

UK local elections: Defend migrant workers

Stephen Woodbridge
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The following is a statement by Stephen Woodbridge, the Socialist Equality Party candidate for the Bretton North ward in today's council elections.

As the economic crisis has bitten deeper, with vicious cuts imposed on working people, the pro-business parties are stoking up anti-immigrant sentiment. Their aim is to scapegoat migrant workers for the social crisis for which the ruling elite and its political representatives are responsible.

This attempt to foster divisions between workers is a key issue in Peterborough, which has relied economically on migrant labour for many years. The city has been a destination for workers from eastern Europe, largely from Poland, who took up onerous and casual employment picking and packing farm produce and in local industry. Polish workers were estimated in 2007 to make up 10 percent of Peterborough's workforce.

These workers, many of them highly skilled, were often employed at, or below, minimum wage. CzeSlo, a local community group for the 7,000 Czechs and Slovaks in the city, reports workers being promised a job and accommodation, only to arrive and find employers paying less than the minimum wage. Many have been easy prey for gangmasters, paying as little as £2 an hour.

The fact that employers have used migrant workers to keep wages down is blamed on the migrant workers themselves, in order to prevent a fight to raise the wages and working conditions of all workers.

With the economic downturn, Peterborough has reported a new 17-year high in unemployment, and nearly one quarter of families live in poverty. In a number of wards, including Bretton North, where I am standing as candidate, more than a third of families live in poverty.

For many migrant workers, already on the breadline,

the loss of their jobs is devastating. Unable to get work or return home, they have been forced to live rough in makeshift camps in the woods around the city. A Latvian migrant told the local press, "We don't want to live like this. All we do is try to survive. We want no trouble."

Two years ago, Peterborough was the test case for deporting unemployed eastern European workers. Conservative MP Stewart Jackson has welcomed recent new Home Office regulations restricting the right to settle in the UK.

Previously, five years' residency was normally sufficient to allow the right to settle. Now, workers must be paid at least £35,000 in order to be allowed to settle. Tory immigration minister Damian Green boasted of the discriminatory character of these changes: "We are sweeping aside the idea that everyone who comes here to work can settle... Our reforms of the immigration system will ensure we are more selective."

Jackson said, "At a time of high unemployment, we owe it to workers in Peterborough to ensure that our migration system does not cause a reliance on migrant labour."

This is thoroughly dishonest. All it amounts to is a demand that eastern European workers be pushed out the country, and their places taken by local labour so as to depress wages even further across the board.

Jackson has called for a reduction in the "immigration of low skilled workers". But low skills are very far from being his major concern. He in fact blamed the January rise in unemployment on the ending of seasonal temporary contracts. Seasonal, temporary, low-paid work is what is being proposed for all sections of workers. This is the product of the profit system, not those who are exploited by that system.

Employment Minister Chris Grayling has been explicit on the super-exploitation of young workers,

and has indicated that even the low wages previously paid to eastern Europeans are now too high. In a recent speech he called on “British employers [to] put local recruits first”, by which he emphasised that he was looking at the lowest wages possible. Rather than employing “someone from Eastern Europe with five years’ experience”, Grayling said employers should look to young British workers who could be taken on for unpaid work experience. Jobs, he threatened, “don’t just come on a plate”.

That this situation has arisen is due in great part to the complicity of the trade unions and the Labour Party. Early in 2009, unofficial strikes at the Lindsey oil refinery in Lincolnshire were consciously channelled by unions behind a right-wing campaign demanding “British jobs for British workers”. The unions assert shared interests between workers and the corporations that exploit them, insisting that this is what is required in the “national interest”.

The result is to drive workers into a never-ending economic struggle against one another, leaving the bosses to reap the rewards.

The Labour Party, which led Britain into wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, wholly endorses this nationalism. John Knowles, Labour candidate for the Paston ward in Peterborough, has spoken of his ambition to see education budgets “being more fairly centred on the children of the lower paid sections of the ethnic British and European communities.”

Not stopping at rationing the provision of education, he has also said that he would be “making suggestions that could help ease the local housing situation.”

Capitalism is an international system of exploitation that pits worker against worker. The struggle of the working class is of necessity an international one and must be based on a defence of the common interests of all workers regardless of nationality, ethnicity or religion.

An essential precondition for the international unity of workers is the unconditional defence of the democratic rights of immigrants. All the official parties and media incite xenophobia, targeting asylum-seekers and migrant workers in order to divert attention from their own responsibility for the economic and social crisis.

The Socialist Equality Party stands for the right of workers to live and work where they choose. We

oppose the reactionary framework of “border controls” and anti-immigrant legislation. We call for full democratic and citizenship rights for all immigrants.



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