Britain: report documents widespread forced migrant labour

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A study released February 3 documents the widespread use of forced migrant labour in Britain. Its findings reveal that the use of such labour is by no means confined to the criminal or semi-criminal fringes of economic life. Rather, many immigrant workers, legal and illegal, are trapped in abusive arrangements that exist in a number of Britain's major economic sectors—including the publicly run National Health Service (NHS).

Published by the Trades Union Congress (TUC), the report offers a damning indictment of the conditions faced by the most oppressed strata of the working class under the Labour government.

Dr. Bridget Anderson of Oxford University and Dr. Ben Rogaly of Sussex University's Centre for Migration Research authored the study, titled *Forced Labour and Migration to the UK*. The paper's release came on the one-year anniversary of the Morecambe Bay tragedy, in which 23 young Chinese workers drowned whilst picking cockles.

The report is based on interviews with migrants, employers and employment agencies, trade unionists and immigration lawyers. It adopted the International Labour Organisation's (ILO's) definition of forced labour, which describes it as "all work or service which is exacted under the menace of a penalty, and which is not voluntary." A range of abuses and exploitative practices were catalogued within this category. These included:

* *Gross exploitation*. Migrant workers are largely concentrated in low-wage sectors. Their pay is further reduced by deductions typically made by employers, agencies, and other third parties, which often leave workers earning far less than the minimum wage. One Ukrainian woman was found working in a pub for £1 an hour; an Indian construction worker was paid £20 for a nine-hour day.

Migrant workers are routinely forced to work very long hours. A previous study cited in the TUC report found that domestic workers in private households worked an average of 17 hours a day. Excessive work hours are also suffered by those forced to work multiple jobs simultaneously. One Nigerian woman worked for several years on the London underground from 6 a.m. to 4 p.m., and at the Royal Mail from 8 p.m. to 4 a.m.

* *Debt bondage*. This was the most common form of coercion found by the researchers. Debt bondage occurs when a worker is forced to take out a loan, often with exorbitant interest rates, in order to enter Britain. The debt is then used to control and exploit the immigrant. "One woman had borrowed US$1,000 for her trip and had not yet managed to pay this off, despite being in the UK for nearly 4 years," the investigation found. "She is currently paid £2 an hour to work in a chip shop for 12 hours a day. From Monday to Saturday she lives on the chips, but on Sunday must pay for her food. Sometimes she works as a barmaid with no pay but for a free meal."

* *Intimidation and violence*. Criminal gangs involved in employment agency rackets typically use violence against migrant workers. Two Polish construction workers brought to Britain by agents were forced to work long hours for no pay. When they attempted to escape, they were badly assaulted.

Some British employers also use the threat of deportation to intimidate their staff. In another case, the researchers revealed, "Three nationals of South Asian countries who entered on legal permits to work for an employer in the manufacturing industry were threatened with violence when they refused to accept their working conditions. They were required to work 12-hour shifts from Monday to Friday and a 9-hour shift at the weekend followed every day by cleaning the employer's private residence. Their employer refused to negotiate and threatened to deport them. When they eventually managed to escape from him he contacted the Immigration Service to inform them that they were in the UK without work permits."

* *Restriction of movement*. Employers or agencies frequently extract forced labour by retaining workers' passports and identity documents. In 2004, it was made a criminal offence to enter Britain without a valid travel document, which the study noted "may make migrants even more reluctant to leave such employers." Many migrant workers are also forced to accept overpriced and often overcrowded accommodation, which is intended to leave them completely dependent on their employers.

Forced labour is usually associated with the most marginalised and unregulated economic sectors, such as menial agricultural labour and prostitution. The TUC investigation found, however, that abusive work conditions and forced labour

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are becoming increasingly pervasive throughout the British economy—and sections of the public service.

Within the NHS, many migrant nurses face extremely low pay and terrible working conditions. Poor salary levels and a lack of education and training opportunities have resulted in a shortage of British nurses. Migrant health workers who fill the shortfall are usually recruited through poorly regulated agencies, leaving them vulnerable to terrible abuse. The NHS, pointing to the agencies involved, declaims any responsibility.

The TUC reported on the case of "Conrado," a highly qualified nurse from Asia, who was brought to England after he paid an agency £700 and took out a loan of £1,500. Once working, the nurse was left with just £46 a week, after money was deducted for his rent and loan repayment. "Conrado described how he lived on £5 worth of food in a week, having an apple for breakfast, a snack in the staff canteen for lunch, and rice for dinner. He felt that he was relatively fortunate because he lived close enough to the hospital to walk."

A number of academics and journalists have conducted studies over the past few years into the conditions faced by migrant workers. The latest TUC report, however, differed in that it attempted to assess the role of forced labour in the context of the demands of the contemporary British economy.

The Blair government as well as the media have routinely reacted to exposures of forced labour and agencies' exploitation of migrants by focusing on "human trafficking." This response consists of the denunciation of individual criminals and gangs together with a push for more restrictive immigration laws. While the government has presented anti-trafficking laws as being in the interests of the affected migrant labourers, the legislation has the effect of driving illegal workers further underground, heightening the vulnerability of migrants to abuse and forced labour.

The government's treatment of forced labour as strictly an immigration issue also results in the deliberate neglect of any examination of the structural and economic determinants of migrant labour abuse.

Forced Labour and Migration to the UK found a direct correlation between the use of forced labour and the competitive relations of those industries in which the use of this labour is most prevalent. "To understand abusive employer relations," the report noted, "it is important to consider the often grossly unequal market strengths of small suppliers and their customers."

The study suggested that in a number of cases, contractors who pay their workers the minimum wage actually price themselves out of the market in many sectors, particularly agricultural and construction work. Economic deregulation and liberalisation, promoted by successive Conservative and Labour governments, have facilitated the reliance upon sub-minimum wage levels in these industries.

Economic pressures combine with the desperation of often-impoverished immigrants to produce a situation in which abuses flourish. The report correctly noted that "it is very difficult to distinguish between a 'free and consensual' and an 'unfree and coerced' employment relationship. Many migrants succumb to the exploitation because they feel that they have no alternative."

The reality is that, under the pressures of the global capitalist economy, the British working class as a whole is being pressed by low wages and substandard working conditions. The forced labour experienced by numbers of immigrants can only be properly understood as the most concentrated expression of a universal trend—that is, the offensive against the social position of the working class that has been sustained for more than two decades.

The report's authors fail to draw such conclusions. Rather, they recommend that the government pass a number of limited measures, such as state rating of employment agencies, and more effective prosecution of employers who use forced labour. Such palliatives will do nothing to address the root cause of the problem—the demands of the profit system.

Despite the report's serious shortcomings, the Blair government reportedly tried to suppress it until after the general election due to be held later this year. According to the *Guardian*, the report was due to be released last September, but pressure from government departments held back the release.

The ILO, which co-commissioned the paper, was threatened with funding cuts by the Department of Work and Pensions if the report was published, according to an unnamed TUC official quoted by the newspaper. An ILO official in Geneva said that the delay had followed "some very sensitive discussions" and "extensive comments from the British government." This reaction indicates the nervousness of the Blair government and its sensitivity to any examination of its right-wing social and economic program.

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