

Action Research in Action: The experience of Polish migrant workers

Andy Danford, CESR

Migrant workers, those from the accession countries and Poland in particular, seem to make the news with alarming regularity. It appears that when they are not being lauded for their 'work ethic' or being held up as the solution to British labour and skills shortages, they are being pilloried for 'stealing our jobs'. What we never see or hear in the news media, however, are Polish migrant workers joining unions: and yet they are. If British trade unions are to help Polish migrant workers fight exploitation by rogue employers, unions need to gain a better understanding of the experience of Poles working in our villages, towns and cities. But just how do we gain this understanding? How do we go about researching this issue? To find out, Andy Danford from the Centre for Employment Studies Research (CESR) interviewed Ian Fitzgerald, a researcher with an impressive track record in working with Polish workers in the construction and food processing sectors.

Ian is a researcher at the Sustainable Cities Research Institute at Northumbria University with a history of project work in workplace industrial relations, the learning and skills agenda and community engagement. His recent work has been sponsored by the Northern TUC and involved working with Polish workers in the North West, North East, Yorkshire and Humber regions. With Professor Jane Hardy at the University of Hertfordshire he is currently working on an ESRC project on cross border trade union collaboration and Polish migrant workers in the UK. In the autumn of 2007, CESR were delighted to host a research seminar led by Ian on the subject of organising migrant labour. While he was in Bristol, Andy took the opportunity of interviewing him about his recent experience of action research with Polish migrant workers in the North East region.

AD: How did you become interested in the migrant worker agenda in the first place?

IF: To be honest, I was completely unprepared for it. I had no real recognition of the significance of accession. However, I had completed a number of projects with the regional TUC in the North East, and with the Northern TUC and a number of affiliate unions and someone put an idea to me that construction had seen a significant increase in the use of migrant labour. And, in any case, construction had always been an industry characterised by lots of labour movement migration and movement. So, it was suggested to me that, perhaps, I could take this to the North East TUC and suggest a suitable project. The regional secretary there told me that the national TUC had asked the regions to actually submit bids to undertake projects. So he was really interested and he said by the end of the day I'll knock up a proposal, which he did, which I thought was amazing. So the eventual research was based on the problems of migrants in north east construction and for this we developed a partnership between myself at Northumbria, UCATT and the regional TUC. And it grew from there essentially.

AD: It's a potentially difficult area, so how did you go about setting up the actual research?

IF: Yes, it is. I'm a very enthusiastic person and... perhaps foolhardy, some might say. But I am very positive; I don't think it's any good being negative. I'm very positive towards the union movement; I think the working class needs a trade union movement. I'd like to think that other like-minded people would feel the same. I think it's ridiculous to talk about the end of the unions. And to be honest, I didn't really think about questions of union renewal, I didn't think about collective mobilisation, I didn't think about any of these types of theories around migrants. Basically, I just thought this was an interesting and very important topic and just set about it with an open mind.

And do you know, at the first meeting I had with John Scott, the regional secretary of UCATT, John said I'm not convinced by this, but I'll go with it. Then three months into the project he said to me, "Ian, this is why I joined the movement. People are in terrible conditions, we are doing important work here, this brings me back to why I joined UCATT thirty years ago." He was totally enthused by the whole situation. So, at first, it was a very, very difficult task and in my opinion, that project, for me, showed me how important it was to build trust with migrant workers, particularly black minority ethnic workers, but also migrant workers of all types.

AD: How did you set about gaining access to these workers and building up trust with them?

IF: UCATT had just brought in a development officer and he was given the task of supporting this project. So he spent time identifying differing groups of migrant workers, where they were, who they were. We found that they were mostly Polish workers. So we decided to go to a particular site in South Tyneside that the UCATT rep had visited a couple of times, and this was a bit of a story. I turned up with my tape recorder at a meeting of about 16-17 Polish workers. This was in a 'cabin', a site canteen. We had identified someone amongst those 17 who was willing to talk for us, to interpret. So we went along speaking English to a group of people speaking only Polish. First of all the UCATT officer explained the role of the union. But then they wanted to know who I was, what the hell I was doing there, you know, real fears and antagonism about why I was there. So I gave my spiel, that I was trying to help them, that my research was for a body called the Trade Union Congress which was very important in the UK and was seeking to protect their rights. I then turned on the tape recorder and all hell let loose, they were so angry. That anger was amazing, I mean, people wanted to hit us and we hadn't done anything. We were there to try and help them.

What came out of that were questions governing everything. Why doesn't the employer pay my wages? Where is my contract? Where is my National Insurance number? What are you going to do about my accommodation? Why do I have to travel at five in the morning to start work at eight? Why am I living miles away? How can I move onto another job? All of these questions, many of them outside of the remit of a trade union. The meeting, from a research structure point of view, just completely deteriorated. It ended up with us trying to firefight, trying to sort out these key issues one by one. But that was the beginning of it.

