

Unions and new migrants

The challenge for the UK's trade union movement

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Union density figures

- union membership in EU15 countries rose by 6.8 per cent between 1970 and 2003;
- However, reasons for the increase are located within the first decade – between 1970 and 1980 – when membership grew by 28.7 per cent;
- Since 1980 trade union membership in EU15 countries has registered a decline.
- Between 1970 to 1990, density rates declined by 11.5 per cent.

Visser 2006

Organising consequences

- ★ Each decade from 1970 onwards ‘became progressively worse from the perspective of union organising’ (Visser)
- ★ ‘a rather universal research finding ... the decline of union density among the young’ (Visser)

Can migration resolve union membership decline

- ✦ Migration not new– has occurred within and between EU states.
- ✦ But new challenges – language, cultural experiences, history

The research

- ✦ East of England for the regional authority
- ✦ England and Wales for the Health and Safety Executive
- ✦ Cambridgeshire for the sub-regional body
- ✦ Based on face to face interviews around 250 to 300

Union policies

- ✦ At national level – difficulty of translating into action at local/regional level
- ✦ Tensions between protection of existing workers and the inclusion of new workers
- ✦ Migrant workers – a shield
- ✦ Focus on recruitment but not necessarily on migrant worker interests
- ✦ Some good practice – eg Portuguese workers project

Sectors

- ✦ Agriculture
- ✦ Processing and packaging
- ✦ Cleaning
- ✦ Construction
- ✦ Healthcare
- ✦ Hotels and catering

Barriers to recruitment

- Fear of victimisation by employers and agencies;
- Inability to communicate due to lack of a common language;
- Mobility and the temporary nature of much of the employment available;
- Existing difficulties in organising the sectors, even in respect of local staff;
- More likely to work indirectly - historically difficult for to organise;
- Stay is seen as temporary – whether to invest in union and whether union to invest in them
- Low wages and union membership costs
- Lack of tradition of organisation or suspicion of trade unions
- Racism and discrimination

Migrant worker problems

- Family issues, banking and religious issues;
- Lack of clarity over pay slips; and
- migrant workers required training in how to raise grievances with their employers.
- Migrants approaching unions rather than the other way about – but therefore isolated individuals