

Migration and national social democracy in Britain

“There is a reason for wanting to ensure that we can control migration. It is because of the impact that net migration can have on people, on access to services, on infrastructure. But, crucially, it often hits those at the lower end of the income scale hardest.”

Theresa May, 6th of September 2017

“What there wouldn’t be is the wholesale importation of underpaid workers from Central Europe to order to destroy conditions, particularly in the construction industry.”

Jeremy Corbyn, 23rd of July 2017

“In the last 10 years, there has been a gigantic experiment at the expense of ordinary workers. Countries with vast historical differences in wage rates and living standards have been brought together in a common labour market. The result has been sustained pressure on living standards, a systematic attempt to hold down wages and to cut the costs of social provision for working people.”

Len McCluskey, 20th of June 2016

These quotes from the governing Prime Minister, the leader of the Labour Party and the general secretary of the biggest trade union in the UK, Unite, set the parameters for the debate which essentially were about the relationship between migration and the significant wage decline of the local working class. The fact that many workers subscribe to their line of argument has less to do with xenophobia, but rather with the merging of various factors during the mid-2000s: the global crisis hit home at a point when the measures aimed at the general casualisation of labour relations that had been introduced by the New Labour government during the late 1990s showed their brutal impact; and this happened during the same period that the labour market in Britain was further opened up as a result of EU expansion in 2004 and 2007. Today we see the seemingly paradoxical coexistence of the lowest unemployment rates in recent history combined with record decline of wages, which points towards a structural weakness on the side of the working class.

Corbyn’s pro-Brexit position is due to his social democratic policies relying not only on the regulation and taxation of capital flows, but also on the regulation of the movement of labour, as the other side of the same coin. This leads to major tension with both the neoliberal wing of the Labour Party and his left-wing foot soldiers, who comprise significant sections of the formerly radical left which have joined the party during the recent Corbynmania. This part of the left reacts against this national trend of social democracy by upholding a liberal or humanist pro-migrant position. As a result, they fail to explain the enormous collapse of working and living conditions of local workers, which they could do by analysing the structural weakness of a newly composed class.

Instead they have to blame the wickedness and omnipresent power of the bosses. In the first part of this article we look at the historical context of the current debate about migration and working class existence.

In the second part we write about our experiences in warehouses and factories in west London and with the mainstream trade union wage management. Since 2012 we organise ourselves as the AngryWorkers collective in one of Europe's biggest logistic and food processing zones. More than 90 per cent of our colleagues are migrant workers. They keep London running, providing food and personal services to the global financial and political centre, while at the same time being used as pawns in the political game.

Migration background

“And most important of all! Every industrial and commercial centre in England now possesses a working class divided into two hostile camps, English proletarians and Irish proletarians. The ordinary English worker hates the Irish worker as a competitor who lowers his standard of life. In relation to the Irish worker he regards himself as a member of the ruling nation and consequently he becomes a tool of the English aristocrats and capitalists against Ireland, thus strengthening their domination over himself. He cherishes religious, social, and national prejudices against the Irish worker. (...) This antagonism is artificially kept alive and intensified by the press, the pulpit, the comic papers, in short, by all the means at the disposal of the ruling classes. This antagonism is the secret of the impotence of the English working class, despite its organisation. It is the secret by which the capitalist class maintains its power. And the latter is quite aware of this.”

(Letter from Karl Marx to Sigfrid Meyer and August Vogt, April 1870)

After the Second World War, England, as a former imperial centre, had to deal with how to adjust general migration from the former colonies to the requirements of the labour market. The British state forged agreements with the new post-colonial governments in Jamaica, Barbados and Trinidad, offering credits to young workers for the journey to Britain once they had signed up to work on construction of the underground railways or the postal services. In contrast, most of the migration from the sub-continent (India, Pakistan, Nepal) was initially based on more general relationships, such as the service of family members in the British Army. Workers from the subcontinent mainly found employment in the private sector light and heavy industries. Between 1951 and 1971 around 500,000 non-white people from the former colonies migrated to Britain. The British Nationality Act of 1948 guaranteed citizens from Commonwealth countries the right to live and work there. This changed with the onset of the economic crisis in the mid-1960s. The Commonwealth Immigration Act of 1968, introduced by the Labour government under Wilson, limited the general right to reside in Britain to people who could prove that their parents or grandparents were born in Britain.

This allowed Australians to migrate, but excluded non-white migrants from poorer countries.

Between 1951 and 1961 around 500,000 people from Ireland also came to work in Britain, representing the biggest group of migrants at the time. Their impoverishment was directly linked to British economic policies after Irish independence and they were used as political pawns during the dispute about the future of Northern Ireland. Wilson's government acted against a background, and with the help of, an increase of racist violence towards migrants. In 1967 the National Front was formed and helped aggravate an anti-migrant sentiment. The trade unions largely ignored migrant workers or actively sold them out, while many landlords followed the slogan: "No dogs, no blacks, no Irishmen". Migrant workers reacted by forming organisations of self-defense (Asian Youth Movement etc.) and a wave of wildcat strikes hit the British industries at its heart, similar to the so-called 'Türkenstreiks' (Turk strikes) in Germany in the early 1970s. Migrant workers fought their way into the local working class. From then on the English Disease ruled Britain, culminating in the mass strikes of the Winter of Discontent in 1979. Already in 1975, during the Sterling crisis, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) was forced to dish out the biggest credit scheme in its history to prevent the British Pound from collapsing. In cooperation with the trade unions the Labour government at the time introduced various measures to limit leapfrogging wage demands and inflation: wage caps on the public sector and the implementation of branch and sector-wide collective contracts were introduced to undermine workers' and shop stewards' activities and wage strikes on the department and shop-floor level. These concerted policies of government and union headquarters became the prelude to a wider process of restructuring which resulted in an increase of unemployment from 2.4 per cent in 1973 to 6.2 per cent in 1977 to 13 per cent in 1982. With their rose-tinted view of the Labour Party large parts of the current left in the UK like to forget this prelude and instead lament Thatcher's taking of office as being the hour zero of the neoliberal attack against the working class.

