irish national workers are viewed as a source of cheap labour, easily disposable and found in the tertiary labour market.

In Ireland the issue of immigrant worker rights has received considerable attention in recent years, not least the high profile disputes concerning the exploitation of non-Irish workers at GAMA and Irish Ferries. These disputes are particularly noteworthy developments that provide an important contextual canvas against which this research has been conducted. For example immigrant workers employed by GAMA International, a Turkish construction company, went on strike in May 2005 for over 7 weeks because the company withheld workers' wages and salaries (illegally) in a Dutch bank, without their consent or knowledge. More recently, the high profile of the Irish Ferries dispute brought the plight of immigrant workers to the fore. Significantly, this illustrated the apparent ease with which employers could replace an existing workforce with immigrant labour on lower rates of pay. In an unparalleled

display of public unity not seen in Ireland since the late 1970s, the Irish trade union movement organised public demonstrations and marches around Dublin in support of dismissed workers and immigrant employees recruited on inferior terms and conditions of employment by Irish Ferries. Such developments in Ireland elevated the issue of foreign workers and labour standards onto a national and visibly public platform, not hitherto witnessed in Irish industrial relations for over a decade.

It is in this context that this research is set. 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 six sections. Section two explains the research methodologies employed, and this is followed by a review of data on the number of immigrant workers in the Irish labour market. The bulk of the evidence and analysis is reported in section four, specifically assessing the following: why foreign workers have entered the labour market; the institutional rigidities with the Irish work permit system; inequality in labour standards; and employer strategies in using non-Irish workers. Section five reports on trade union organising activity for foreign workers, and the conclusion argues that the main cause of labour exploitation and work degradation for non-Irish workers is twofold: first, it is due to the abuse of employer power, and secondly, this power is reinforced by state policy and legislation surrounding the work permit system. Arguably, for many migrant workers, the Irish labour market now conjures up not an image of a booming Celtic Tiger economy, but rather a much less attractive reality of

near-serfdom and social and cultural exclusion. If the objective is to attain a workplace which is more inclusive for the non-Irish worker and still meet the demands of the Irish economy, then current labour policy cannot be left to individual employers to respond in opportunistic and discriminatory ways. 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, several qualitative and ethnographic research instruments were utilised. Interviews were held with three respondent groups: key policy makers in Ireland; national union officers; and immigrant workers. In addition, documentary material was reviewed where available, such as union policies and various literatures from state agencies and employers organisations.

The primary research method involved an ethnographic approach which involved participant and non-participant observation and semi-structured interviews. One member of the research team was employed on the “Diversity at Work Network project” funded by the European Social Fund and the European Union EQUAL Initiative, and was based with a number of partner institutions across Ireland (the Chambers of Commerce of Ireland, the National Consultative Committee on Racism and Interculturalism (NCCRI), and the Institute of Technology in Blanchardstown (ITB)) over a period of six months. This involved organising and participating in workshops, advising

companies and immigrant workers, as well as attending conferences and events directly related to non-Irish workers, immigration policy, and a National Action Plan Against Racism. The primary ethnographic approach centred on observing interactions and issues faced by foreign workers, and how employers, unions and immigration policy responded. It also facilitated the development of relationships with the potential informants, which included immigrant workers, officials of state agencies, employer groups and trade unions.

In total, seventy semi-structured interviews were conducted with foreign workers<sup>1</sup>, members of ethnic minority community groups<sup>2</sup>, employers, government officials, and trade union national officers. Some of these included focus group interviews with workers, as well as forty-four one-to-one interviews with the following key informants: (i) five union officers; (ii) five immigration policy experts in Ireland; (iii) four human resource managers in Ireland; and (iv), thirty non-Irish workers. All participants were guaranteed anonymity and asked 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 within both previously determined themes and according to emerging issues from respondent groups. The method used was

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<sup>1</sup> Three Polish nationals; one Romanian; three Philippine nationals, three Latvians, two Chinese nationals, one Malaysian, one from the United States, one from Nigeria, one from Pakistan, one from India, and one from Brazil.

