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Migration from the new EU member countries

A part of a Europeanization process or a threat towards the low skilled Danish workers?

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Workshop: “Changing patterns of labour migration in Nordic working life”

Migration from the new EU member countries – A part of a Europeanization process or a threat towards the low skilled Danish workers?

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Abstract

Background: During the past four years more than 52.500 Eastern European EU citizens have worked and lived in Denmark. Migrant workers from the new EU countries are characterized by a high degree of mobility, flexibility and eagerness in terms of working and adapting to working conditions. Poorer socioeconomic and working conditions in their home countries as well as being of another cultural background than their Danish colleagues brings with it many challenges. This article examines the consequences of low-skilled labour migration to Denmark from the new EU member countries in Eastern Europe. The article investigates the potentials, limitations and conflicts of interests that are connected with temporary employment of Eastern European migrant workers within the unskilled labour sectors seen from the perspective of Danish labour market actors; politicians, labour marked unions, Danish employers, Danish employees and unemployed workers, as well as the migrants.

Method: Interviews were carried out with politicians, five labour marked unions and one employer union. Furthermore, group- and single person interviews were carried out with 16 migrant workers, four Danish employers, two Danish employees and Danish unemployed workers within butchering, construction, farming and manufacturing. Danish emergency care data about reported and non-reported lost-time injuries (LTI) among East-European migrants from 2004-2010, and results from a labour union campaign, are used to illustrate the working conditions of migrant workers. The campaign workers visited, unannounced, 400 construction sites with migrant workers in the autumn of 2011.

Results: The employers, their organizations and some of the liberal political parties found that the cheap and flexible foreign labour is crucial for business's ability to compete on the global market. Trade unions, on the other hand, are concerned about the developments on the labour market and the protection of workers' rights, safety and equal treatment. Danish workers express solidarity with their foreign colleagues. However, their working conditions are threaten by the presence of the migrants, who are e.g. willing to work longer for less pay and who will work under conditions that do not meet Danish working environmental standards. The migrants are very satisfied with their jobs in Denmark, especially the relatively high salary and the high standard of living. To cope with the threat of losing their job, they avoid as much as possible getting into conflicts with their leaders, including not reporting LTI's. Emergency data indicates that only 30 % of the LTI's among migrants are being reported. Moreover, half of the companies with migrant employees are not registered in the mandatory database, and at 30 % of the work sites conditions in the working environment is considered poor or alarming.

Conclusion: The temporary employment of Eastern European migrant workers puts the Danish labour marked conditions, as well as the working environmental standards, under high pressure, particularly in the current situation with a global recession. European law provides Danish politicians and unions limited possibilities to act. Finally, the escalated labour migration from Eastern European EU countries challenges the negotiation model, which is central to the structure of the Danish labour market.