

Opinion

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Stop blaming migrants - exploitation is the problem

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A bar on east European workers won't bring down unemployment. We need solidarity, not scapegoating

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The past few weeks have seen that most unedifying spectacle - liberal people trying desperately to justify illiberal attitudes. The debate on what to do about migrant workers from eastern Europe is producing more contortions than a circus act.

Employers have bemoaned the pressures on public services, which they more often advocate cutting and privatising. Economic liberals who insist that there must be no barriers to free trade have argued that free movement of workers is globalisation gone mad. And social liberals have argued that they are acting selflessly on behalf of "white van man" in calling for restrictions on Bulgarian and Romanian workers when their countries join the EU.

Of course people are worried about the recent increases in unemployment, especially after so many years when the UK has had such a strong jobs record. Hard-pressed families are not as keen on slow wage growth as the Treasury. And people are right to be angry when they see their jobs replaced by temporary agency contracts.

It has always been tempting to scapegoat "the other" when such economic difficulties come round. But undercutting, exploitation and unemployment are not caused by eastern Europeans, nor are these things a necessary part of a sustainable economic future. And the solution to the growing vulnerability of large sections of people at work that they represent is not to throw up the shutters and put out the "foreigners not wanted here" signs, even if we could.

The truth is that the government can do little in practice to restrict Bulgarians and Romanians. They will have a right both to travel here and to be self-employed after accession. EU member states can temporarily restrict employment but, as Germany shows, all that happens is that you replace employees with the self-employed. And their wage levels are likely to be even lower than the super-exploited Polish agency workers who are the stuff of rightwing tabloid scare stories.

That is why the TUC conference in Brighton this week will hang up a "you are welcome here" sign. But we must also tackle the myths about migrant workers and campaign to put right the underlying problems that migrant and indigenous workers face.

The biggest myth is that migrant workers are causing unemployment. Those parts of the country that are seeing job losses are not those where migrant workers are most prevalent. They will go where there are job vacancies, not dole queues. Underlying these arguments is, we usually find, the lump of labour fallacy. This is the idea that there is a set amount of work to go round, and that if you increase the number of workers, unemployment must go up and wages must come down.

Despite the supposed waves of Polish plumbers, there are still substantial shortages of such skills in the construction industry. Many sectors of the economy, such as health, social services and hospitality, would collapse overnight without migrant workers.

We are told that the 600,000 eastern Europeans who have entered the country since May 2004 (many of whom have long since returned home, uncounted and unremarked) are putting intolerable pressures on schools and hospitals across the country. Yet they are mostly healthy young adults without dependants (who incidentally are net contributors to tax, not benefit scroungers).

Of course there are real pressures in some places, such as the smaller rural towns with agriculture-related jobs; but these are precisely some of the areas where migrant workers are most needed. The solution therefore is to give the towns the social infrastructure they need, not ruin their local economies.

If eastern Europeans are being paid below the minimum wage, it is hardly their fault; the blame lies with employers breaking the law. If they are living in overcrowded expensive sub-standard accommodation, it is the fault of slum landlords who are profiting from their inability to find a decent home. And if they are bussed over from their homes by the promise of good jobs at good wages and end up in jobs where they do not even enjoy legal minimum standards, it is the fault of our system of labour-market regulation.

The solutions are clear. Some come from that old union watchword, solidarity. The best defence against exploitation, undercutting and divide-and-rule is to refuse to accept lower standards, lower wages and lack of respect for migrant workers. At Luton airport, baggage handlers who found that Poles had been brought in by an

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