<sup>2</sup> Members of the Polish, Philippine, Brazilian and Chinese community were interviewed.

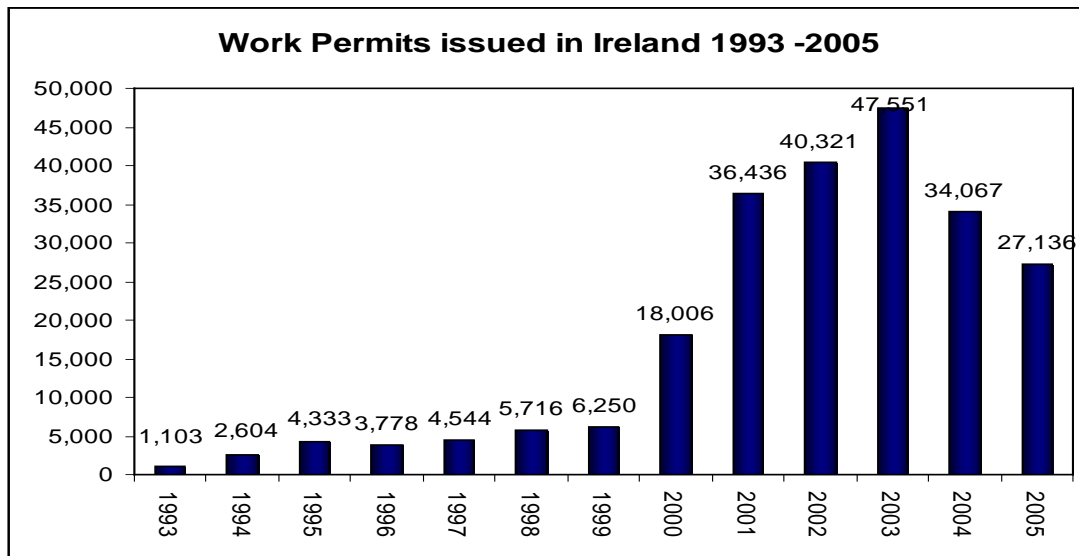
a cyclical design that constantly referred back to the transcripts, notes and documentation in order to refine the categorisation and synthesis of data in an attempt to ascertain the pertinent issues and patterns and isolate key phrases within the framework of study.

### ***3. RISE OF THE NON-IRISH LABOUR FORCE***

With the rate and pace of economic growth over the decade, Ireland is an attractive location for asylum seekers as well as foreign nationals who are seeking employment. Over the last twelve years, Ireland has experienced unprecedented economic expansion. From 1995 to 2000 , the Irish economy grew at annual rates in excess of 8 per cent. It has performed strongly though not so spectacularly in the years since. Employment has expanded by an average of 25 per cent between 1993 and 1998 (O'Connell, 1999). By 2002, the immigrant population in Ireland accounted 224,261 equal to approximately nine per cent of the working population (CSE, 2006).

The Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment (DETE) issued 47,551 work permits in 2003, 40,321 in 2002, 36,436 in 2001 (see Figure 1). Ireland's current rate of immigration per capita is double that of the United States. In 2005, 27,136 work permits were issued, and this has continued to decline not because there are fewer immigrants but due to the expansion of EU-member states whose citizens do not require permits. In other words, the number of non-Irish workers continues to rise, even though the number of work permits issued has declined.