As the result of government immigration policy and rising unemployment in the 80s, migration from Commonwealth countries declined drastically. Many unemployed industrial workers from England's north-east migrated to London or even further, to end up working on construction sites in Germany during the post-Reunification boom. During the 1990s the new imperialist global order (Gulf War 1991, NATO interventions in Somalia and Afghanistan) led to a new increase in asylum-related migration. This was followed by a surge in migration from Eastern Europe as a result of liberalisation in 2004 and 2007. The number of foreign-born people in the UK increased from 3.8 million in 1993 to 8.3 million in 2014. The average annual net-migration between 1991 and 1995 was 37,000, compared with 249,000 between 2011 and 2015.

The current composition of migration to the UK

Net migration figures persist in being relatively high despite the Tory party's proclaimed goal of pushing them into the lower tens of thousands. In 2015 net migration was 333,000 out of a total population of 65 million. After the Brexit referendum numbers declined slightly to 273,000 in 2016, which is only partly due to a more hostile social environment, but more likely outcome of the relative wage decline due to the devaluation of the pound. Since the referendum the pound has lost 15 per cent of its value compared to the Euro, meaning that a British wage now doesn't go as far as it once did back in the home country.

Around half of the migrants who arrive in the UK are from EU countries and they first go to areas where it is the easiest to find work: around 40 per cent of all migrants live in London. Students account for a large share of those migrants who are not from the EU - for children of the global elite a degree from a UK university is still of high market value and therefore one of the main export goods of the UK economy. Skilled workers from outside of the EU can obtain a so-called Tier 2 visa, with which, e.g. a software programmer from India can work in the UK for a year, provided their boss can prove that they can't find any suitable person locally and that they pay the workers a certain amount. Another important aspect is the increase of migrants who only stay for a short period of time: in 2015 around 1.2 million people came to work or study in the UK for less than a year.

Between 400,000 and 800,000 migrants have no right to reside and live in the UK under illegal, and therefore precarious conditions. Only few people come to the UK in order to claim asylum, comprising around 5 per cent of total migration. Currently around 40,000 asylum claimants live in the UK and like in other countries the state has allocated them in geographically unequal terms: according to a survey by The Guardian in summer 2017 there were five times as many asylum seekers in poorer thirds of the country than in the richest thirds.

Brexit

The Brexit campaign focused on the migration of 'unskilled' and low-paid workers from Eastern Europe. The stereotype of the Polish builder meandered through the public discourse and both Tories and Labour used it as a straw man. The slogan 'British jobs for British workers' was popularised by Labour Prime Minister Gordon Brown.

Currently around 2.37 million people from the EU work in the UK (around 8 per cent of the total working population). Around a third of all EU migrants are from Poland. Since 2014 most newly arrived migrants are from Romania and Bulgaria. Since 2014 their numbers have increased from 230,000 to around 413,000. The most common professional categories for the so-called A10 migrants (from the ten Eastern European states) are 'process operative' (36 per cent) or packer (19 per cent).

In early September 2017 a Tory Party working paper was leaked (purposefully or not) that discussed how the government could curb migration after Brexit, e.g. through heavier taxation of companies that employ migrants or through limiting the work permits for unskilled workers. The leak was followed by a general outcry from representatives of certain sectors of British industry, who warned of extreme shortages of labour. Two thirds of all waiters, a quarter of all chefs and kitchen staff, 85 per cent of all seasonal agricultural workers, 30 per cent of all workers in logistics and a quarter of all people employed in food processing are from abroad. The UK would face starvation without migrant labour!

The leak is part of the steadily increasing material and ideological pressures that the state exerts on EU-migrants as part of its low wage strategy. Since April 2014 EU-migrants have officially been placed onto the lower ranks of the social hierarchy when it comes to access to social benefits: they can claim basic social welfare only after having worked for at least three months, they are entitled to housing benefit only after a year, limited to a maximum of six months. The share of EU-workers who claim benefits is small, nevertheless, these measures which curb benefit access result in more pressure on workers to find and keep a badly paid job at all costs. Not only social welfare, but also the general right to reside is called into question, as there are more and more media reports about deportations of EU-citizens who were neither officially employed nor registered as job seekers. Some homeless charities hand homeless EU-citizen data over to the migration police as a protectionist measure towards their own local clientele and to preserve their sources of state income.

The state also erects higher hurdles for non-EU migrants. Workers with a residence permit have to earn at least £18,600 a year to be able to bring their spouses over - a minimum wage job will fetch you only £15,000, which explains why many of our colleagues work mad hours in overtime. If you also want to bring your child over the required annual income increases to £22,400, which is why some of our colleagues from India haven't seen their children for years. University lecturers have to show proof of their foreign students' attendance to the migration police. The Brexit referendum and the ensuing debate about how to deal with migrant workers in future has aggravated the situation further. The Tories act quite brutish, e.g. Boris Johnson proposed that migrant workers should only get access to benefits after two years. The Labour Party tends to be more technocratic, e.g. by suggesting the creation of a point-system for work visas that relates to skill levels etc. In February 2017 the Party's deputy leader, Tom Watson, suggested that migration should be regulated according to regional requirements, which would allow EU-migrants to move to London, but not to Newcastle.

Wages of fear

According to a study of the TUC the average real wage dropped by 10 per cent between 2007 and 2015, which means that the UK is only topped by Greece in terms of income loss amongst industrialised nations - but in contrast to Greece the economy in the UK grew during the same period. The GDP reached pre-crisis level in 2013 and currently stands at about 10 per cent above the 2007 level. The employment rate has increased steadily, it now stands at 75 per cent and at 4.3 per cent the unemployment rate is at a 42-year low. Labour shortage does not translate into wage pressure. Another sign of the pressure on workers' confidence is the record low sick-leave levels at around 2 per cent (4.3 days illness related absence per year). Investment rates and productivity levels are also relatively low: why invest in machinery if people work for low wages and long hours, on average around four hours per week more than their continental colleagues?

