

## INTERNATIONAL TRADE UNION CONFEDERATION (ITUC)

### ITUC OnLine

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VIDEO- Estonian migrant workers: "longer hours for less pay"

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Brussels, 15 December 2006 (ITUC OnLine): Better wages is the chief motivation of the 35,000 or so Estonians who leave home to work abroad. They represent around 5% of the workforce in this small Baltic state, which has been a member of the European Union since 2004. Finland, Norway, Sweden, Germany, the UK and Ireland are the main destinations of these Estonian migrant workers, who can hope to earn wages up to 4 times higher than those in their country of origin in certain sectors.

The construction industry, heavy industry - mainly for qualified welders -, bus or lorry driving and nursing are the main areas of work. Low-skilled work, particularly in the hotel and catering industry or in seasonal agricultural work, also attract a lot of young Estonians, both workers and students.

Estonia, the departure country, is also a host country, however. Some sectors, including construction, metalworking, nursing and public road transport, are suffering from a shortage of local labour. As a result Estonian employers are tending to "eye up" the huge pools of labour in the former Soviet Union, in order to fill these gaps whilst keeping wages low enough to compete favourably on the European market.

Toomas Sarapuu, a coordinator from the transport worker' union in the North of Estonia, is helping Estonian workers wanting to go abroad and those coming to work in Estonia from other countries in the former Soviet Bloc.

"People are leaving first and foremost for better pay, not considering other circumstances, such as that going abroad means going into a totally different environment, in terms of language, culture and traditions. People are leaving for money, but the reality of working abroad is often not what they hoped they'd find."

"When a bus driver or a truck driver goes abroad, he has no idea what kind of sacrifices he or she may have to make. The worker has probably never been away from their family for a long time, but the employer is interested in a worker being available for a longer period, full-time. Another sacrifice is the intensiveness of the work they do". "I have seen it in the bus and truck drivers' eyes when they come back home for the weekend - they are exhausted."

Sometimes the drivers sleep in their cabs. So when a transport firm locks up the vehicles overnight the migrant workers sometimes have to sleep on the street. In agriculture too the sleeping arrangements provided by farmers can leave much to be desired.

(Marje Soon - Advisor at the Info-point on the Finnish labour market).

"The living conditions of these workers are harsh - for example, many construction workers are in a situation where several workmates have to share a single room. ... The biggest sacrifice is being away from your family. In order to get more money, you are jeopardizing the integrity of your family, you don't see your children grow up. That is the hardest part".

Many receive lower wages than they had been promised. Posted workers, in particular, are paid less in practice than the rates applying under collective agreements in the host countries. As a result they are doubly

attractive to employers, since they work longer hours for less pay.

"Either because of the language problem or because of the lack of information, workers do not know about their rights. Very often the employer keeps quiet about the pay and working conditions provided by the collective agreements, although these agreements should normally apply to migrant workers too."

Many important issues related to protection of migrant workers' rights cannot be dealt with effectively by a union in just one of the affected countries. For instance, the union that is best able to represent workers' rights through collective bargaining on pay and working conditions is not necessarily the best one for defending workers in individual contract-related matters. That especially applies to posted workers. In addition, the union in the host country can only be in touch with a migrant worker over a limited time, whereas the union in his/her country of origin can have a longer and deeper relationship.

For Marje Soon, the Advisor at the Info-point that was set up, with support from the Finnish trade union centre SAK and the Finish employers' association TU, in Tallin in 2002 (to provide information about the Finnish labour market) , the key is provision of information.

"If people come to us before going abroad, then they know what working conditions and pay apply to them in Finland and which trade union they should join as well as what formalities they will need to complete. Well-informed people face far less problems".

Trade union cooperation between the source and destination country unions is crucial, and is one of the priorities of the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) in promoting the rights of migrant workers.

As far as Estonian migrants are concerned, there are close links between the countries involved. That takes the form of both direct bilateral cooperation, such as the numerous training activities, study tours and other forms of assistance that have been organised, and the multilateral framework provided by the ETUC or the Baltic Sea Trade Union Network. At sectoral level too there are activities aimed at reaching out to migrant workers. These include the transport workers' pan-European trade union cooperation network, which Toomas Sarapuu represents:

"If somebody experiences a problem in Europe, he or she will get in touch with me, and I will get in touch with a fellow coordinator from the respective country, who will deal with the matter on the spot. That way we can help our members, give them as much information as possible. We are in the process of creating a database comprising all relevant wage rates and collective agreements throughout Europe, so our members can be equal partners and not taken advantage of."

Study carried out for the ITUC  
Research and directing: Margarita Tuch  
Post-production: Benoit Collienne

Founded on November 1 2006, the ITUC represents 168 million workers in 153 countries and territories and has 304 national affiliates.

<http://www.ituc-csi.org>

For more information, contact the ITUC Press Department on +32 2 224 0204 or mobile phone +32 476 62 10 18

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