**Figure 1**

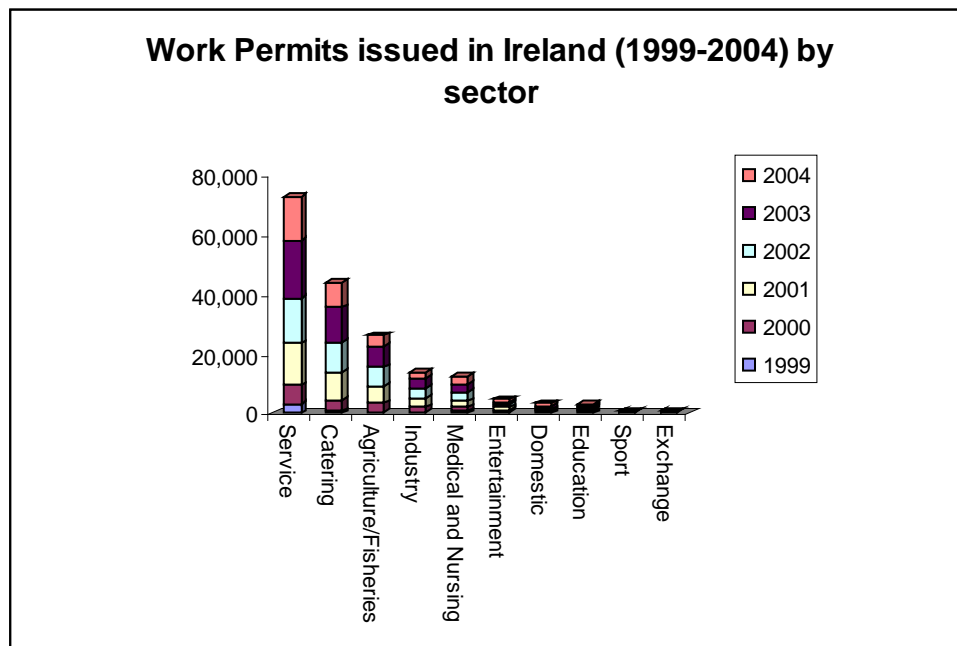


*Data Source: The Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment (2003, 2004, 2005, 2006).*

Perhaps more interesting is the job and sector destination for many immigrants entering the labour force. As noted in Figure 2, the majority of immigrant workers can be found in lower paid and lower skilled occupations in the service, catering, agriculture/fishery sectors, whereas the higher skilled professional occupations in the medical and nursing sectors are comparatively minimal.



**Figure 2**



*Data Source: The Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment (2003, 2005).*

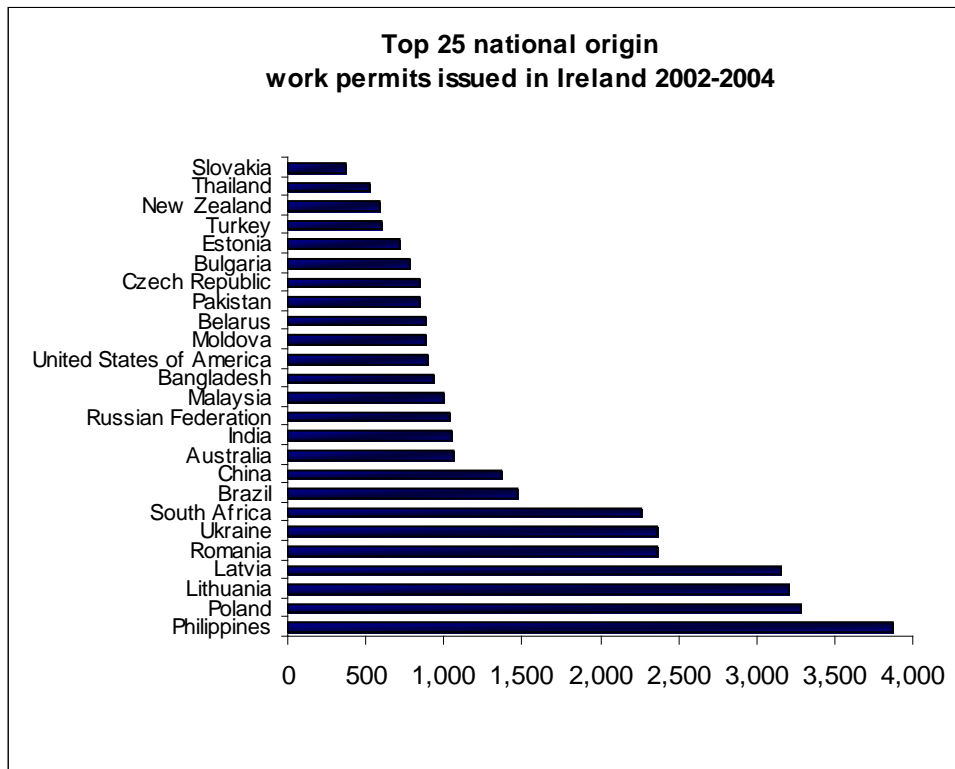
However, there are important deficits in the available data (Barry, 2000). For example, there are no reliable statistics available on the numbers of European Economic Area (EEA)<sup>3</sup> nationals in Ireland who do not require specific work permits or have to report their presence to the authorities. Furthermore, prior to the latest census data (2002)<sup>4</sup>, nationality and ethnicity had not been surveyed. The problem of accurate data is further compounded by illegal non-Irish nationals who enter the labour market and work without permits: and nationals from EU 15 and the aforementioned new accession countries who since 2004 do not required permission to work in Ireland. Basically, if there is no requirement for a work permit there is no data.