Politicians and so-called experts ask themselves why, despite low unemployment, wages continue to fall. At least when it comes to the state, this is a hypocritical question, given that the state has actively intervened to guarantee an expansion of the low wage sector by presiding over:

- The curbing of access to social benefits and repressive migration policies (workplace raids etc.). This has increased the pressure to accept low wages by 3.5 million foreign workers;
- The introduction of the minimum wage that currently stands at £7.50 per hour. Implemented initially by Blair's Labour government, the minimum wage stabilises the low wage sector by making workers accept legally instituted low wages. Currently around 6 million people earn between £7.50 and £8.50 per hour, which is 20 per cent of the entire working population.
- Declining real wages through inflation that has specific consequences e.g. since 2008 the cost of childcare has increased seven-fold compared to the nominal wage increase. This results in proletarian women getting into the crossfire of being forced into low paid jobs on one side and the conservative backlash (new family values etc.) on the other.
- The expansion of zero-hours contracts. Around 4.6 million workers have contracts that don't guarantee weekly working hours and therefore no regular income; the number of zero-hour and similar contracts has increased by 30 per cent since 2014, also as a consequence of state-induced casualisation of the labour law.
- State encouraged self-employment in various ways (taxation etc.) which has led to the increase of bogus self-employment by 45 per cent in 2002 to currently 4.8 million workers, whose average weekly income has dropped from £300 during the mid-90s to £240.
- Wage pressure from above e.g. by introducing a wage freeze for 5.4 million public sector workers in 2011 and a wage cap of 1 per cent annual increase since 2013. Due to higher inflation levels this has resulted in an

individual real income loss for public sector workers of around £3,000 between 2010 and 2016.

While the left interprets the politicians' nervousness about wage levels as proof for the validity of their leftist Keynesian dreams ('low wages = limited consumption = not good for the economy'), the politicians are rather more concerned about how dangerous the personal debt bubble is. Since the Brexit vote inflation exceeds wage growth by two to three per cent - at the same time the total amount of unpaid personal loans (for car instalments, credit card purchases etc. excluding mortgages) increased by ten per cent. Total private consumer debt is over £200 billion. Around 8.8 million workers pay for food or electricity bills by using their overdraft.

At this point the ruling rats bite their tails. The political class had to use Brexit as a smoke-screen to disguise the unsolved structural problems of the financial crisis from 2008, e.g. the lack of productive investment, sluggish exports, low profit-rates and wage growth. The referendum in turn created more market uncertainties and caused a decline in the value of the pound. This has fuelled inflation and boosted the private debt rate which compensates for falling real wages. The Bank of England has trouble hiking interest rates which would be necessary to bolster the pound on the international currency markets, fearing that higher interests could seriously upset the real estate bubble and private debt payments.

The Tory party has no real strategy, veering between throwing money at the problem on one side (e.g. by lowering corporate tax to a historic low of 17 per cent, which is supposed to keep London as a global tax and money haven), and agitating for a hard Brexit and a new nationalism on the other, without having a national economic vision. The Party is deeply divided and keep Theresa May hostage. No surprise that there are now many voices in the corporate and industrialist camp that would prefer a 'stable government under socialist Corbyn'. It will be significant whether the 'left' leadership of Labour can develop a national economic plan in order to 'make the best of Brexit' from their perspective. Attempting this, they will not only have to face up to hostile reactions from international investors, but they will inevitably have to offend the liberal and democratic feelings of their new and enthusiastic party members by implementing protectionist and technocratic measures.

Labour camp

“The chairmen and secretaries of Trade Unions and political working-men’s societies, as well as other well-known labour spokesmen who might be expected to be influential in their class, had overnight become important people. They were visited by Members of Parliament, by lords and other well-born rabble (...) The radical bourgeois has sense enough to realise that the election of workers to Parliament is becoming more and more inevitable; it is therefore in their interest to keep the prospective working-class candidates under their control (...) For that purpose they have their Mr. Samuel Morley, a London millionaire, who does not mind spending a couple of thousand pounds in order, on the one hand, to be able to act as the commanding general of this sham labour general staff and, on the other, with its assistance to let himself be hailed by the masses as a friend of labour, out of gratitude for his duping the workers. (...) Under Morley’s chairmanship this conclave drew up a “labour programme” to which any bourgeois could subscribe and which was to form the foundation of a mighty movement to chain the workers politically still more firmly to the bourgeoisie.” (Engels, The English Elections, 1874)

After the Brexit referendum Labour’s relative success during the elections was the second surprise for the establishment. In times of neoliberal crisis even a stale party program can appear radical - £10 minimum wage by 2020; re-nationalisation of the railways; only 7 billion pounds worth of austerity cuts instead of the Tories’ 9 billion. This program and some warm words from the party leader (“solidarity”, “working people”, “for the many, not the few”) is enough to bring tears to the eyes of even some weathered British anarchists. Since the election of Jeremy Corbyn as party leader around 350,000 people have joined the Labour Party, making Labour the biggest political party in Western Europe with a total of 550,000 members. Amongst the converted are nearly all of our British born comrades with a higher education (teachers, lecturers etc.), many members of Plan C (sister organisation of Um’s Ganze in Germany), the formerly liberal-anarchist news platform Novara media, comrades of the ultra-left journal Endnotes and of course our Trotskyite comrades. The organisation Momentum was founded to support Corbyn’s candidacy within the Labour Party and became an important ‘grassroots’ vehicle during the general election campaign, now counting around 22,000 members. While Momentum is portrayed as a bridge between ‘party and social movement’, it is foremost a stage for political in-fights between a new generation of rather post-modern social media oriented activists and the more traditional trots, such as the Alliance for Workers Liberty (AWL). The majority of new Labour members are from the wider London area, they are better educated, with a higher than average income or at least aspiration. In absolute terms Labour has attracted ten times more members in London compared to the whole of Scotland: every fifth Labour member lives in the capital.

