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Britain, TUs & Migrants: Freedom of movement and securing labour rights are both important principles, and must go hand-in-hand

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Prejudice against immigrants was one of the deciding factors in the Brexit Referendum. The issue of migration touches many raw nerves. There are many big national and personal interests at stake, as well as key principles, especially now that the number of people being displaced by conflicts and seeking refugee status is increasing. Article 14 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights recognises the basic right of people to move to preserve their lives. Meanwhile there is a worrying development of a rising culture of xenophobia in Europe, partly because media stories often confuse refugees with economic migrants and such migrants are oftentimes presented in a bad light.

During the last election campaign and up to now, politicians have been grilled about their positions on migration and the principle of freedom of movement. Although the general view is that those opposing migration are “anti-foreigner” and often hold a conservative perspective, it becomes very complex when progressive organised sectors that are championing people’s rights, like the trade unions, are seen as anti-immigrant.

Last Sunday’s interview of Jeremy Corbyn by Andrew Marr [1] was the last of many occasions that journalists have grilled Corbyn about Labour’s seemingly weak migration policy. There will continue to be more questions and criticisms, most importantly from migrants, unless a stronger position on migration is adopted by the Labour Party, especially as it sees itself now as a government in waiting.

Class and race politics are often seen as uncomfortable topics. However, unless one is so privileged as to be threatened by these concerns, any progressive initiative of building alternative societies must be able to talk explicitly and clearly on these topics, as failure to do so will mean we are unable to question and challenge power. Our position on the most vulnerable, weakest and exploited, oppressed and discriminated against section of our society reflects how we really value rights and equality. Our movements need to reach out and organise more with self-organised immigrant and migrant groups who are already fighting a wide range of their own struggles, not just to win campaigns, but to build and rebuild movements that can lead to radical transformation for social, economic, environmental, and gender justice.

Building New Collective Politics

We believe that it is important that unionised workers in this country, and the Left in general, put forward a clear position of solidarity with migrants, based on the recognition that migrants make up an important part of the working class in this country (both those in paid employment, and also those unemployed). Furthermore, we believe that workers and the working class need to be understood in a global context, in which migration is an important feature of the worldwide working class, and that class solidarity requires an internationalist outlook that does not pit workers in one country against those in another.

As such, we see the need for open borders as an essential element in building internationalist solidarity, which sees the working class in Britain as just one part of a wider worldwide working class that is struggling throughout the world, in different circumstances and conditions. The world economy is based on the work of a very fragmented and conflict-ridden worldwide working class, and a major task for progressives and those on the left is to find ways of overcoming these divisions and conflicts.

As such, we believe that it is critical to challenge the far right's xenophobic agenda, based on the above understanding of migration, work, class, and the world division of labour. We must avoid our arguments becoming confused with or seen as similar to far right positions. More importantly, there is a sore need for building a broad progressive movement for more radical social transformation in this country and at this juncture. Organisation, not exclusion, should be our root to beating low wages, and the solution to "the migration crisis" lies not in excluding migrants, but in struggling against the (very real) wage hierarchy that exists between so-called "migrant" workers and "British" workers.

The recent massive wave of migration to more affluent countries like the UK has its roots in the dispossession of people caused by the devastating impacts of global capitalism and war, which are connected to policies here. The accumulated impacts of the earlier global expansion of capital and post-colonial regulations are also relevant. Both have their roots in the Global North.

It is understandable that trade unions protect their interests as workers. The starting point of opposing the recruitment by companies of low paid (skilled or unskilled), exploitable labour with very few rights in order to increase their profit margins is expedient and correct. Similarly, the initiatives of the trade union movement to organise migrants and immigrant workers are laudable as it could help solve the problem of seeing migrants and immigrants as rivals for jobs and welfare. But these are not enough. Political parties should work on addressing the root and current causes that drive people to leave their countries of origin at the same time as also expanding the rights and power of organised workers (both "native" and "foreign" alike) in the UK itself.

Making the progressive view on migration popular

It is important that citizens of a former empire and a current key actor in global political economy, understand that the presence of migrants in the UK is a product of both this country's history and its role in shaping the present global order. The massive wave of global migration, estimated by the UN to be 244 million migrants and 65 million refugees in 2015, shows the desperation of people who are being pushed by increasing inequalities produced by the continuing expansion of global capital and those who are fleeing war or persecution. However, it must be acknowledged too that they are not just victims of their country's circumstances as everyone has a capacity to change their own situation and contribute positively to society.

Migration is also linked to the fact that the developing world is sending too much of its natural and financial resources to rich countries, or rather the rich countries are siphoning off these resources from the developing countries. A recent study shows that from 1980 up to the present, the developing world has lost \$16.3 trillion in capital flight to the Global North. Developing countries have paid \$4.2 trillion in interest payments on international debt. That produced a reality of large populations in the Global South without state social services, decent work, as a result of structural adjustment and the integration into global capitalism.

Conservative thinking is not anti-migration per se. It is true that cheap migrants can supply the needs of businesses. What they want is an assurance that the influx of migrants is controlled, which means it remains temporary, vulnerable and deportable at any time. In their eyes, temporary migration suits the needs of capital, but the state must not give migrants an easy way to stay.

According to the International Labour Organisation, in 2015 there were an estimated 150 million migrant workers worldwide. The overwhelming majority are guest workers. Globally, countries are regulating migration and creating forms of tier-systems, stratifying migrants in two forms:

1. A tier for wealthier migrants who could buy properties and invest, as well as skilled workers. They have access to citizenship and permanent residence status under the points system
2. Poor migrants who can be exploited and who do not have the means to become permanent residents.

For the second type, the policies of international financial institutions and banks, free trade agreements, as well as the International Organisation on Migration, ensure that workers from the Global South continue the flow of remittances back to their home nation. Remittances and migration become the only means available for people from the Global South to access services like health and education, which were previously provided, albeit often in a limited manner, by the state and have become privatized thanks to neoliberal policies. Entire economies (such as that of the Philippines) are now built around providing export labour (labour as commodity). This has become a central aspect of jobless growth and capitalist development in the Global South. While debts rise endlessly and without independent industrial and economic policies, it will be impossible to realise national economic development and for citizens of poor countries to get out from the trap of temporary work abroad.

As conditions facing all workers become more precarious, immigrant and migrant workers become increasingly vulnerable. They do the dirty, dangerous, poorly-paid jobs as temporary agency workers and day labourers without having trade union representation. Migrants are now organising themselves to defend their rights against unjust laws, and employers. What can we do to ensure that the whole labour movement and other sectors become their partners, not only to defend their own rights, but in building a better society?

Dorothy Grace Guerrero, 25 July 2017

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<http://www.globaljustice.org.uk/blog/2017/jul/25/freedom-movement-and-securing-labour-rights-are->

[both-important-principles-and-must](#)

Footnotes

[1] <http://www.bbc.co.uk/iplayer/episode/b08z1g83/the-andrew-marr-show-23072017>