<sup>3</sup> The EEA includes all the EU states (Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Ireland, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Portugal, Spain, Sweden and the United Kingdom) with the addition of Liechtenstein, Iceland and Norway.

<sup>4</sup> In 2002, 16% of the population living in Ireland were not Irish citizens (CSO, 2002).

Figure 3 shows top 25 countries of origin of work permit holders in the period 2002 -2004.

**Figure 3**



*Data Source: The Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment (2003, 2005).*

Currently it is estimated that the foreign labour force in Ireland is more than eight percent of the labour force<sup>5</sup>, with approximately half of them from Poland<sup>6</sup>

It is a lawful requirement for every non-EEA national resident in Ireland to have a residence permit as a refugee, an asylum seeker, a non-EEA national

<sup>5</sup> The total labour force of Ireland was 2,180,300 in May 2006 (CS0, 2007).

<sup>6</sup> The Polish embassy estimates that roughly 120,000 Polish nationals live in Ireland (Kropiweic &, King-O'Riain 2006). Poland became an EU state in May 2004. Since then, citizens from Poland do not require legal permission to live and work in Ireland.

under work permit,<sup>7</sup> a non-EEA national with a work visa/work authorisation<sup>8</sup> or as a student under a student visa scheme. Residence permits are usually 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.

#### ***4. A road to serfdom?***

The evidence from this research highlights that the image of a Celtic Tiger holds very little reality for thousands of immigrant workers. Many are alienated from the social and economic boom evident over the last 10 years. Instead, many non-Irish national workers are subject to extensive employer control and exploitation in both their working and personal lives.

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<sup>7</sup> Work permits are issued to employers who employ non-EEA nationals to fill specific vacancies that they have 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>8</sup> Working visas or work authorisations were introduced to allow greater access to the labour market for non-EEA workers in possession of skills of which the Irish economy was very short. 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.

### ***A Celtic fantasy?***

Several reasons existed as to why people chose Ireland as a destination for emigration. These included the expectations created by the successful stories of people who had emigrated and returned home creating new economic opportunities for themselves and their local communities, or who decided to stay abroad and have prospered relative to their economic status in their home country. As one Romanian worker explained:

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

For many non-Irish nationals, the expectation of greater economic prosperity is real and significant, especially when compared to what they have left behind. One worker compared her situation in Ireland to elsewhere:

*To work in Ireland in a B&B means than I am earning four times what I was making working in a resort in Dubai (Philippine Waiter, 27)).*

However, there is a significant price to pay for many of these workers, which is part of the untold story. Immigrant workers, especially those from outside the EEA/Switzerland, are confronted with a variety of exclusion and marginalisation factors, including a lack of information and differential treatment in public services, such as hospital attention charges and social welfare support. A Latvian worker explained:

*I didn't know how the system worked here [in Ireland], I get paid less than the Irish who do the same as me in the same cleaning company [...] also I had lots of problems with my taxes for a few months, and 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 [...] Sometimes I think its because of my English, but most of the times I think it's because I am not Irish (Latvian cleaner, female, 21).*