The new enthusiasm for Labour stems from similar geographic and social strata as the bulk of Remain voters during the Brexit vote. Apart from the general desire for more social justice the concrete promise to lower university fees will be one of the main motivations for the current support the Party receives. Currently students leave university with several ten thousand pounds worth of debt, many students who have fought against the introduction of student fees are now amongst the most active Labour members. Corbyn's declaration that he wants to lower the fees, but won't cancel existing student debt has been an initial dampener on young people's and their parent's enthusiasm. Due to Corbyn's refusal to go along with Blair's military interventions in the Middle East and thanks to his year long support for the Palestinian National cause British Muslim's are a second, more heterogeneous group that he can bank on.

Since Labour's electoral success the Tories have made some decisive u-turns in their budget program. Self-employed workers will now not be forced to pay social insurance contributions and the 'dementia tax' was scrapped - a scheme to tax real estate property of the elderly supposedly to finance the national care sector. The Tories even want to get rid of the wage cap in the public sector, though only for cops and prison wardens! This softening on the side of the Tories is seen as the first signs of success by the lefty opposition. The new Labour community needs the Tories as the common punchbag and the Corbyn leadership as a projection screen for all kinds of rosy dreams. During the last Labour Party congress in September 2017 around 13,000 people came together at the so-called Fringe Festival. This is where party leadership and the upper-echelons of the union bureaucracy that finances the Labour Party crossed path with self-proclaimed representatives of the social movement, such as David Graeber or Paul Mason (on the jump to the enactment of national liberation in Catalunya), but also smaller personalities of the so-called radical left. While at the fringe people collectively hallucinated in various workshops about how the citizens' future can be organised self-sustainably and along feminist principles thanks to universal basic income and workers' cooperatives, at the actual party congress Momentum helped to organise a decision-making process amongst delegates NOT to make use of their right to have a say about the biggest elephant in the room: the Labour Party position on whether or not the UK should remain in the single market post-Brexit and whether or not freedom of movement for EU Labour should persist. Despite all talk about grassroots, it was left to the party leadership to make a decision about this contentious issue. Everyone knew that the happy festival atmosphere was at stake and that an open dispute would most likely mean that the party would be over...

The Party leadership knows that e.g. a re-nationalisation of the railway and energy sector and the heavier taxation of financial transactions would hardly be conceivable within the structure of the EU, but require more control over the national economy. And whoever wants to control and restrict the movement of capital has to do the same with labour - as capital's living essence.

It was not a whim or merely populist tactic that Corbyn used the three-line whip to discipline Labour MPs to vote in favour of Article 50 and that the majority followed through. The fact that this brought the first tears to the eyes of liberal and parts of the Trotskyist left - or was it snow melting? - only shows how little the current left understands or cares about structural constraints.

The current left is not seriously posing the question of how a national program of redistribution can be enacted in a global capitalist economy – at a time when the UK economy is undergoing its longest period of stagnation in terms of wages and productivity since the Industrial Revolution. They complain about a lack of democracy within Labour, as if they were sitting in a participative workshop at Occupy XYZ and not between the seats of a potential state machinery and their main ally, the executive strata of the UK trade unions. If Labour tries to follow through with their tax policies, capital flight and a decline of the pound will be a likely consequence. In this situation the trade union apparatus would be an indispensable partner to Labour, not only to put pressure on the corporate sector, but mainly in order to transmit the message to workers that despite spikes in inflation and/or unemployment they should ‘give their Labour government more time when it has to deal with global capital and other national enemies’. The current left is blind in both eyes: both when it comes to analysing the objective structural constraints of global production and markets and knowing about the actual experiences of the working class. In times of surging xenophobia and nationalism they limit themselves to open-border appeals of well-meaning and well-to-do sentiments, without addressing the difficulties that migration poses - not only for local workers, but for migrant workers, as well. Without having roots amongst the working class the course of events will turn them either into driftwood for the more (neo-)liberal Green Party or pets of the national social democracy.

In this context our own experiences are of limited nature, our practical efforts modest and our proposals towards the wider revolutionary milieu receive minimal echoes. But you have to start somewhere!

As a small collective of four, five people, supported by a dozen friends we cannot replace a wider class organisation, but can start building a local cell on four levels:

- Solidarity network: We meet weekly at McDonalds in an industrial area, at a supermarket cafe in a logistics park and an Indian tea place in Southall and offer support to fellow proletarians with their problems, such as outstanding wages. We try to encourage them to build more collective resistance at work or take part in local initiatives, e.g. against the closure of the local pool or job centre.
- Workplace groups: Currently we work in a major warehouse of a supermarket chain and factories of a major ready-meal producer and try to establish workers groups. Together with the IWW we try to organise independent union structures in ten local companies.

- Workers newspaper: We try to reflect on the experiences of the solidarity network and the reports from workplaces in a wider context, e.g. migration policies and return of nationalism. We distribute around 2,000 copies of the paper in front of local job centre and workplaces.
- Political collective: Together with politically interested colleagues we take part in the general left debate and international meetings, such as the Amazon workers' gathering.