AD: So at first they thought you were part of the problem, rather than part of the solution?

IF: Oh yes. But the way I understand this now, these migrant groups are beamed in as if from the Starship Enterprise, beamed into these settings in different locations, localities and workplaces around the country. And this time it just happened to be the North East, about which they knew nothing and no-one, and they were just there to earn money. They believed in the employer, subcontractors in this case, subcontractors who promised them £8 an hour and then paid them £3 an hour if they were lucky, if they paid them anything.

These workers never had anyone to turn to and many were living in Sunderland which can be a very white, racist, insular area. They were living three or four to a small house, getting up in the mornings at perhaps five or six o'clock, getting in the car, or being picked up, starting work at seven or eight o'clock and working until seven at night, or when the sun went down in construction, and then they were going home. They were lucky to have time to shop, to do the normal things that all of us do. And, by the way, they were working Saturdays and some were going to a church or places of Polish worship, or whatever they'd found in the region on the Sunday. So their lives were pretty tight around that.

AD: You have adopted an action research approach, working with the union and the Polish workers themselves. How difficult has it been to get Polish workers to buy into the union message?

IF: In earlier meetings people pointed out to me that Poles tend not to join unions and Poles don't do this, don't do that. But I think that's rubbish. I found that they are joining unions, they are not antagonistic towards union principles, there's actually sympathy towards them. They have a strong sense of solidarity; they have a strong sense of not being mugs, of not being made mugs of. But there are obstacles. After all, they are economic migrants. They look at their wallets and pay packets first and while they are being paid rubbish wages, or should I say minimum wages, are they going to spend money on unions? This has been half the problem. So perhaps when I talk about trust, it isn't solely trust, its trust and branding. It's about unions actually showing Polish workers that the union can do good things for them.

AD: How have the unions handled the language problem?

IF: From what I've seen, a lot of unions are now translating leaflets. You won't find it unusual to find unions identifying the largest migrant groups and starting to use translation services. Also, in some cases, in food processing for example, English is often the second language. But there's also an awareness that there are limited union resources, not only for translation but other services too. I don't want to overemphasise this, but obviously people will have to start to learn English and there's a significant role here for workplace reps and people who are now called "buddies", people who are very sympathetic towards the union, but don't want to be a rep quite yet or don't want to be a full activist, but are happy to talk to the group they are dealing with. They have been significant with translation and I think a lot of unions have used that system. So, there are strategies there but we do need some sort of co-ordination because so much of the language support has been *ad hoc* so far.

AD: What support do these Polish migrant workers receive from other community groups?

IF: I think it's highly significant what's going on here. I think three have been really important. The first one is the Federation of Poles in Great Britain. They have worked on support for these Poles. They have a booklet called *Living and Working in the UK*, which is in the Polish language, which is in hard copy and in an electronic version on their website. They tell me that since accession, they've had 70,000 copies given out to Poles over here, that's the hard copy booklet alone with another 30,000 run that's ready to go out. They've done a lot of work in communities and nationally and they've started to engage with the TUC and other unions.

The second group is the churches: the Catholic Church and Parish Committees. I've been to the Polish Catholic churches in the North East and you get nearly 1,000 people turning up for services. I've even been to Poland and walked outside churches with people queuing outside. And these are good access points. What I've found is, there are a number of older activists who are associated with these Parish Committees, not only the priests. For example, I've worked for a little while now with a woman who is on a Parish Committee. She calls herself an interpreter, is 75 years of age and seems to spend her time stressed out, she tells. I've tried to help her as much as possible. She goes around helping Polish workers. I've interviewed her on a number of occasions and at one of these, her mobile rang and when she put the phone down, she went to me straight away – a bus company in Manchester had just sacked 100 Polish workers, can you do anything about it? So I phoned someone I knew in the TUC nationally and put him onto her and said, "do something about it." I don't think he was very happy with me!

The third group is Poles workers themselves, new workers who have started up web pages in the UK as a basis for networking and helping other Poles.

AD: Final question, overall, do you feel optimistic about the future position of migrant labour in British trade unions?

IF: Extremely optimistic. Poles are joining unions; they are going to become, I think, very important for the movement. I think the organisers, the full-timers, the shop stewards, the activists, I think they could really renew unions in this country and I also believe they could really renew unions in Poland. *Solidarność* are aware of this and so are the TUC. I think I am tremendously optimistic. Polish workers are not just discontented; they are extremely discontented with their conditions. But that could be short term. I think the longer their employment goes on, the less major discontent we will have. So for the unions, now is the time to strike as far as recruitment and mobilisation are concerned, to actually show to these people how important unions are and to convince them that the union is there for life. We're not going to see this in a year or two years, it might take three years, but I think if we don't go for it, in three or four years, there's going to be people writing about another opportunity lost.