### **Recruitment agencies**

Traditional approaches to labour migration have theorized migrants as a factor of production, motivated by social and psychological expectations of differences in wage levels between countries (Cobb-Clark, 1993; Foner et al,

2000; Portes and Rumbaut, 1997). However, this perspective runs into difficulty in that wage differentials are historically ubiquitous, and the decision to migrate may be shaped more by informal social networks that emerge between actors in the sending and receiving countries. The basis of such informal networks is often associated with a socio-psychological risk reduction effect for those involved (Fawcett, 1989; Hernandez-Leon & Zuñiga, 2000; Kritz et al, 1992; Orozco, 2002; Portes & Sensebrenner, 1993; Roberts, 1997; Sola-Corbacho, 2002). Above all, meeting social, familial and cultural needs in an alien environment poses complicated industrial relations issues (Bronfenbrenner et al, 1998; Grünell & Kaar, 2003; Nelson, 2001; Milkman, 2000; Milkman & Wong, 2000; Tansey, 1998; Waldinger & Der-Martirosian, 2000; Waldinger & Lichter, 2003).

In this regard the role of external recruitment agencies features prominently among the accounts from respondents in our sample. For example, several Filipino workers explained how they were recruited in their home country to work in a fast food outlet (with a recognised global brand name) in Ireland. The agency charged each individual a fee equivalent to €1500 (€500 for the employment permit fee) with the guarantee of employment in the fast food company. If the permit application was refused, the agency would reimburse the individual 80% of the charged fee after a few months. We could not ascertain how much the fast food company paid for the services of the recruitment agency, but understood it was substantial. Other immigrant workers in the hotel and catering sectors explained that they paid recruitment agents an amount deducted from their salary once they started work.

From our calculations of the earnings of immigrant workers interviewed, given average accommodation and living costs, we found that it takes on average 27 weeks working an average of 45 hours per week just to pay the recruitment expenses to work in Ireland. Because of this network in recruitment, many immigrant workers (and their families back home) begin with undertaking a substantial debt just to be able to enter the Irish labour market. As two workers explained:

*For our families, even when they miss us, to be abroad is a matter of pride [...] When one get the opportunity of leaving the country, our parents and other relatives lend or give us the money [...] it is like an investment for them [...](Malaysian Chef, Male, 30).*

*Chinese parents think that to go abroad, and to learn how other people live, and to learn their language make 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 better life (Chinese worker, fast food restaurant, female, 23).*

However, as important as these recruitment agencies are to the mobility of migrants, they are far from ubiquitous. For example, in one fast food restaurant, once a pool of employees had become established, informal

networks replaced the role of the recruitment agent, often with the endorsement and encouragement from management. That is to say social links between employees and their friends and family back home effectively substituted for formal (and expensive) recruitment agencies. In contrast, at the higher end of the labour market the situation was found to be quite different. Among skilled engineers, architects and especially medical and health sector employees (nurses) the use of external recruitment agencies was more extensive and embedded, with such agencies often providing assistance with permit applications on behalf of the employing organisation.

The roles of recruitment agencies on the one hand, and the informal social networks of workers on the other, signify emerging issues not often addressed in much of the extant research. At one extreme, formal organisations like recruitment agencies can help address a skill shortage by providing expertise for both immigrant workers and employers. At the other extreme, however, migratory labour movements are often dependent on informal information from 'pioneers'; that is workers who enter the labour market at the lower skilled level end and then feed information back to the home community for future employees.. This wide range of variability has important implications for workers and the operation of the work permit system in Ireland, explained next.



### ***The work permit system***

In the course of this study it was found that several factors influence the vulnerability of immigrant workers in Ireland and contribute to their exploitation in the workplace. The present Irish employment scheme has led to abuse. We interviewed a female national of Bulgaria, who had received a job description and a contract of employment with favourable conditions including accommodation. On this basis she accepted to come to work in Ireland on an employment permit 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 the room with another non-Irish national woman a few years younger than herself, the living conditions were very poor and located in the countryside without the possibility of socialising with people other than her co-workers. She raised the situation with her employer, who replied that if she was not happy her work permit would be cancelled. Similar cases were reported by workers of several nationalities.