In London's wild west

We live and work in the western hinterlands of London, the so-called 'Western Corridor', which lies between Heathrow Airport and the M4 motorway/A40 (which goes into central London). Apart from dreary suburban streets with overcrowded rows of houses, this is an area of logistics and industrial parks. 80,000 people work around the airport; around 20,000 people work in the industrial areas in Southall and Greenford; and 35,000 people work in Park Royal. Where in the 60s and 70 helicopters, car parts and double decker buses were riveted together, now pallets are unloaded, vegetables are packed or ready-meals are prepared on assembly lines. Over half of the food consumed by London's 9 million inhabitants has been through this western corridor. Around 90% of the people who work here are first or second generation immigrants. With industry, the composition of the local working class also changed. In the 1930s, when the first tea factories, chemical companies and big road and rail construction sites emerged, the Welsh were told to 'go home', targeting the largely unemployed miners from Wales who had come to work here. They were followed by people from Ireland in the 1950s. In the 60s, Southall became the biggest enclave of Punjabis outside of India. Today, eastern Europeans meet both a new and a more settled Indian workforce, a layer of whom went on to become the local petit-bourgeoisie: lots of building contractors, landlords, local authority employees, shopkeepers, local politicians or middle managers are of Indian origin. Occasionally an Eastern European racism and an ignorance of the newly-arrived (e.g. Sikhs with their long beards are mistaken as Taliban sympathisers) mixes with a proletarian disgust for the 'little bosses' and bloodsuckers - a mixture which is not easy to disentangle.

A big proportion of workers live near their workplaces in involuntary house-shares, often with more than one person per room. There are hardly any one-bedroom flats under £900 a month; a double room in a shared flat costs around £600 – and that's with a minimum wage of around £1200 a month. It's no problem to find 3 or 4 jobs a day, which is what is needed to make ends meet.

Geographically and culturally a million miles removed from the metropolitan city centre, Corbyn-mania and the elections have little meaning here: the local Momentum group consists of 4 pensioners. However, the Brexit referendum has had a bigger influence, as well as the general anti-immigrant politics.

Our Polish neighbours – a bus driver who has lived in London for 9 years – has reported an increase in anti-migrant remarks and bullying after the referendum. Romanian workmates are asking whether they have to go back this year. The immigration police do regular raids inside the factories e.g. at the big sandwich producer, Greencore. In this situation, the solidarity network is our finger on the pulse.

Due to austerity measures the state has lost some of its mediating institutions of social work or charity that working class people in trouble would usually have turned to. As soon as we stick up our solidarity network posters around the area, people call us. In the current social atmosphere apparently every landlord, boss or immigration cop thinks migrant proletarians are fair game to rip off, without having to face any consequences.

A Polish family was threatened with ‘deportation’ by their landlord, after they had trouble paying their rent after their housing benefit was cut. A visa agent had promised a programming course and work visa to one of our colleagues from Punjab and tried to cheat her out of £10,000. A kitchen worker from Senegal was fired for absence, despite the fact that he provided sick-notes from his GP. Bosses of a bar worker from Hungary and builders from Poland and Cameroon didn’t pay their outstanding wages. The tax office heaped hundreds of pounds of penalties onto a night-shift retail worker from Sudan who failed to fill in some otherwise irrelevant forms. Dozens of warehouse workers directly hired from Bulgaria and dependent on the agency which also organised their accommodation were told that they ‘owe the company hours’ and forced to work 72 hours a week in a logistics warehouse for the House of Fraser department store. These are a few of many cases.

Often a little pressure on the boss, e.g. by threatening them to give them a bad name in public, is enough to make them pay. More importantly, we try to keep in touch with the fellow workers we’ve helped and try to get to know new people with their help, e.g. family members of the worker from Sudan are employed in one of the bigger local warehouses where we needed more contacts. We hope that over time we can develop a visible network of (migrant) workers that can take on the bosses - even before workers lose their job.

Doing this we have to deal with other forms of - religious or national - ‘community’ networks. In proletarian areas like Southall mosques or temples play an important role in the day-to-day material and ideological reproduction of the local working class, beyond their particular clientele. For example, a lot of unemployed Eastern European builders visit Sikh temples in order to get food there. After the Grenfell fire disaster Muslim Aid was one of the first charities supporting victims, while state-organised support didn’t show up till much later.

These community organisations play a contradictory role, e.g. during the bin (wo)men strike in Birmingham in Autumn 2017, the Bearded Broz, an organisation of aspirational Muslim (business) men, self-organised refuse collection in the poorer and predominantly Muslim area of town. Arguing that the strike would hit these (Pakistani) parts of town the hardest they practically, even though on a modest level, undermined one of the most important recent disputes in the public sector. In reaction to anti-EU migrant media propaganda Polish nationalist and football hooligan organisations called for demonstrations and even for a ‘Polish strike’ (which was later downplayed to a call for ‘Polish blood’ donations). They emphasised that Polish people are the most industrious workforce in the UK. Another effort to organise a ‘migrant strike’ (‘one day without us’) largely remained an online mobilisation with a few smaller protests in front of government buildings. Since then it is mainly the more professional Western European migrants together with some of the liberal-minded British who organise demonstrations calling for the UK to remain within the EU.

In general the discussions around Brexit are more complex than the media portrays them: ‘liberal middle-class vs. anti-migrant working class’. One of us was working in a small factory in Park Royal during the referendum:

“The good thing about being a small team of workers who sit or stand around a table cutting cables or assembling parts is that you have plenty of opportunity to shoot the breeze about a wide range of topics. While we were working in our dingy workshop, the world around us was changing rapidly: war in Syria, refugee crisis, Brexit referendum, terrorist attacks, signs of decay of the establishment. Our discussions were informed by the varied background of their participants: one friend, a devout Muslim, born in Pakistan and raised in London, who had worked in all sorts of industries and even in the top-notch Ocado warehouse; another friend born in Algeria, who had witnessed the civil war, worked on construction and in warehouses in the UK, married to an English woman; a friend from Hungary, who had lived in the UK for 17 odd years, worked in the company for nearly 10 years, very much a Hungarian nationalist and Brexit supporter (he had obtained his English citizenship); an Irishman, Hindus, Arsenal fans, Kiss FM listeners, all sorts.

