

Briefing on ..

Migrant Workers

A Charter for Migrant Workers

Introduction

UNISON branches are reporting increasing concerns over the exploitation of migrant workers in Scotland. In response to this concern UNISON Scotland launched a minimum standards Charter for Migrant Workers in the Scottish Parliament on

Wednesday 18 June 2008. This briefing sets out the background to this initiative and encourages branches to raise the charter with employers and improve our organisation of migrant workers.

Background

Migration is more difficult to measure than births and deaths. People can move within the UK, emigrate, or move to the UK from within the European Economic Area with no obligation to register their migration. There are workforce registration requirements for new EU accession states and tough immigration rules for workers outwith the EU.

Traditionally, Scotland was a country of emigration. For example, in the mid-1960s there was a net outflow of around 40,000 people per year. However this has changed. Since the early 1990s, inflows and outflows have been approximately equal; while in the last four years there have been net immigration gains of around 9,000 in 2002-03, 26,000 in 2003-04 (the highest net gain recorded), 19,000 in 2004-05 and 21,000 in 2005-06.

Broadly speaking, in the last 4 years migration into Scotland has typically been about 70,000 to 100,000 whilst migration from Scotland has ranged from around 70,000 to under 80,000. The level of net migration can be significantly affected by relatively

small changes in these gross flows from year to year, particularly if one flow rises while the other falls.

Scotland's population is set to rise over the next 25 years to its highest-ever level, according to new projections. The number of people living in the country is projected to rise from 5.12 million in 2006 to a high of 5.37 million in 2031, before slowly declining and eventually falling below the five million mark in 2076. Migration together with longer life expectancy is a big contributor to this with the associated benefits to the economy and our culture. UK government figures show that migration is worth £6bn to the economy. Migration, particularly those of working age, also helps balance the aging population trend. By 2031 there will be 18 people over 75 for every ten today.

Whilst there has been a general welcome of immigration and recognition of the economic and cultural benefits, there remain some challenges over public attitudes and exploitation of migrant workers by some employers.

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Exploitation

Many migrant workers do not receive the traditional Scottish welcome they might expect. Instead they can be exploited by employers or contracting agencies and gangmasters.

This exploitation starts before they even arrive in Scotland by being overcharged for travel costs and documentation, costs that are often deducted with interest from wages. They can be tied to shoddy overpriced accommodation that is

again deducted from wages. When they get to work they can face discrimination over pay and conditions as well as bullying and harassment. Health and safety standards can also be poor.

Even the better employers often struggle to provide necessary support to address the cultural and language difficulties that many migrant workers face.

Migrant Workers Charter

A good starting point for how we respond to migrant workers should be to remember that Scots have for centuries travelled the world to live and work. Employers and fellow workers should treat migrant workers in Scotland as we would expect our own family members to be treated when they are abroad.

The Migrant Workers Charter helps employers to do just that by bringing together a range of best practice in the treatment of migrant workers. It covers ethical recruitment, pay and conditions, accommodation,

discrimination and how to address language and cultural issues.

Whilst this charter is aimed at all employers it is particularly important that the governments at UK and Scottish levels together with public bodies lead the way as an exemplar employer, not only with directly employed staff but through the procurement of goods and services. Governments can also ensure that the enforcement agencies pay particular attention to the issues highlighted in the charter within their remit.

Action for Branches

Branches are encouraged to raise with their employers the issues highlighted in the charter and ask them to adopt it. The charter can be downloaded at <http://www.unison-scotland.org.uk/activists/migrantworkerscharter.pdf>

Please keep the P&I Team advised of progress.

UNISON already has a number of organising initiatives targeted at migrant workers in Scotland including the ground breaking overseas nurse network. A key resource is the UNISON Organising Migrant Workers handbook. This and other materials are available on the UNISON UK website

<http://www.unison.org.uk/migrantworkers/>

This includes details of the new migrant workers participation project that will include training for stewards and migrant worker activists. The best way to challenge exploitation is by getting migrant workers organised in UNISON.

Write to your MSPs asking them to support Scottish Parliament motion S3M-2229 Marlyn Glen MSP: Listening to Migrant Workers. This motion congratulates the UNISON initiative and calls on public bodies to adopt the charter.

Finally there are a range of resources on the UNISON Scotland Fighting Racism website <http://www.unison-scotland.org.uk/comms/antiracism.html> to challenge some of the myths about migrant workers that appear in the media and elsewhere.