The net effect of the Irish work permit system is that it maintains a situation in which immigrant workers are subject to employer control, both inside and in many situations outside of their place of employment. As one union official remarked:

*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 to change job... 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 national officer).*

The significance of this issue cannot be overstated. For example, it is the employer who applies for and subsequently owns the employee's work permit, which prohibits any labour mobility or job transfer should the individual feel dissatisfied or aggrieved.

A consequence of the work permit system is that employers use this to devise their own particular supplies of labour. It is common in the fast food and hotel industry to observe clusters of people of the same nationality and usually from the same region in a particular country, sharing the same language, emotional bonds and cultural ties. This phenomenon occurs due to an embedded recruitment method dependent on social networks, with migratory movements arising through the existence of links between sending and receiving communities and peoples (Gurak & Caces, 1992; Kritz et al, 1992; Milkman, 2000; Orozco, 2002; Portes & Sensebrenner, 1993; Roberts, 1997; Waldinger & Lichter, 2003).. For example, we found that in one fast food retail outlet, around 70 per cent of staff came not only from the same country, but from the

same location within that country. Thus clusters of workers 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” (paisanaje). Basically, there is a pioneer from a certain region in a specific country who opens the road and establishes contacts with an employer, from which others follow.

This extends to issues beyond the workplace. We found especially in the case of Filipino, Latvian, Lithuanian, Polish and Chinese workers, that they share accommodation with people from the same region; in some cases as many as four people were sharing a single person’s room in order to either save money to send home, or to be able to repay recruitment agencies. Arguably, this social behaviour 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 engender a vicious cycle of social and economic exclusion. This tension was noted by one policy advisor:

*In Ireland, there are no visible formed and organised ethnic communities [...] The non-EU immigrant is mostly recruited abroad as an individual. In some cases they are recruited as part of a group... generally, the worker comes to Ireland alone and doesn't have any social and family relations in Ireland [...] they physically don't have anyone from whom to ask for help. The uncertain length of their period of permanency in the country, and the language and cultural*

*differences limit their possibilities to establish and develop friendships with Irish people (National Officer. State Agency).*

### ***Inequality in labour standards***

Respondents explained that several discriminatory practices were particularly evident in their workplace. For example, many employers use the justification of a lack of proficiency in English to explain the absence of promotion of non-EU workers to supervisory and managerial levels. Others had to work exceptionally long hours, often without overtime premium rates, which further reinforced social and cultural exclusion. Very few immigrant workers had Irish friends. Many reported a lack of free time or regular days off; insecurity and employer intimidation concerning the renewal or status of their work permit; low salaries in relation to their living expenses in Ireland; increasing economic pressures to provide money to send back home; and very little if any recognition of qualifications and skills attained back home. The effect is a low road economy for many non-Irish national employees, as explained by another union official:

*Some of them (non-EU workers) are located in low-status jobs, which it's said the Irish don't want to do anymore, such as washing dishes, picking mushrooms, etc. [...] some of the immigrants are earning less than the minimum wage, they work overtime without extra pay, and for some there are weeks in which they don't have a day off [...] some of them have payments deducted for uniforms, accommodation [...] others are having the cost of the work permit deducted from their*

*wage by employers [...] a number of immigrant workers came to Ireland without a detailed contract, and as a result, arrived with false expectations or a lack of knowledge about their conditions (Union Equality Officer in Ireland).*

According to all union respondents, key employment related concerns of immigrant workers had been steadily increasing over the last few years. Above all, the view that most employers perceive immigrant workers as a cheap labour force was almost unanimous among union interviewees. Just one of the trade unions associated immigrant workers with a high level of education, which can be attributed to the fact that this particular trade union represents professionals in the health care sector.

Moreover, there are identifiable barriers to immigrant workers joining unions which were consistently expressed by union officers interviewed. Scepticism about unions (especially among immigrants from former Communist states); fear of deportation; language difficulties; lack of information about employment rights; and the current Irish work permit system were reported as particularly significant. These hurdles are magnified by a lack of social and community support for many immigrant workers.

