

## Migrants get unions back to basics

*Solidarity with migrant workers is helping trade unions to get back to the basic principles of the labour movement.*

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**P**olitical action, a trade union social charter for migrant workers, anti-racist campaigns and special training, collective agreements, recruitment and promotion strategies in cooperation with the employers, organizing among migrant workers, specific assistance and services: at work and in society at large, trade unions are engaged in a struggle against racism, xenophobia and the many prejudices to which migrant workers are subject.

Campaigning may be at the international level, through the exercise of solidarity, or at the grass roots, by getting back to the basics of trade unionism, namely organizing the most vulnerable workers. This benefits the migrants themselves, but also the trade unions as a whole, as it helps them to expand their rank and file and breathes new life into their founding principles.

### Political action

Today's world provides the unions with all too many opportunities to mobilize in the defence of migrants. For instance, in September 2002, the Spanish labour confederations UGT (*Unión general de trabajadores*) and CCOO (*Comisiones obreras*) denounced the emergency plan unveiled by the Spanish Government for the repatriation of 1,000 Moroccan immigrants who were living in the Canary Islands. The unions said the plan was "superfi-

cial, improvised and no answer to the real problems". In Spain, where immigration is a recent phenomenon and awareness-raising and education on this topic are therefore particularly difficult, the unions have incessantly denounced the Government's policies on migration – particularly the preference for nationals other than those of neighbouring Morocco – as well as the authorities' tendency to equate illegal immigration and delinquency.

In the Republic of Korea, the Federation of Korean Trade Unions (FKTU) is running a protest campaign against the Government's repressive policy of deporting illegal immigrants. Instead, the unions are calling for a new work permit system. On 8 September 2002, they took part in a rally against these repressive policies.

The Ecuadorian free trade union confederation CEOSL, on the other hand, has constantly denounced the Government's failure to defend Ecuadorian migrants abroad, particularly as their remittances to Ecuador are the country's second-biggest economic resource.

A good example of large-scale political mobilization is the postcard campaign launched by the American labour federation AFL-CIO. Addressed to members of the Congress and the Senate, as well as to President Bush, the cards call for a legal status, with equal rights, for all immigrant workers, together with the legalization of illegal immigrants. Current law requires American employers, under pain of sanc-

tions, to check that their employees' papers are legal. In reality, sanctions are rare, and employers tend rather to use this law as a means of pressure on illegal immigrants who show any signs of wanting to join a union. On 22 April 2002, the AFL-CIO publicly declared its support for the restoration of the federal food-stamp programme for immigrant workers. This programme was discontinued in 1996. As a result, in the high-immigration states of Texas, California and Illinois, immigrant households are now ten times more at risk of severe hunger than are non-immigrants.

### Practical tools

The unions that are furthest advanced in supporting migrant workers have understood the importance of providing them with vocational training programmes and education services, while of course taking into account the linguistic and cultural specificities of the groups concerned.

The Canadian Labour Congress (CLC), building on the work both of its own Anti-Racism Task Force and of the 2001 UN World Conference Against Racism, held an Aboriginal/Workers of Colour Conference from 28 November to 1 December 2002. The CLC has produced an immigration toolkit that helps its membership to promote the adoption of progressive policies on immigration and refugees. Britain's Trades Union Congress (TUC) has produced a migration guide and also has an online trade union training course on the same topic (TUC Tackling Racism Online course). The Spanish union confederations UGT and CCOO have each set up a network of specialized centres to deal with problems specific to migrants. These centres organize campaigns on regularization and family reunification, negotiate with the authorities about the issuing of residence or work permits, settle questions about social security access or employment contracts, organize training and follow up complaints of discrimination. The Spanish UGT also published an active job-seeker's manual for immigrants, full of practical ad-

vice. In France, the labour confederation *Force Ouvrière* has provided a free phone number for victims of discrimination, as well as advice centres on legal and administrative matters. The AFL-CIO also offers a free legal service for immigrant workers, including the provision of a lawyer.

