

# Britain: Gang convicted of running “extensive and prolific” modern slavery network

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Last week, the remaining members of a criminal gang were convicted for modern slavery, trafficking and money laundering following a three-year investigation. The eight gang members, five men and three women all of Polish origin, have received sentences of between 3 and 11 years. The court had heard traumatic evidence of nearly 100 victims, also all from Poland.

The gang’s activities were initially exposed by the charity Hope for Justice, whose co-founder and CEO Ben Cooley said, “This was a vast criminal conspiracy profiting from the misery and manipulation of vulnerable human beings.” The charity believes there could have been up to 400 victims who were exploited by the gang between June 2012 and October 2017, in what Judge Mary Stacey, who presided over the two trials, described as the “most ambitious, extensive and prolific” modern slavery network ever uncovered in Britain.

Victims, men and women from 17 to over 60 years old, were recruited in Poland from among the most vulnerable social layers—the homeless, alcoholics, recently released prisoners, the unemployed and destitute. Promised jobs and a better life, once they arrived in the UK they undertook mainly manual labour including house renovations, painting and decorating, gardening, working in poultry factories and in rubbish recycling centres.

According to an investigation conducted by the Times, fresh produce harvested by slaves was sold by Britain’s leading supermarket chains, including Tesco, Asda, Marks & Spencer and Waitrose. Others made garden sheds and fencing for a supplier to Homebase, Argos, Travis Perkins and Wickes.

One man told reporters he worked on a farm and was forced to wake at 5am to start working at 7am, “It was hard work. We were promised minimum wage—but I didn’t receive a penny.”

In some cases, victims were forced to work up to 13 hours a day. The gang took their pay packets and handed

back a pittance—providing the barest minimum by way of food and drink, leading to some victims seeking support from soup kitchens. In other cases, victims were forcibly taken to ATMs and made to withdraw money under threats of violence. Crammed into filthy and unsanitary living conditions, often lacking the most basic amenities, one victim described having to wash in a canal. Another said that “homeless people here in the UK live better than I lived after I arrived.”

Another, recruited immediately after his release from prison, said being locked up in a Polish jail had been better than the conditions he was forced to endure at the hands of the traffickers.

Victims were told they had accrued large debts for accommodation and transport and would have to continue working till these were paid off. Gang members took their ID papers and used these to fraudulently claim welfare benefits, which they pocketed along with the wages. The total proceeds of the exploitation are thought to run into millions and were used to finance the gang’s opulent lifestyle. The court heard how the gang leader drove around in a Bentley and enjoyed using a fleet of other high-performance cars.

Following the verdicts at Birmingham Crown Court, Judge Mary Stacey said, “Any lingering complacency after the 2007 bicentenary celebrations of the abolition of the English Slave Trade Act was misplaced. The hard truth is that the practice continues, here in the UK, often hiding in plain sight.”

A recently published report by the European Union (EU) Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) underscores how widespread are such slave-like conditions. The evidence presented was based on accounts by 237 adult migrant workers, including third country nationals as well as from the EU, who were “severely exploited or worked in sectors at high risk of labour exploitation” in eight member states (Belgium, France, Germany, Italy, the

Netherlands, Poland, Portugal and the United Kingdom).

It is not just criminal gangs that benefit from human trafficking and the super-exploitation of the most defenceless. According to the report, “Unscrupulous employers use the weak position of migrant workers to force them to work for endless hours with no or little pay, often in dangerous settings, and without the minimum safety equipment required by law.”

Employers used “a number of strategies with varying degrees of coercion to create a fearful and intimidating environment and increase employers’ control of the worker, ultimately preventing workers from exiting labour exploitation.”

Unscrupulous employers went to great lengths to avoid their illegal practices being uncovered, “including requesting workers to hide or not show up during [labour] inspections, to lie about real work conditions or to pretend not to understand the local language.”

Coercive measures included “physical violence, threats of violence, and establishing an inhuman and degrading environment for the workers, including sleep deprivation and poor nutrition/denutrition” and “in a few, extreme, cases” workers were “completely deprived of their freedom of movement.”

The authors were particularly critical of the UK, where they found that “legislative gaps” facilitated the exploitation of migrant labour.

While the prime minister’s residence at 10 Downing Street was lit up in red last year, supposedly to show support for Anti-Slavery Day, the Home Office was detaining over 500 victims of modern slavery in immigration detention centres, rather than placing them in safe accommodation with specialist support and counselling. Using Freedom of Information requests, data mapping project After Exploitation has exposed that almost one fifth of the 2,726 suspected victims of modern slavery identified through the government’s own reporting system were held in centres used to detain immigrants prior to deportation.

The director of After Exploitation, Maya Esslemont, told the press, “The unjustifiable detention of potential trafficking victims shows disturbing failings by the government to protect vulnerable people from prison or prison-like settings under immigration powers.”

In June, the *Independent* published the result of its investigation into the treatment of victims of trafficking at the hands of Britain’s Home Office, the government department responsible for immigration. The paper found that there were numerous cases where such victims were

being sent “back to the address where they were enslaved” following their release from immigration detention.

“In one case,” the investigation found, “a Chinese woman who was exploited as a sex slave for five years in London, was released from Yarl’s Wood immigration removal centre last month and told to make her way to the address in Barking where she had previously been discovered being forced to work in the sex trade.”

Case workers from the Salvation Army, which holds the government contract for providing support to those identified as victims of modern slavery, reported numerous instances where the charity had not had information about such individuals passed on to them.

Shalini Patel from Duncan Lewis Solicitors, who have represented several victims of modern slavery, said that for the Home Office, the safeguarding of detainees “was not a priority.”

“There is clear incompetence and sheer disregard for the safety of these women who have already been subjected to such horrendous sexual abuse and exploitation,” she told the newspaper.

The latest convictions in Britain are part of a global trade in human misery and exploitation.

According to the International Labour Office (ILO), there are 40.3 million people in conditions of modern slavery across the world, including 10 million children. This equates to 5.4 victims of modern slavery for every 1,000 people in the world. While the majority (30.4 million) are found in the Asia-Pacific region, mainly in bonded labour, the ILO records 9.1 million in Africa and 1.5 million in “developed economies.” These barbaric practices generate for 21st century capitalism \$150 billion in illegal profits.



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