## **5. UNION ORGANISATION AND REPRESENTATION**

Despite the catalogue of concerns noted above, unions have found themselves in an almost no-win situation regarding the organisation and representation of immigrant workers. The inability of a union to mobilise non-

Irish national workers is compounded by several factors: employer exploitation and intimidation; social exclusion and the lack of awareness about union roles; and perhaps most significantly, a work permit system that serves managerial and employer control strategies. It is apparent that union membership in Ireland has remained stagnant after a period of decline, and initiatives connected with immigrant worker campaigns have failed to increase membership, especially among non-Irish national workers. Of course membership numbers is not the only indicator of union mobilisation, and the form and character of unionisation can change as a result of campaigning and organising tactics. Arguably, as a result of the Irish Ferries dispute and large scale public protests in Dublin, the plight of immigrant workers and the role of organised labour has received renewed attention and support. It is with this point in mind that several union organising responses can be noted.

First, most union campaigns have been directed toward what can be described as ‘soft’ organising<sup>9</sup>. Added to this is the fact that unions in Ireland are very much entrenched in a national partnership model. Within this context a policy of cultural diversity and racism awareness has been the main vehicle of union campaigning with regard to immigrant worker issues. For example, one campaign run by ICTU has appealed for the early ratification of the *UN Convention on the Rights of Migrants* and their families. This has raised awareness that an immigrant workers’ family is often denied access rights or right to work. Promoting the status of immigrant worker qualifications and exposing a lack of education and training opportunities has been another

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<sup>9</sup> ‘Soft’ organising refers to awareness campaigns, such as anti-racism and diversity literature. In contrast, ‘hard’ organising relates to mobilisations, street protests and marches, and strikes (e.g. the Irish Ferries strike).

vocal union avenue. The most noticeable campaign so far was the *Equality-Diversity Award*, first launched in November 2002 as part of the “Anti-Racism Workplace” Week. This award was an initiative of the General Officers of SIPTU who invited Section, Branch 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 multi-culturalism. As one of the union officers argued:

*There are good examples of innovation and particular attention to the needs of migrant workers such as 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).*

Second, some specific unions, in the health and services sectors, have tackled directly the implicit assumptions of racism. For example, SIPTU expressed the opinion that creating a pool of cheap labour through immigrant

workers in the labour market might stimulate fears of rising unemployment for native Irish people, generating a potential racist backlash and xenophobia. Unions argued that this might potentially be resolved through bringing the wages of the immigrant to the level of the Irish worker, thus removing the advantage to the employer of contracting an immigrant worker as cheap labour. In another example, 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 wage and who enjoyed all other statutory conditions of employment. Other specific union campaigns have sought to try and make unions attractive and valuable for immigrant workers by offering assistance with taxation regulations and social welfare provisions.

It is possible, although by no means conclusively demonstrated, that these softer organising approaches have provided a platform for unions to develop harder mobilising strategies. For example, workers at a brick factory in the Midlands went on strike for a few days in support of equality of pay for their Czech colleagues who worked beside them but were paid less. The higher profile disputes may also be seen as an escalation of softer organisation methods, suggesting a turning point in which unions are diverting their attention from the 'sword of justice face' of unionism (Flanders, 1970), towards a 'vested interest' approach specific to immigrant workers. It is more probable, however, given EU expansion and the extension of legal rights for previously disenfranchised immigrant workers, that unions are now able to by-



pass the fear and restrictions of the work permit system for EU-member immigrants. As one union official commented:

*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. Immigrant workers must be made aware that they have other ways to fight for their rights, and they must have confidence that there is enough support in the Irish legal system to prevent unfair treatment. Irish policy and legislation should be adequate to immigrant workers. For example, if an immigrant did not get a holiday, they can take the case to the labour court or to the Equality Authority (Union officer).*