Collective agreements are another concrete means of trade union action on this issue. The Canadian Labour Congress pioneered the inclusion of anti-racist provisions in collective agreements. A recent survey by the British TUC – which is fighting very actively against racism at all workplace levels, notably by demanding the granting of extended leave – shows that black and Asian workers covered by collective agreements have an average hourly wage that is one-third higher than for those not covered.

In the United States, the textile and catering unions UNITE and HERE are fighting for collective agreements to include a provision that employers will notify the union immediately when they hear of a visit by the immigration and naturalization service.

But this struggle presupposes a change of mentality within trade unions themselves. The French labour confederation CFDT did some in-depth work on this over several years. This resulted in new trade union practices, including greater awareness-raising and training for union activists. The CFDT wants members and workers in general to speak out on this issue, and it aims to promote responsibility in each individual through the introduction of equality charters or codes of conduct, whether at the workplace, area or sectoral level. If a serious racist offence takes place, CFDT members are encouraged to denounce it publicly and take action through the courts.

### Maintaining contact

In February 2001, the British TUC and the Portuguese union federation CGTP-IN signed an agreement to promote membership of TUC unions by Portuguese

workers based in the United Kingdom. There are about 21,000 of these, most of whom are non-union and employed in temporary jobs. Under the agreement, the workers benefit from an information campaign in their own language, explaining how they can be helped to limit abuse by their British employers. The CGTP-IN had already signed similar agreements with trade union organizations in Luxembourg, Spain and Switzerland.

Indeed, national trade union centres are keen to maintain links with their expatriate membership. The Senegalese union federation UNSAS is one case in point. Another is the Dominican CNTD. Trade unions in Pakistan also try to keep in touch, via the union organizations in the country of settlement. The Ceylon Workers' Congress (Sri Lanka), the Moroccan UMT (*Union marocaine du travail*) and the Portuguese CGTP-IN, all of which organize in labour-exporting countries, testify to the fundamental importance of coordinating with union organizations in the labour-importing countries.

Most of the trade union centres in labour-exporting countries have adopted policies for assisting migrant workers on their return.

## Back to basics: Organize

In many sectors in the United States, from the roofers of Arizona to the laundresses of Massachusetts and the janitors of Los Angeles, tens of thousands of immigrant workers are organizing to improve their lot. This American example of big new union memberships, a movement that began with Mexican immigrants in the agricultural sector, proves the effectiveness of getting back to trade union basics. At the same time, however, unions must be open to innovation in their organizing techniques, particularly in the difficult sectors that employ massive numbers of immigrants, such as construction, agriculture and domestic service.

In Canada during February 2002, the *Pineros y Campesinos Unidos del Noroeste*

(United Northwest Treeplanters and Farmworkers) won a victory in their fight against NORPAC, a cooperative grouping 240 fruit and vegetable producers. After undergoing a ten-year boycott spearheaded by the CLC, NORPAC finally agreed to negotiate on improvements to its minimum employment conditions for agricultural workers. Mainly immigrants, these workers had previously been subjected to appalling conditions and violent anti-union harassment.

In France, the CFDT has launched a campaign in defence of seasonal workers, particularly in agriculture. Although seasonal work is scattered across small-scale holdings and family-run farms, the CFDT managed to create a form of area works council in some of France's *départements* (administrative units roughly equivalent to a county). The CFDT is also combating undeclared seasonal agricultural work. It is doing so by promoting an "agricultural service employment voucher" (TESA) which simplifies the administrative aspects of taking on workers legally, thus depriving employers of the argument that there is too much paperwork involved.

Imagination is vital to new organizing, but it is needed just as much when adapting to the rapid development of regional integration. No slouches when it comes to the new European realities, the French unions also made sure that Romanian lumberjacks employed in a French forest by a German firm got their entitlements.

When defending and unionizing migrant workers, success also often depends on alliance-building with other civic groups that defend these sections of the population. For example, in Omaha, in the American state of Nebraska, the United Food and Commercial Workers has been cooperating very closely with Latino, mainly Mexican, workers' community organizations in a campaign to unionize immigrants working in the meat industry. These workers, who are paid very low wages, are engaged in slaughtering and butchering – a regional industry that has been dependent on foreign labour since the early 1900s. With each new wave of immigration, union organizing in this sector has to start from scratch.

