

Spaces of Migration and Labour: Living – Articulating – Organizing

May 24-25, 2024, University of Duisburg-Essen

This workshop brought together over 30 participants from a variety of backgrounds – academic, social policy, trade unions, activist, migration – to exchange views on topical issues such as, intra-EU labour migration, forms of precarious employment, social and migration policy frameworks, collective forms of migrant workers' organizing. The aim of the workshop was to create a platform for shared analysis and exchange on contemporary perspectives on migrant working and living conditions in Germany and beyond between actors that have few opportunities for coming together. In their opening remarks, the organizers – Polina Manolova (University of Duisburg-Essen) and Thorsten Schlee (University of Duisburg-Essen) – stressed the need to continue to visibilize the normalization of exploitative jobs and the specific socio-legal and political processes that sustain them.

Day one started with two panels dedicated to mapping out the working conditions in various sectors such as construction, cleaning, logistics, and their effects on structuring experiences beyond work, on the housing market, the access to social support, and the general living situation of migrants. Consultants from the trade union project “Faire Mobilität” Dortmund (Szabolcs Sepsi) and Hessen (Anel Crnovrsanin and Velislava Firova) noted the lack of control of exploitative work practices and the impact of their work which invests significant efforts in solving individual cases but ultimately cannot prevent hundreds of labour migrants from being subjected to fraud every day. Christian Sperneac-Wolfer (Goethe University Frankfurt) presented snippets from his research in different field sites in Romania amongst migrating construction workers and reflected on the effects of capitalist transformations at home on the strategies of resisting labour exploitation in Germany. He emphasized the importance of a comprehensive transnational perspective on labour experiences for understanding workers' motivations and (dis)engagement from struggles. Karsten Weber from “Migranti”, independent

network of migrant workers' collectives, shared inspirational instances of solidarity and collective organizing of, among others, shipyards workers from his own working history in Gibraltar and Spain as well as from the recent trucker strikes at the Gräfenhausen highway parking near Frankfurt/Main.

In a second panel, looking at the Belgian context, Patrizia Zanoni and Ivelina Balabanova (University of Hasselt, Belgium) presented preliminary findings from a joint project with the municipality of Genk on the living and working situation of Bulgarian Turkish and Roma migrants, many of whom are engaged in secondary transborder labour mobility between Belgium and Denmark. Among other things, they reflected on the need of a transborder approach to coordinating and enforcing labour legislation, including stricter regulation on the work of temporary employment agencies which dominate low-skilled sectors. Dilber Kurum and Francien Winsemius from Fair Jobs, an action project from the Netherlands presented their test project on founding a cooperative work agency that puts the interest of workers first. They pointed to the need of fundamental change in labour recruitment which in their view needs to be guided by the needs of workers rather than employers and should offer a more rounded approach to addressing not only work but also social, housing and family needs, all of which are part of the process of migration and fair inclusion. This was re-affirmed by Peter Köster who shared his experience of organizing workers in the trade union IG BAU (construction, agriculture and environment), where labour migrants would sometimes seek help but not constitute an active mobilizing force.

Another, more analytical perspective on the intersections between migration and labour and the need for new conceptual and methodological models was explored in Panel III. By elaborating on the different forms that workers' resistance has taken during the Covid-19 pandemic, Peter Birke (University of Göttingen) proposed to think about the ways in which the strategic position of migrant work in the economy can be mobilized in self-organization struggles and negotiations. His reflections on the current shaping of migrant labour by capitalist structures of power and inequality was further taken up by Valeria Piro (Università di Padova, Italy) who offered a comprehensive theoretical framework for thinking about the connection between

labour conditions, the role of migration policies in shaping precarious workers and the crisis of social reproduction. Looking at her long-term fieldwork amongst migrant workers in Italian agricultural enclaves, she highlighted the opportunities of grassroots union organizing that can engage migrants in spontaneous and radical actions to advance their rights.

Day 1 concluded with a book launch of the edited collection 'Prekarisierung in Duisburg' by Anna Irma Hilfrich and Thorsten Schlee who collected essays and interviews on the living conditions of EU citizens in Duisburg. By focusing on their localized experiences and biographies and their embedding within multi-layered structures, the authors discuss multiple aspects of urban migration experience, such as historical precarisation related to post-industrial developments, gentrification and spatial displacement, state governance and securitisation, dangerous employment, and the sorting effects of immigration policies that reveal uncanny resemblances across different epochs.

Day 2 commenced with an exchange on the socio-spatial articulations of precarity by representatives of grassroots solidarity organizations, housing associations, independent activist and migrant workers. Siw Mammitzsch from the tenant association "Mietergemeinschaft Essen e.V." pointed out how the scale and entrenchment of rights infringements committed by real estate firms and state authorities like the Jobcenter call for higher-scale, political mobilizing as civic initiatives cannot shoulder the burden of aiding people with everyday bureaucracy. This stance was reaffirmed by Shabnam Shariatpanahi, an activist from Duisburg.

Milena Detzner and Simona Varbanova presented their work in "Solidarisch in Gröpelingen", a community initiative in a marginalised district of Bremen that combines social counselling with a low threshold membership and regular common meetings translated in several languages. Their Bulgarian-speaking fellow activist Silvia Radoslavova reflected on her family's experience of enforcing their social and working rights vis-à-vis the irregular procedures of the Job Center and employers.

The closing round table brought together the social movement historians Caner Tekin (Ruhr University Bochum) labour sociologist Jan Cremers (Tilburg University, Netherlands), trade union activist Süleyman Gürcan (IG BAU) and Ferdinand Yordanov from the migrant support association 'Stolipinovo in Europa'. Their conversation straddled the historical and contemporary trajectories of industrial labour disputes, the challenge of regulating employers and especially subcontractors, and more informal forms of migrant workers' organizing. Yordanov commented the relative lack of systematic organizing for policy change (bar the notable exception of the subcontracting ban in the German meat industry) with the conclusion that "if all the highly esteemed academics here in the room could not improve the situation, then maybe we should better teach our children to become businesspeople and make money that way."

Overall, this workshop met the expectations of participants and publics, resulting in lively exchanges and opportunities for networking and future collaborations. One particular strength of the workshop was the opening up of academic space for the perspectives of activist, migrants and civil society organizations which were given space to introduce their work and offer their perspectives in a dialogical and (self-)reflective manner. Apart from providing a platform for exchange between local actors, the workshop managed to strengthen inter-regional and transnational exchanges and comparisons and to overcome divisions between national contexts and knowledge discourses by involving participants from the Netherlands, Belgium, Italy, and other countries. This emphasized the need for, on the one hand, engaged and participatory research agendas, and, on the other, a comparative perspective that can illustrate the differences and similarities between localized institutional and policy contexts. Lastly, the workshop attested to the need to contextualize theoretical and conceptual exchange into the empirical realities of migrants and the engagements of activists and practitioners on the ground in the quest for more dignified conditions of movement and labour.

This report was written by Dr. Philipp Lottholz (Center for Conflict Studies at the Philipps-Universität Marburg).