

# Editorial

“We cannot bear all the misery in the world!” This simple slogan has long been proclaimed in most industrialized countries. The misery to which they refer is that endured by the millions of people who come knocking on the doors of the richest countries to obtain a small piece of the development cake to which they have hitherto been denied. However, while misery is a very sad reality, the spectre of invasions en masse by foreign nationals seeking to grab nations’ riches is no more than a deceptive fantasy blithely dreamt up by reactionary forces and extremists bent on stirring up the xenophobic sentiments which they have long cashed in on at the ballot box.

Nonetheless, there is no denying that nowadays immigration is analysed more frequently from the security angle than from the social viewpoint. The terrible events of 11 September in the United States merely reinforced that trend and unfortunately exacerbated people’s negative perception of the phenomena associated with immigration.

Today immigration, once a favourite issue covered by labour ministries, falls under the competence of ministries of the interior or of justice. This short-sighted political approach, combined with the closure of borders, has achieved precisely the opposite of what it set out to do. And should we really be surprised? The nations in the West have as many holes in their fortress walls as Swiss cheese. Migrant workers are today at the mercy of mafia-like groups specializing in human trafficking, and the security forces appear to be conceding that they are powerless to stop them. It is easier to send back a few “illegal immigrants” than to dismantle the traffickers’ networks. Likewise it is easier to close one’s eyes to the exploitation of a vulnerable, malleable workforce than to take on the slave traders. Faced with the problem of immigration, leading politicians in one very large transition country are talking openly of setting up “education camps” for the few million foreigners who have “illegally” entered their country. Another country has just refused its immigrant workers the fundamental right to form trade unions to make their voices heard collectively. This flies in the face of recommendations made by the International Labour Organization (ILO). Surely it is high time to change course, otherwise the situation may spiral out of control and pose a threat to democracy.

The general discussion about migration which will take place at the 2004 International Labour Conference in Geneva will have to set the record straight and above all come up with specific measures designed to step up the protection of migrant workers at a time when the need has never been so great. It is with this event in mind and in an attempt to launch already a debate within the trade union movement that this special edition of *Labour Education* is devoted to migrant workers.

The analysis will have to be serious and the approach will have to focus on the human aspect. History shows that, conditions permitting,

people will always prefer to stay in their home country. It also reminds us that not so long ago Europe's countries were the main source of economic migrants and political refugees. People crossed the Atlantic in their millions in search of Eldorado. Today, thanks to its economic development, Europeans have a reputation for staying put. The same phenomenon has been noted in the famous "Asian tigers", which have transformed themselves from countries that "exported" labour to countries that attract migrant workers.

While the number of migrants has gone up in absolute terms (today numbering 175 million people living outside their country of origin, 100 million of whom are migrant workers), relatively speaking it has barely changed, for it currently represents 2.3 per cent of the world's population, the level it was at back in 1960. And even though the situation may vary from region to region, at the global level migration has remained stable. This fact is rather surprising when seen alongside the development in wages. In the early twentieth century the per capita income in the wealthiest countries was ten times that of the poorest countries. Today the ratio is 60:1! So there can be no denying that the benefits promised by fervent supporters of globalization have yet to materialize. Poverty is one of the main factors responsible for waves of migration. But most immigrants will halt their quest for a better world in a neighbouring country which is often just as poor as their own. In fact 60 per cent of immigrants live in developing countries.

Accordingly, the nervousness displayed by countries in the West may seem rather incongruous. All the more so since their demographic development – at least where Europe and Japan are concerned – will mean they need more bridges than barriers. For the United Nations estimates that unless Europeans are made to work until the age of 77, Europe will have to boost its capacity for welcoming migrant workers to more than 1 million a year, four times the level of immigration in the 1990s. By 2050, the population of Europe will be a mere 660 million, compared with 730 million today. So even if productivity is boosted by a record amount, there will be a drastic need for manpower.