## Women exploited

A number of union federations make special efforts on behalf of women migrant workers, who have to cope both with the discrimination suffered by all migrants and with the inferior status of women in general on the labour market.

According to a recent report by the University of Toronto, wage rates for home-based seamstresses, who lack all social security and other protections and who are mainly recent immigrants, have not increased since 1980!

Migrant women outworkers are particularly difficult to organize, and particularly subject to exploitation. Attempts to unionize them include drives in Australia, through the Textile Clothing & Footwear Union of Australia (TCFUA), in Canada through the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union (ILGWU) and in the Netherlands by the national union confederation FNV. In each case, the scenario is the same: make contact, gather information in order to raise public awareness, try to press for better protection of these workers' rights, and organize them. Thus, in Canada, UNITE has managed to organize many textile homeworkers, both male and female.

Absence of legal protection, breaches of employment contracts, passport confiscation, debt bondage, violence, various forms of discrimination, psychological problems caused by isolation – migrant women in domestic service are subject to all of these. They form another group that is especially vulnerable and difficult to protect. This reality is particularly grim in the Gulf States, where trade union rights are virtually nonexistent and women's status is especially low. The Trade Union Congress of the Philippines (TUCP) has for a number of years made special efforts to provide advice on the letter and application of the law, in a bid to protect women domestic workers and to promote their rights. Together with non-governmental organizations working in this field, the TUCP is also pressing the Government of the Philippines to ensure better protection of its nationals abroad.

The migrant and domestic workers' section of the Indonesian labour confederation SBSI is cooperating with the International Confederation of Arab Trade Unions (ICATU) in an effort to provide better protection for migrant workers in Arab countries. This August, a regional seminar on the international migration of domestic workers was held in Colombo, Sri Lanka, in the course of which the trade unions represented there undertook to strengthen their networking.

While unskilled and underskilled migrants form a reservoir of labour at the beck and call of economic globalization, the soaring migration rates among skilled workers also pose new challenges to the trade union movement. The many problems raised by this trend include a "brain drain" in their countries of origin and the undervaluing of their qualifications in the receiving countries. One example is the foreign doctors who staff French emergency wards at cut-price salaries. In the British information technology (IT) sector alone, half a million migrant workers will be needed over the next eight years. Indian IT workers are in great demand in a number of Western countries, notably Germany and the United States. Last year, IT workers in several Indian cities, including Hyderabad and Bangalore, set up IT professional forums and applied for affiliation to Union Network International (UNI). In response, this global union federation of service workers produced a "UNI passport" in order to help these mobile workers to maintain their union rights and to obtain support as they move from country to country. Concretely, the "passport" enables workers to transfer from one union to another when they migrate across frontiers. Also, via the Web and email, it provides trade union information and practical advice about contracts and about moving house to another country.

## International trade union solidarity

In response to economic globalization, trade unions are organizing the globalization of solidarity in defence of migrants.

This summer, following the Malaysian Government's massive, brutal expulsions of migrant workers, and alarmed by the inhuman conditions inflicted upon thousands of Filipino and Indonesian migrant workers in detention camps where scores of them perished, the Asia-Pacific Regional Organization of the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions, in cooperation with the Malaysian Trades Union Congress, the Bangladeshi ICFTU-BC and the Trade Union Congress of the Philippines, asked the Malaysian Government to review its policy and to ensure the protection of migrant workers, who are vital to the country's construction, plantation and domestic service sectors.

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The Pinault-Printemps-La Redoute affair caused a storm this year, when this major French industrial group was accused of anti-union harassment at one of its American plants, in Indiana. The French union confederations CFDT, FO and CGT put some noisy public pressure on the parent company. In cooperation with the services and textile workers' internationals UNI and ITGLWF, the French unions denounced the expulsion threats made against workers at the Indiana plant, for the most part Hispanic immigrants, in a bid to stop them from joining a union. If today's migrations know no frontiers, neither do today's unions.