Apart from discussing the contradictions of small-scale capitalist production, we talked big politics. Although being (second generation) migrants, those of the colleagues who could vote, voted for Leave. Only one worker (a second generation Ugandan Gujarati) said he did so because ‘all the migrants come in to take benefits’ (his girlfriend was Lithuanian and worked in the factory), the others said it was ‘two fingers to the elite’. They might have been right, because the day after the referendum, the main manager came in crying about the fact that importing the parts from China and other places will now become much more expensive – he was worrying about future access to export markets, too. The colleague from Hungary usually wore a t-shirt saying “Love Europe – Leave the EU”.

He was very concerned about the ‘refugees’ and the potential ‘danger’ they posed to national security. We pointed out that he himself is a migrant, but he replied that he was welcomed, that he had legal papers and that he would leave if he wasn’t. This was during the attacks on the two Polish blokes, shortly after the Leave vote. He followed the Hungarian news and consequently he was quite obsessed with ‘the refugees’ – but luckily enough there were quite a few refugees in the department: the colleagues from Algeria and Lebanon could put things into a clearer perspective. The second generation Ugandan-Gujarati (Chamar caste, Dalits or so-called Untouchables, who made jokes about the other Kenyan Hindu colleague, who was a frequent temple-goer) was unsurprisingly quite anti-refugee – the refugees being mainly Muslim. It didn’t help too much to point out that his parents had been refugees in a major refugee crisis and had been welcomed by pretty nasty UK fascist mobilisations. At the same time he was pretty ‘race conscious’, identifying mainly with Black culture and music and talking “this is Whitey stuff, that is Whitey stuff”. In the end we all agreed that ‘the system is fucked’, but we might not have been so sure about what the system is. The ‘devout Muslim’ friend was a Corbyn supporter, because Corbyn was against the Iraq war and for social justice. The colleague was clearly against the bosses and injustice, but in the end it was literally all a Zionist conspiracy – from archeological and evolutionary science to the creation of ISIS. Our discussions travelled far in time and space, talking loads about religion, spirituality, the universe and cosmic energy – but then we found ourselves back under the neon-strip lights, being paid badly for assembling 3D printers that didn’t sell.”

Unions on the shop floor

In 2016 trade unions in the UK had about 6.2 million members, less than half of what it was in 1979. In the first part of the article we criticised politicians who ask the hypocritical question of why low unemployment doesn’t translate into wage pressure from below. According to our local experiences the trade union apparatus forms part of this alliance of hypocrisy.

In many of the bigger local companies there is union representation. Even though we focus on building independent structures we join the union wherever we work, first of all looking for a space where workers can meet. After over four years in three, four different unions in various companies we only very rarely came across rank-and-file union meetings - and at the few meetings we attended workers themselves didn’t really have a say.

In most companies unions rather help to administer the bad conditions and divisions within the workplace, apart from representing people with their individual issues. In most companies divisions are not mainly related to migration, but to the schism between permanent workers and temps. While overall around 25 per cent of permanent workers are members of a union it is only 13 per cent amongst temps.

Only 16 per cent of migrant workers are unionised, which is also related to the question for how long migrants stay in the country. In 2016 around 339,000 people have left the UK, while 588,000 arrived. The overall movement of labour is significantly higher than the net migration. During a survey in 2015 around 40 per cent of the interviewed migrant workers said that they aim to stay for only one or two years, which is confirmed by statistics of the national insurance administration, which claims that between 2010 and 2014 around a third of the EU migrants stayed and worked in the UK for less than a year.

These short periods of stay pose a problem for traditional unions, but they are also a challenge for the general question of workers' power: having spent money for the journey and for the first steps in the new country migrant workers who only plan to stay for a short while are more prone to accept bad conditions during the initial period.

But migrant workers' low union participation is not only because of their transience. On several occasions unions have taken a public stance against migrant workers e.g. in 2016 the local GMB organised demonstrations at Heathrow Airport protesting against the employment of Tier 2 visa software programming workers and in their press release equated these workers with a threat to national security.

Counter to the notion that these low-waged migrant workers are 'un-organised', there is normally a union presence inside these bigger workplaces, even if the benefits are rarely felt. Here are some of our experiences with unions in the area:

- *GMB trade union, Amey, refuse collection*

In Ealing the local Labour council has outsourced the refuse collection and street cleansing to the service multi-national Amey. Most of the newly hired and seasonal workers are employed on zero-hour contracts through Hays, a recruitment agency. In London road sweepers' and bin (wo)men's wages vary a lot, e.g. in 2015 in Ealing temps were paid £6.70, while they earned £9.25 in Camden. At the end of 2015 Ealing Council announced the introduction of wheelie bins - up to that point rubbish was collected in bin bags from the road side. Council and Amey management announced that this measure would result in fewer dust cars and refuse collectors being required, in total twelve crews. They also claimed that streets would be cleaner with the wheelie bins, so the number of road sweepers could also be reduced. In total 80 permanent workers at Greenford depot would become superfluous. The depot management used the Ealing GMB rep to announce and explain the restructuring. Despite the fact that temps account for half of the workforce they were not invited to the meeting. The union rep began his speech by complaining about the fact that each year Amey supposedly made 8 million pound loss with the Ealing contract. After that he said that he already had a list of 50 colleagues who would like to take redundancy - meaning that according to him the loss of 80 permanent jobs didn't pose a major problem.

In order to save the remaining jobs he proposed that the other workers should become more flexible and be willing to work some days on the bins and some days in street cleansing. There was no word about the possibility of opposing the Labour council and Amey management's restructuring plan. In Autumn 2017 Amey colleagues told us that the total amount of workers in the depot had been culled from 240 to 130 people and that the workload of each team had increased significantly.

