

Supporting and organising Eastern European workers employed at construction sites in Belgium

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1. Observations and motivations

In spite of the current crisis, the construction sector maintains a good level of activity in Belgium, and there is a significant demand for labour at worksites. Since the broadening of the European Union, we have observed the presence of an ever-growing number of workers from Eastern Europe, especially from Poland, in this sector.

Belgium is an attractive country for mobile workers and migrants; it has a good reputation as far as working conditions and social protection are concerned. But the “fairytale” about how workers will be welcomed, which often motivates their coming to Belgium, can unfortunately be very different from reality.

In certain situations, work and employment conditions are exceedingly poor and very much below what Belgian law requires.

This “social dumping” provokes reactions of rejection which isolate and lead to an even more fragile situation for these workers, including among our own members.

For the CSC, the foreign workers themselves are obviously not the issue; rather, it is the non-respect of their rights, the abuse they suffer and the lack of means and controls for effectively combating social fraud.

We feel that our role as a trade union organisation is to welcome and support these workers.

However, it is not easy for organised labour to locate and reach posted workers. They are often afraid or distrustful and will even avoid us when we try to contact them.

They are often employed at small renovation sites and work behind “closed doors”.

They are present for only very temporary periods and, of all mobile workers, are the most difficult to organise.

In Belgium, the minimum wage is 14 euros per hour in the construction industry. Posted workers are frequently paid half this amount because they work for 60 hours instead of the legal 39 hours.

They accept these working conditions without protest, and it is only when an employer disappears or when they are the victims of major abuse (non-payment of wages, for example) that they contact the union. In these cases, it is often difficult to gather the elements necessary to defend them.

For these different reasons, we have decided to implement a specific action strategy aimed at Polish workers.

2. Goals

The overall goal is to reach the worksites where Polish workers are found to:

- obtain a clearer idea of their employment and working conditions,
- give them information concerning their rights,
- unionise and organise them.

3. Method implemented

We have:

- defined a target group (mobile Polish workers in general, whatever their status),
- translated handouts and brochures in Polish to inform workers of their rights,
- and implemented several actions:
 - o **distribution of handouts at places where these workers are found**, including worksites, churches, stores, Polish travel agencies and consulates;
 - o **publication of press releases** to Belgian newspapers, as well as to Polish newspapers in Belgium, which relay our actions in a very regular manner;
 - o **organisation of “construction sector evening events”** in different venues in order to reach the greatest number of workers.

Since June 1, 2006, the opening of the Belgian labour market to Polish workers and the possibility of their working directly in the construction sector has led to unionising a large number of workers who wanted to become installed in Belgium.

This has enabled us to hire two permanent advisors for Eastern Europe to work on this action.

4. Type of action carried out

Since 2005, our organisation has addressed this “target group” with the help of volunteers of Polish origin.

These volunteers are mainly qualified women who have a migrant background and are familiar with the difficulties encountered.

In addition to information actions, we work in collaboration with representatives from the Social Law Inspectorate and point out abuses to them.

We also support workers if they undertake civil proceedings to defend their rights.

5. Impact of action on issues encountered

We are now able to state that the CSC has a true audience among these mobile workers and that we have extended our initiatives to include Bulgarian and Romanian workers.

We currently edit brochures in 13 languages (see attached documents).

6. Feedback

We conclude that as a trade union organisation, we must invest in the protection of migrant workers because this is a phenomenon which will continue to develop. The idea is to plan for the future.

On the one hand, we must reinforce unionisation of these workers in order to organise them, and, on the other, we must reinforce links and collaboration with the supervisory services.