In general, unions' activities and attempts at mobilising around non-EU/EEA immigrant worker concerns are constrained and limited to non-traditional union concerns. Evidence of bargaining and representation over issues such as wages and working conditions are mostly confined to EU/EEA nationals. For the most part, unions have embarked upon a strategy of services, such as free legal information and assistance in employment rights and entitlements, obtaining the required social welfare PPS (Personal Public Service) number and tax advice. Other related activities have included language training, anti-racism awareness and exposing different forms of discrimination and promoting multiculturalism. This servicing union approach has evolved through cooperation with various government agencies (e.g. the Health

Service Executive and Department of Social and Family Affairs) to promote 'awareness' rather than active 'mobilisation'. In other words, despite the emergence of strong informal networks and ties among immigrant workers themselves, unions have been unable to penetrate these networks in order to leverage recruitment among the non-Irish working population, especially in the lower skilled occupations.

Additionally, it is important to highlight that neither immigrants nor ethnic minorities appear to have been included in the union structure in Ireland, and no evidence was found relating to foreign-born organisers or union activists in Ireland. Furthermore, it was found that efforts to date have not had a significant impact on the membership of any of the unions interviewed.

## **6. CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION**

Issues surrounding immigrant workers and industrial relations policy look set to continue in Ireland, as well as elsewhere across the industrialised world. The recent Irish Ferries dispute has elevated the plight of many immigrant workers onto a national (and international) stage. In Ireland, economic boom and the globalisation of labour and product markets has led to a demand for cross-national union activity. Within Ireland new multi-cultural currents have changed the character of the workforce and the scope for representation. Constrained by shrinking resources and declining membership, the union response to these new developments has been variable, fragmented and often localised. This "glocalization" of the world economy creates a different context for the movement of labour while, at the same time, the vulnerability of

immigrant workers has increased the need for union representation and a more aggressive organising response. This “glocalization” of the world economy creates a different context for the movement of labour. It is to be expected that traditional views of migration will necessarily be found wanting, and several changes can be hypothesized in this new context.

First, migration will increase at the top of the occupational structure as business managers, researchers and professionals follow capital around the globe and move to those regions specializing in jobs at the “top” of the labour market value chain. Alarcón (2000) has found that transnational professionals occupied a privileged position because they are vital to companies involved in global production processes and markets; and human capital produced elsewhere represents a net gain for “information technology” companies that have the wealth and resources to choose professionals from a global pool. Ireland has recently begun to show signs of this kind of migration. Nevertheless, in this context, Ireland has achieved success in international markets through absorbing native labour into specialized and high-skilled jobs, while foreign labour served as a buffer in the lower skilled, lower paid service sector.

Second, the movement of labour will be increasingly globalized with important industrial relations implications at the national and local levels. The existence of global networks of production will mean that larger percentages of the population at all locations will have experienced capitalist production and its associated culture. The “compression of time and space” will make it easier

to conceive of migrating, and new and emerging economic areas of the globe will become a new source of migrants. Thus, it can be hypothesised, that the movement of labour will be increasingly organized by entrepreneurial groups of both a legitimate and criminal nature, and take place outside of traditional channels and beyond the regulatory control of industrial relations institutions.

In Ireland, a neo-liberal policy agenda has provided such entrepreneurial groups (and employers) with the tools to manipulate and exploit a global labour pool at a localised level. Above all, the current work permit system 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 their place of work. In practical terms, this means that local managers have the discretion to decide whether a non-Irish 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 the edict 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 a covert threat in the context of continued employment, and this in turn has affected the union movements' ability to mobilise and represent immigrant workers.

Even so, there has not been enough strategic action on the part of unions to address immigrant worker concerns. Nevertheless, considering the fact that

the migratory process depends upon social networks and informal ties (especially at the lower skilled end of the labour market), union organising that is targeted directly at these informal networks of immigrant worker groups may be the most effective tactical strategy to mobilise and recruit these workers. Arguably, efforts, in which organisers are drawn from specific countries with a deeper understanding of the cultural nuances as well as local and sectoral concerns experienced by workers themselves, could be a more effective conduit for union membership. Moreover, such an organising response ought to pay attention to the values of equality, diversity and cultural integration given the dichotomous low-high skill labour market experienced by many immigrant workers in Ireland.

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