

# Eastern European migrant workers face slave labour in Germany

Anna Rombach  
30 August 2013

An increasing number of Romanian and Bulgarian workers are being forced to come to Germany in search of a job. The global economic crisis and the austerity policies of the European Union (EU) are not only having a disastrous impact on social and economic relations in both Balkan countries, but have also led to a collapse of the economies of Spain and Italy, which were previously the favoured destinations for Romanian and Bulgarian migrant workers.

The number of immigrants to Germany has risen from a few thousand only years ago to more than 70,000 in 2012. According to a study by the Institute for Labour Market and Career Research (IAB), which is connected to the German government's Labour Agency, the number of Bulgarian and Romanian immigrants in Germany is expected to rise to between 100,000 and 180,000 when the labour market within the EU is opened fully in 2014.

Brutal exploitation awaits many of these workers in Germany. Having left their homes to avoid the social catastrophe caused by the policies of privatisation and austerity enforced by the EU and International Monetary Fund, they are also denied minimal social rights in Germany.

On August 19, the ARD public broadcaster aired a documentary titled "Germany's new slums: business with poor immigrants" by Isabel Schayani and Isat Mogul. The programme exposed the catastrophic working and living conditions under which migrant workers live.

People shown on the programme are trying to escape unemployment, hunger, illness and criminality in the slums of their own countries. They have either made it to Germany themselves or relied upon unscrupulous "middle-men" who promise a job with the security of a contract and a place to live, only to then force the migrants into slave-like conditions.

Many have to get by with casual labour. The desperation creates a parasitic environment, where the migrant workers even have to steal a place to sleep on the floor of overcrowded houses. Andor, one of the migrant workers, returns to his family in the Bulgarian slum Stoliponovo in Plovdiv with a liver infection after failing to find a job or place to stay following days and nights of searching.

A Bulgarian managed to work 12-hour days for six days a week in a Tönnies meat factory until she physically broke

down. She was employed by a subcontractor, meaning that if she had called in sick she would have been immediately fired.

In 2011, Tönnies was Germany's leading meat processing firm, slaughtering 16 million pigs and achieving annual sales of €4.5 billion (US\$6 billion). The company received subsidies from the EU's agricultural fund totalling €2.67 million in 2008. Reports of the scandalous exploitation of its workforce, appearing for years, have clearly done no harm to the company's expansion throughout the EU.

Zublin, a firm based in Stuttgart involved in the building of the new European Central Bank (ECB), also employed migrant workers from eastern Europe, including some hired by the notorious Polish subcontractor Polbau. The ECB twin towers will be built in the east end of Frankfurt over the city's historic market hall.

The building site and living quarters of the workers resemble a prison camp, surrounded by barbed wire barriers and completely sealed off from the public. According to a newspaper report, the construction trade union IG Bau has no right of access to the rooms where workers socialise and have their breaks, since the ECB operates under a law which states that the site is "extra-territorial."

The name Zublin awakens horrible historical memories. In 1944, the firm employed the forced labour of 1,700 Jews from the concentration camp at Walldorf to expand Frankfurt airport. To this day, the firm continues to refuse to pay compensation for its crimes.

The *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (FAZ) reported from the ECB's building site of "day wages" and "men with tired faces." They came from Bulgaria, Turkey and across Europe, and are transported to the site early in the morning "depending on the demands and stage of the building process to work setting concrete."

Polbau has been involved in hundreds of building projects since the 1990s in Germany as a subcontractor. The company was in the headlines at the end of the 1990s and the early 2000s, because it paid its workers only €1,400 to work up to 270 hours. It then deducted so much from the wages for accommodation and the cost of work tools that barely anything was left. Now the monthly net wage of a worker is around €1,000. According to research last year by FAZ, none of these

brutal methods have changed. Any workers who protest or complain are immediately sent back to their home country.

At the end of 2012, the story of 13 Romanian workers was made public. They had lived through a real nightmare while working with the firm Dreßler Bau to build the exclusive Europa Quarter development in the district of Gallus in Frankfurt.

The subcontractor with whom the workers had signed a contract registered them as independent workers without their knowledge. The firm had promised a contract with a €1,200 monthly salary, free accommodation, transport and health care. But in fact, everything imaginable was deducted from the wages. The workers were left with an hourly pay of €1.09. First, they slept in an empty factory building, where 50 workers shared a toilet, before the group of 13 shared a three-room flat.

In March of this year, details of catastrophic conditions came to light in the building of the Bostalsee holiday camp, which is a project of the state government of the Christian Democrats and Social Democrats in Saarland. Since the previous December, 50 Romanian building workers had received no wages. There were not even mattresses in their accommodation. The building firm IETC sent a letter to the local radio station laying the blame for the conditions on a subcontractor.

Previous media reports have already revealed the terrible working and living conditions facing migrant workers from eastern Europe. In the building and meat industries, the exploitation of such workers for poverty wages is the norm. They are employed by several subcontractors with a number of contracts, so that the relevant legislation and labour regulations can be bypassed. It is also common practice for companies in the auto and export industries to employ temporary workers for low wages through subcontractors and job contracts.

German firms are exploiting the eastward expansion of the EU to create conditions of exploitation comparable to China. Since capitalism was re-established in the countries of eastern Europe, they have served as a location for low wages for central European, and above all German, capital. The EU has systematically encouraged this development, and has been supported by all established political parties: from the Christian Democratic Union/Christian Social Union (CSU), to the Free Democratic Party, Social Democratic Party (SPD), Greens and Left Party.

The policies of austerity and privatisation dictated from Brussels and Berlin have drastically worsened the social catastrophe in Bulgaria and Romania, which are the poorest countries in Europe. These relations are now being transferred to Germany.

Within the framework of its Agenda 2010 reforms, the SPD-Green government of Gerhard Schröder from 1998 to 2005 made possible the introduction of labour contracts and the outsourcing of whole areas of production to subcontractors. In this they were supported by the trade unions.

The trade unions have refused to support migrant workers,

apart from a few isolated cases. When the unions raise the workers' exploitation as an issue, they merely call for more investigatory powers. Thus, the chair of IG Bau, Klaus Viesehügel, described the expansion of the financial controls of customs authorities as "the only tool [!] against firms which conduct wage-dumping and undermine production with illegal employment and informal labour."

Erhard Strobel, the chairman of the Berlin section of IG Bau, even declared in July that his department had offered money out of its social fund to customs in order to employ more personnel.

The Left Party also supports the EU, which has systematically promoted the exploitation of European workers in the interests of the banks and major concerns.

Only the Socialist Equality Party (PSG) struggles for the unified mobilisation of all European workers, the building of a workers' government and the United Socialist States of Europe. Every worker has the right to live and work in the country of their choosing, and social and political rights should apply to all. The enormous riches of Europe must be used to meet the demands of the workers through the socialist restructuring of the economy.

The ruling class does not only use the poverty of Romanian and Bulgarian workers to attack wages and social rights, but also to split the working class and stir up anti-immigrant chauvinism. Germany's interior minister, Hans-Peter Friedrich (CSU), announced at an EU meeting of interior ministers that he would be targeting Romanians and Bulgarians who were supposedly a drain on German taxpayers due to their abuse of social welfare. The only way to defend the social rights of Bulgarian, Romanian, German and all European workers is on the basis of the socialist perspective put forward in the current election campaign by the PSG.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](http://wsws.org/contact)**