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All work and low pay — Europe's migrant workforce

Despite Europe's extensive labour shortage, it seems incapable of improving the poor working conditions that migrant workers find themselves in

According to the World Migration Report 2022, Europe hosts some 87 million international migrants. Almost 10 million workers in Europe are 'non-EU citizens', of whom a number would fall into the 'essential' category.

Majority-world workers might have been compelled to migrate in search of employment. But there is also a demand for their labour in European markets. Yet, as with most employer-employee equations, this is not exactly a symbiotic relationship.

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In Europe and Central Asia combined, there are 4.1 million forced labourers. In Serbia, Indian workers have been driven to organise public protests in pursuit of unpaid wages. (Of course, workers from the Balkans are also discriminated against when they go to work in Western Europe.) In Italy, farm workers are dying by suicide. Migrant workers in Spain have lived in places with 'far worse conditions than a refugee camp, without running water, electricity, or sanitation'. Women who went to work as domestic workers in diplomats' houses in Switzerland have had to file coercion and trafficking cases against high-profile bosses.

This oppressive structure exists not only in traditional factories and on farms but also in the online world of platforms and the 'gig' economy. In Germany, a company offering cleaning services can undercut all others while still profiting from the informal workers it recruits. The workers, on the other hand, operate in isolation from one another with little or no bargaining power.

Forced into flight

So why do workers from the Global South still migrate to Europe? For many, it is not a happy choice — driven by climate disasters, political strife, persecution of minorities and unemployment in their places of origin. The unemployment rate in India, for example, was at a 45-year high even before the pandemic.

Corrupt governments do play a part in a country's poor economic condition, but the colonial shadow of the loot of natural riches, plus contemporary extractivism towards the same resources by already privileged nations, cannot be ignored. And there are ample cases of political instability in the majority world (take the continuing chaos in postwar Iraq) driven by the interests of the Global North.

Those in the Global South who could survive on a domestic income but choose to cross borders are drawn by the old dream of 'a better life': decent wages, dignified working and living conditions, equal rights. Some migrant women from India I spoke to admitted that life abroad was not easy. But, they said, their families grudgingly respected them as breadwinners and did not see them only as liabilities to be married off.

Men also talked of enjoying a higher status in their countries of origin if family members were working abroad. For those battling class, caste and religious discrimination, such social acceptance by their communities makes a world of difference. Ultimately, as the poet Nissim Ezekiel puts it, 'Home is where we have to gather grace.'

A system in need of an update

Labour shortages in Europe make a business case for the region to forge a new contract with its migrant workers. Yet, not only economics but humane principles – of liberty, equality and dignity – should drive the change.

The convoluted visa processes of employing states cry out for overhaul. An abstruse system ostensibly inviting workers makes them the victims of illicit agents (in home and host countries) who facilitate their migration while charging a tidy sum in 'fees' workers can ill afford. Aspiring migrants are then driven into debt bondage, which can later be compounded by wage theft.

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Not knowing the host country's language makes workers especially vulnerable to exploitative middlemen and prevents them from seeking

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assistance from legitimate sources. Workers may also stay in the shadows, fearing they lack the complete documentation to work in Europe — they can freely report wrongdoings only when they know their migrant status will not lead to sanctions. This anxiety can even keep them from seeking essential medical help.

To ensure proper integration of migrants with members of host communities, there should be more initiatives at the state and local levels, as commended in 2022 by the Council of Europe, including language courses and programmes to create awareness among workers of their rights. In the 'common basic principles' agreed upon back in 2004, the European Union recognised integration as a 'two-way process', rather than putting all the onus on migrant workers to find their way.

Dehumanising workers

Charlie Chaplin's 'Modern Times' – 'The Billows Feeding Machine will eliminate the lunch hour, increase your production and decrease your overhead' – reminds us of the importance of state intervention, so that company (or land) owners preoccupied with 'decreasing overheads' do not dehumanise workers, perceived as mere mechanical hands.

Strict registration rules for companies have to be in place, with regular checks to ensure compliance. When it comes to the 'gig' and informal workers supporting the digital economy, regulations have to be implemented with urgency — already some platforms have been lobbying hard against such legislation.

Many migrants, however, work in an atmosphere of fear. They are not likely to name their abusers, so interviewing them does not reveal all. In examining their living and working conditions, more frequent, unannounced inspections can help. Inspectors must present themselves as figures one can turn to for redress, not as people to run away from. Unions can act as a bridge between workers and public officials.

Some workers daring to raise their voices have thus been left baffled trying to identify the competent authority to address their grievances.

For the migrant worker, moreover, the immediate contact is often a recruitment agent or contractor. When incidents of abuse are exposed, the primary hirer must not be able to plead ignorance and must be brought to account.

Companies operating in one country may, however, be registered in another. There is already a lot of push and pull around what the employing country's responsibilities are and when the home country should come in to protect workers' interests. A corporation based in one region, headquartered in another and with affiliations with several other companies further adds to the confusion.

Some workers daring to raise their voices have thus been left baffled trying to identify the competent authority to address their grievances. Workers attempting to earn their daily wages cannot confront these legalities alone: they require free or low-cost legal assistance.

Warsan Shire's poem 'Home' begins:

no one leaves home unless

home is the mouth of a shark

Majority-world workers leaving their ancestral abodes, due to a raft of challenges, have filled Europe's labour vacancies. But the paucity of labourers across the continent could keep growing — if workers travelling to it fail to find a workplace where promises of fair and timely pay, safety, health and rights are not only made, but kept.

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