

Polish workers in Netherlands agriculture

Conditions of working black

Introduction

This short text illustrates the situation of polish workers in agriculture in southern Netherlands. The main point is a description of conditions of work and standart of living. Author is an anthropologist, who worked in flower factory for two months, march-may 2004. Experience he gets there is the main source of information. Interviews and stories gathered after and before travel, all about the same place, are the secondary source.

Over 17 large flower factories, each worth about 3 mln euro, are the property of one dutch family. 'The boss', owner of the company, hires about 200 people. The majority is working black. The biggest part of the workpower comes from Poland. In the full season it is possible to find over 100 polish workers. 'The boss' hires also people from Vietnam, Sri Lanka, Romania, Turkey, Afganistan, Ukraine, former Yugoslavia, and Nigeria.

Polish workers

Polish workers can be divided in two parts: pernament workers, living in Netherlands, and seasonal workers, mostly students. Pernament workers come from all parts of Poland, mostly from rural areas. Some of them has worked for 'the boss' for over 8 years, others – from 3 to 1. There is a big rotation between pernament workers. Many frequently return to their families and come back to work in a short time. All polish workers work black.

1. Accomodation and transport

Workers live in a official and wild campsites. Pernament workers rent caravans for 50-80 euro/week, seasonal often stay in tents to reduce costs of living. Some of the most experienced polish workers rent a house. In season all campsites are full of polish people looking for work, waiting for job or already employed. Renting a caravan is almost impossible for new ones. Atmosphere in campsites is usually described as 'ugly and bad'. Most is without job and money. People steal from each other, job-cheating is one of accepted forms of activity among polish imigrants. Solidatity does not exist at all. Everyone cares mainly about his own intersts.

Polish workers used to live in flower factories. Now it is almost impossible for a bigger group, but few years ago in each factory lives up to 40 workers. They sleep, eat, wash in the factory to reduce costs of living in Netherlands. Factories are designed to work, not to live in, so they are devoided of any facilites. Nowadays living in factories is restrictly forbidden by 'the boss'. Mainly because of the danger of huge fine.

Most of workers use cars or bikes for getting to the workplace. Campsites are usually close to fields about 3-10 km. Workers pay the driver for fuel and some extra for service.

2. Income

Working for 'the boss' is often the only source of income for the whole families in Poland. The average salary is 4 euro/hour¹. More experienced polish workers gets 4.5 or 5 euro. The average working day is 11 hours, so it is possible to earn 44 euro a day. The biggest complain is a delay in payments. Polish workers have to wait for a salary up to one month. It this time, in spite of their work, they do not get any payment. Problems with accomodation and food is the biggest concern then. The lack of organization of labour-union forms of activity makes their pressure impossible. They are forced to accept all the rules. In general, they get a payment, but they have to wait. Even when the time exceeds the period of their stay in Netherlands.

The average polish worker, working black, gets 4 euro per hour. Other workers gets much more for the same job. It is the significant violation of point 2, article 23 of Universal Declaration of Human Rights². But workers do not complain about this, all know the conditions and accept them. All say that the responsibility lies on polish goverments which, indirectly, forced them to leave and work abroad.

3. Workday

Work begins every day at 6 a.m. Polish workers are assigned to hardest jobs in a factory or a field. They are demanded to work more than others, especialy dutch. If 'the boss' is near, they have to work two times faster and more effective. It is so called 'Chaka'. Half-hour 'pauzas' are at 10, 12, and 3 p.m. Coffee and tea is for free. Finish is usually at 6 p.m., but sometimes workers has to work longer, until all jobs are complete. On Sunday work can finish ealier. There are no free-work days, even in Easter. After job workers return to campsite, watch the TV for 2-3 hours and go to sleep. Every day, apart from Saturday is the same. People usually are too tired to other kinds of activity. Most has not visited any other dutch city.

The next big problem is mobbing. 'The boss' is well known of the lack of the respect to foreign women. Sexual provocations are common. Lonely women have problems with refusing sexual offers. They are afraid to lose work and often let 'the boss' much more than if they do not be workers. Touching, even in public, and open offers are the most common form of mobbing.

4. Social organization

There is no social organization among polish workers. No labor union and no solidarity. The most common social form is a 'group'. The 'group' consists people who know each other, who comes from the same place, usually together. It is not a rule, that all 'group' gets a job, so everyone must care mainly about himself. Vietnamese workers, well organized and supporting each other called polish workers 'fools', because of the lack of organization. Vietnamese workers as a 'social subject' have no problems with getting regular salary from 'the boss'

¹ The minimal legal payment is in Netherlands about 6 euro/hour. If 'the Boss' hires people 'white' he would have to pay (with insurance, taxes ans so) about 16 euro/hour each person, so he would soon bankrupt.

² "Everyone, without any discrimination, has the right to equal pay for equal work".

The only positive form of organization, author noticed, is transport. Owners of cars often help with transport. There is a private bus driving regularly between Poland and Netherlands. One side travel costs 80 euro. It is also the possibility to send money to Poland, for a small fee. The bus drivers is the person who does this service. It is quite confident and cheap way of sending money home.

Conclusions

Immigrant polish working class appeared after 1989, as one of the first results of the transformation. Nowadays the situation in home country: mass unemployment and poverty, especially in rural areas forced people to look for job in other countries, including Netherlands. Most of them fail to find job and come back. Those who stay, have to accept non-human terms. For polish workers, working hard 11-12 every day, the job is everything. Most of workers, in spite of conditions are quite satisfied. Having an illegal job abroad is the huge advantage for a whole family. Money earned in flower factories by 'working machines' are being spent in home country on basic needs like food, children education and nursery. This is the main reason to predict that eliminating this kind of illegal work will not solve any of the real problems.

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