- *USDAW trade union, Wincanton, spirits and alcoholic beverage warehouse for Waitrose*

In the warehouse of the logistics giant Wincanton, situated close to Greenford tube station, alcoholic drinks are prepared for delivery to various Waitrose supermarkets in London. Around 40 per cent of the workers are employed by the agency Templine, receiving the minimum wage. Another 30 per cent of the workers have new contracts with Wincanton, earning barely more than the temps. In Spring 2014 the Templine boss announced they were cutting the overtime bonus - resulting in a wage cut of 50 per cent after 40 hours weekly working time. This caused significant discontent amongst the mainly Polish workers. Leaflets were distributed and smaller (rather chaotic!) night-time meetings took place in nearby parks. Temps refused to work overtime and addressed the Wincanton workers with the newer, low-wage contracts, who were also pissed off about receiving £2 p/h less than their older Wincanton colleagues. Templine management reacted by announcing that the bonus cut would be postponed by one month. Templine colleagues also contacted the USDAW union rep, who works as a trainer in the warehouse. He said: "Leave the overtime to us permanents, then the company has to pay dearly." During the unofficial overtime strike he and some of his permanent colleagues worked 16-hour double-shifts.

- *Unite trade union, Wincanton, Sainsbury warehouse*

This warehouse is next to the Wincanton Waitrose warehouse, but they have a different trade union and there is no communication between the sites. In the chill house 120 workers pick groceries for supermarkets, more than half of them have Templine contracts. Most of them are recently arrived kids from Poland and Romania, but there are also people from Somalia, Afghanistan and Nepal. They earn the minimum wage, 30 per cent less than the permanents, who are more settled workers from Nepal, Lithuania and some of them second generation Caribbean and British Asian. The shop floor regime is bad: no guaranteed shifts and they constantly monitor the pick-rate. The individual pick-rate can be seen on monitors in the warehouse, on print-outs in the briefing room and via text message to your mobile the following day: "Yesterday your pick-rate was below the requested 90 per cent". People whose pick-rate is in the lower third of the pecking order get less shifts, so you are forced to work faster to get enough shifts - Templine tries to keep a slight over supply of workers to instigate the rat-race. Two temp-working comrades in the warehouse joined Unite, they were the only members amongst the temps.

Unite has a union board, but it displays only the recent 2.5 per cent wage increase agreement (backed by a narrow majority) and the individual surgeries for members. The union reps didn't show any interest in the new members and were hostile towards meetings and leaflets that circulated amongst the temps. The reps were overworked with individual cases and didn't want to rock the boat with management. The leaflets also addressed the permanents: "We get only 70 per cent of your wage, but are forced to work harder. Support us working slower, otherwise management will use us to undermine your conditions". When it came to disciplinaries about 'calling others to lower their performance levels' the union refused to represent the affected temp members.

- *USDAW trade union, Tesco warehouse*

Tesco is the biggest supermarket chain in the UK, employing around 350,000 people. They have a partnership agreement with the union USDAW that grants Tesco the right not to recognise union reps who have been elected by workers if they don't represent the company values. Tesco has the highest level of unionisation in the retail sector, but while Tesco pays store and warehouse workers only around £7.80, un-unionised 'discount'-supermarkets like Lidl pay over £9.50 for the same job. During recent years USDAW has helped Tesco to cut extra-payments for overtime and weekend work on a massive scale and to introduce flexible contracts for all newly hired workers (they only guarantee part-time hours for formerly full-time jobs). In the large online-grocery shopping warehouse in Greenford Tesco employs around 1400 people, 600 of them van drivers. The drivers currently get £9 p/h (including London location bonus), which is 10 per cent less than most other van drivers. At Tesco you earn less, but it used to be less stress, too. This has changed, e.g. through the new scheduling system called Bumblebee that has recently been introduced and that has increased the workload for drivers significantly. The union does not intervene at all, they don't ask what workers think of the speed-up. Instead they co-manage Tesco's internal training courses for people who want to advance their careers.

- *GMB union, Bakkavor food factory*

Bakkavor is a multinational food business, the owners were deeply involved in the Icelandic financial scandal and one of them was sent to prison. In the UK Bakkavor makes ready-meals, soups and sauces for the big supermarket chains. In our area the company has four big factories and a warehouse with over 4000 workers in total. In the winter of 2017 a southern England-wide 'houmous crisis' hit the headlines when they had to stop production in one of their west London factories for two days and withdraw stock because of 'technical reasons' (the houmous had a metallic taste.) Most permanent employees in the factories are women from Gujarat or from other south Asian regions. Lots of them have been working there for 10-20 years. Lower and middle management is made up mainly of men from the same regions. Women's knowledge of English is mostly rudimentary. Everyone wants overtime because it is paid at time-and-a-half over the basic 40 hours.

People regularly work or worked 50-60 hours to go home with a 'decent' wage, and this is especially important for those who want to bring family members over or have to earn a certain minimum in accordance with their visas. At previous seasonal peaks around 30% of production was dependent on overtime. However, more recently, overtime has been cut but not at the expense of output, meaning they have been squeezing workers for greater efficiency gains. The use of agency workers has also decreased compared to last year – a memo went around saying that if needed, overtime should mainly be given to permanent staff, presumably as a way to reduce workers' discontent and save money. The Indian workers' poor English and manner of talking is often perceived as unfriendliness by the Eastern European colleagues, which is exacerbated by the massive work pressure and bullying culture by the managers.

After several campaigns at the end of the 90s, the GMB union was recognised in all of the west London plants. In a female worker dominated company, most of the union reps are men and are part of the management structure. Most workers regard the GMB as corrupt but still pay their membership dues (although membership has been dropping off over the last year in particular).

Before the Brexit referendum the GMB and Bakkavor management bought out a joint memo encouraging employees to vote to remain inside the EU. According to the companies' and union memo, free entry to EU markets and free movement of labour was vital for their survival. In the main, most workers of Indian origin with British citizenship experience 'free movement of labour' in the form of agency or temporary workers. Most agency workers at Bakkavor are from Eastern Europe. Shortly after the referendum Bakkavor lost the Tesco mash contract, and the GMB agreed to redundancies and longer shift hours at the same time as the use of agency workers was increasing despite (or because of) permanents being laid off.

