

Cross Border Trade Union Collaboration and Polish Migrant Workers in the UK

ESRC funded project

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Context

- May 2004 A8 accession to EU
- UK, Ireland & Sweden opened labour markets
- Push factors – high unemployment in Poland & low wages
- Pull factors – UK labour market shortages & flexible labour market

How many Poles in the UK?

- Estimated 700,000 – 1 million
 - WRS 579,000 registered:
 - 65% Poles; 82% 18-34; 43% female; move away from traditional migrant locations (small towns)
 - Issues over data sources (ONS Improving Migration and Population Statistics)
 - Major traffic between countries - Polish Foreign Ministry estimated in first month 15,000 Poles had left for London but 8,000 had returned!

Problems & possibilities for UK unions

- Concentrated in ununionised parts of economy (food processing, hotels)
- High levels of exploitation
- TUC built on experience of working with Portugese workers
- Information in several languages given
- Contacts established with Solidarnosc
- Information gathering & publications

ESRC project

Four levels of investigation;

- National level collaboration
- Regional strategies UK (NE, NW & East)
Poland (Dolnoslaskie, Malopolska, Slaskie, Podslaskie)
- Response of sample UK unions (GMB, USDAW, T&G, BFAWU)
- Workplace case studies

TUC

- **TUC 2005 – regional projects involving affiliates (Northumbria, NTUC, UCATT)**
 - ‘Organising migrant (Polish) workers in construction’
 - Solidarnosc engagement
 - Migrant workers in the North East
- **TUC 2006 – building on this National Strategy (Northumbria)**
 - ‘Working in the UK: Polish worker routes into employment in construction and food processing’ - Solidarnosc engagement
- **Observation: Moving forward and urging affiliates to follow**

T&G

- **T&G (Go Ahead, Arriva, First Group)**
 - Go Ahead T&G influenced strategy (reps vital)
 - Arriva T&G involved but only consulted early on
- **Observations: *'Poles happy to join union, have taught us a thing or two about trade unionism'***

Language major issue – Arriva questioning costs

Workplace reps important

 - First Group T&G joint platform praising Polish workers
- **Observations: Overall strategy seems to be based on federated structure; Polish organisers engaged but no co-ordination**

USDAW

- **USDAW (food processing – North East & North West)**
 - Mainly organised site approach (site agreements key)
 - Issues with separate groups in workforce – fire-fighting
 - Negotiating at a national level with agencies for recognition - *“easy to recruit if they [Polish workers] are on the books, as it goes through the payroll”*
- **Observations: Traditional approach (site organisation); engaging Poles as reps/full-time organisers; worked with Solidarnosc; undertaken reps study on sector**

BFAWU

- **BFAWU (food processing – North East & North West)**
 - Mainly organised site approach
 - Access to Poles at induction; partnership for agency reviews
 - Learning centre used – ‘*drop in centre*’
 - Strategic agreement with agency - ‘*opened its books*’
- **Observations: Traditional approach (site organisation); learning agenda supported this; strategically important agreement with agency**

GMB

- **GMB (food processing – North East & North West)**
 - Mainly organised site approach (site agreements key)
 - Identification by reps of Poles who (1) speak English (2) Are willing to assist union
 - Learning agenda beginning to become important
 - liP > company learning agreements > skills-for-life diagnostic > community organising
- **Observations: Traditional approach (site organisation) but beginning to use learning agenda + engaging Poles as reps/branch officials/full-time organisers**

Polish workers – active players

Disputes

- Irish ferries
- Tesco
- Luton baggage handlers
- Cheshire buses
- Iceland distribution

Problems and possibilities for Polish unions

- Decline in membership resulting from deep restructuring
- Loss of current & potential members
- Loss of skilled workers (drivers, welders)
- Late 1990s onwards more proactive
- Improvement in Solidarnosc/OPZZ
- Solidarnosc, OPZZ, Forum ZZ opposed to labour controls

Two approaches

Solidarity: Contesting

- Education at home, regional information centres
- Cooperation with TUC & British unions

Seamens Union (Gdansk): Acquiescing

- Operate employment agency
- Supply labour directly to UK employers
- No contact with UK TUs

Note: Approach involved them leaving OPZZ

NEW CHALLENGE

Migration to Poland from Ukraine; China;
India