Like all unions, the GMB posted a letter to its members calling on them to vote for Labour. At the end of 2016 the GMB put up notices inside the factories promising to introduce Labour's demand for a £10/hr London Living Wage. Shortly after Bakkavor began its regular wage negotiations but workers represented by the GMB were hardly involved in the progress. It was not until July 2017 that GMB and Bakkavor management presented the wage offer in ten languages and recommended that the membership accept the deal. The pay deal came along with the introduction of new and blatant sexist wage/skill categories. Assembly line workers who are mostly women who fold samosas and other pastries were categorised as 'unskilled' whereas dealing with pallets, which is a 'man's job' was deemed semi-skilled. After 20 years of seniority in the company and a decade of union presence women were offered a 15 pence pay rise, an increase to £7.65 when the current legal minimum wage is £7.50/hr. The semi-skilled wage groups – constituting a relative minority of the workforce should get £8.30/hr. No mention of temp workers.

The immediate reactions of almost all workers was that they were unhappy with the agreement. Over the last four years we have distributed our newspaper and leaflets about various topics at Bakkavor; at this point we suggested a meeting and an overtime boycott in response to the bad offer. We only got verbal support. Colleagues amongst the forklift drivers and cleaning staff (mainly men from Sudan or Sri Lanka who were categorised as 'unskilled') organised their own informal meetings – mainly thinking about how to improve their own position in the hierarchy. At one of the sites on the day of the ballot about whether or not to accept the deal, a GMB rep was standing over people making a note of who was voting against the offer. We also heard that some women were being told that the vote was not about the pay offer but a vote for the union and some women were not even given a voting paper, it was filled out on their behalf by the rep. When these 'unregularities' were pointed out to the regional GMB office, we got only evasive answers. Official figures stated that 62% of GMB members voted to accept the pay deal. Shortly afterwards there were lots of individual and some collective grievances by workers against their categorisation. While the management tried to defuse these complaints behind closed doors without union representation, the GMB reacted more offensively.

They hired a new Bakkavor organiser who organised a meeting for workers across all the west London sites. This guy is someone known on the left, a former construction worker who was himself blacklisted by the construction industry and who now works full-time for the GMB. Around 60 out of 600 workers came to the meeting. The guy explained that he thought the pay deal was shit and would have voted against it. He advised workers to take out individual grievances together with their union rep with respect to their wage categorisation. The reasoning being that individual complaints would exert more pressure in terms of numbers and work generated for the company than collective ones.

Another reason for the 'offensive' was that the company banned one of the GMB full-time reps from entering the company and the GMB wanted him back in. As a full-time unionist and as someone who has difficulties communicating with workers in their mother tongue, the new GMB organiser is dependent on 'militant' or at the very least reliable union reps. He doesn't want (chaotic) mass meetings, rather a core group of solid union people who can wield influence amongst workers. But maybe exactly what we need is bigger meetings where workers can talk freely - we shouldn't be afraid of the chaos under heaven that might also erupt.

What could be done?

In this situation we have to try new things. In November 2017 we stood in front of a local sandwich factory, introducing the IWW with some leaflets. We only knew a guy in the cleaning department, but otherwise had no clue what was happening inside. The workers - mainly women from India and Lithuania - took us by surprise: "Yes, good that you are here, we want to take on management."

They treat us like slaves, make us work up to 14 hours. We already tried bits and pieces, we wrote a complaint letter, signed by 120 workers of all nationalities. Last week two lines stopped working when they wanted to make us work overtime without extra-break. We also went to visit the big boss in his office, a dozen of us, because the work uniforms don't keep us warm enough. And the mechanics put in a collective grievance. What can you do?" Impressed by these workers we organised two meetings where around 40 workers turned up. We invited cleaners from Columbia along, who had just won a strike against their boss. Finally something was in the air again. People talking about exploitation, oppression and about who keeps everything clean and everyone fed. We need the will to organise and the courage to scratch the surface of fear and daily indifference, instead of staring at the power plays on the stage of official politics. This doesn't mean we can't discuss the bigger picture.

The union leadership supports the national-social democratic program, which opposes further migration, unless it is highly regulated. On the shop floor union structures are not able to or not aiming at giving migrant workers more self-confidence and perhaps to learn one or two things from the workers. Unions rather cling to the recognition agreements by management and by the core workforce, as a result of which they sell out the rest of the workers pretty cheaply. These workers in turn can then be blamed for undermining existing conditions.

There are some hopeful experiences of rank-and-fails organising amongst migrant workers, primarily in the cleaning sector. These were only successful when a bigger group of already politicised workers from South America became involved and when workers cleaned buildings of institutions that don't want to risk losing their reputation, e.g. as prestigious international universities, famous museums or globally acting banks. Who cares about unknown sandwich manufacturers in the suburb? Workers in west London, unlike the logistics workers in Italy, don't arrive with the inspiration and encouragement of the Arabic Spring on their backs. In the back of their minds is the rather dreary autumn of the sell-out of Solidarnosc - neoliberal corruption in the name of workers' solidarity.

The left has to give up their belief in the idea that a Labour government will open up new spaces and break with their liberal multiculturalism that portrays migrants first of all as good victims. A class position and a class organisation has to be built practically and enforce itself politically. We need deep organising as opposed to just campaigning and mobilising efforts. Building structures that support workers in their daily struggles are a first step, as only in the process of struggle can sectorial, language-related and other divisions be challenged. Only once it is rooted in this process of a practical working class internationalism can the revolutionary left start thinking about strategy and wider organisational steps that could pose an alternative to the farce of parliamentary politics.

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