If neo-liberal pundits have their way, they would rather leave these future movements of workers to market forces, with all the attendant risks to which the invisible hand so dear to Adam Smith has accustomed us by regarding labour as a form of merchandise.

But there is another option, namely that of managing migration humanely, along the lines proposed by the ILO. This approach is based on efforts designed to create decent jobs and at the same time attack poverty in those countries that have traditionally "exported labour". The foundations of such an approach are respect for equal rights for immigrant and native workers, solidarity and cooperation between nations (hence also a serious increase in development aid), and the battle to eliminate exploitation and human trafficking and also to eradicate child labour.

It will undoubtedly take some time to restore the image of migration and highlight the role it played in the development of the industrialized countries. Workers' freedom of movement, the possibility of freely switching employers whenever they want, and the opportunity to become unionized and negotiate their working conditions are all key elements underpinning economic development. The contribution made to social security funds in their host countries, where the working popula-

tion is ageing, must be reiterated and acknowledged. In fact, studies show that the contribution made by migrant workers to social security coffers in the countries to which they emigrate exceeds what they take out of the system. Moreover, the exporting countries benefit quite substantially too. Each year, remittances, the amount of money transferred (i.e. sent back home by migrant workers to their parents still living in the countries in question), exceed the sums allotted to development aid, attaining a level close to the sum total of all the world's oil exports.

In reality migration is a linchpin of development and growth for many countries, both in the North and the South. What still has to be done is to make sure that it takes place in a manner that fully respects fundamental human rights, failing which – as the slave trade reminds us only too well – it will merely bring about human suffering and the decline of society as we know it.

Thus the dramatic increase in labour trafficking is merely a reflection of the hypocritical and restrictive policies that ignore – or pretend to ignore – the growing demand for labour in the industrialized countries. The result is that nowadays nearly 20 per cent of migratory movement is deemed “illegal”. This situation is creating a lucrative niche for organized crime in the form of people smugglers and procurers, a source of cheap labour for unscrupulous employers and a living hell for millions of men and women.

As ILO Director-General Juan Somavia put it recently, “migrant workers provide essential services in their host countries where their work represents a kind of hidden economic subsidy. Whether they are employed in industry or agriculture, as domestic servants or hospital staff, they all contribute to our social well-being. Nonetheless, this contribution is rarely recognized and most of the time they are very badly paid”.

The studies conducted by the ILO over the last ten years all lead to the same irrefutable finding: racial discrimination remains a major obstacle to the integration of immigrant workers, who are underpaid and exploited when in work and also the first to be fired in the event of a crisis. What is more, when immigrants have to find another job, one in three searches will remain fruitless. “The same people who accuse them of abusing unemployment benefit are those who refuse to employ them because of where they come from,” said ILO Executive Director Assane Diop recently in a speech delivered to an audience of European ministers.

The peak of hypocrisy of the international community is that whereas the International Convention on the Protection of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families was adopted by the United Nations in 1990, it has only very recently obtained its twentieth ratification which will now allow this instrument to come into force.

Similarly, the rate of ratification of ILO Conventions designed to protect migrant workers is hardly encouraging. Two ILO Conventions – the Migration for Employment Convention (Revised), 1949 (No. 97) and the Migrant Workers (Supplementary Provisions) Convention, 1975 (No. 143) – are aimed in particular at migrant workers. So far they have only been ratified by 42 and 18 countries respectively. Both these international instruments advocate the protection of migrant workers, call for their equal treatment and encourage cooperation between the respective countries. Convention No. 143 extends its protection to workers in an “irregular” situation, who fall victim to abuse. As we stand on the threshold of the

twenty-first century, with globalization all the rage, isn't it time to award all workers equal rights? Of course we can also look into the need to improve the ILO's instruments, and the general discussion scheduled for June 2004 will have to make sure that it does just that. Some aspects of the phenomenon are new: the growing number of female immigrants, the proliferation of employment agencies, a dramatic explosion in human trafficking. All this will have to be borne in mind.

On the other hand, the rising demand for manpower by countries in the North offers us a unique opportunity to lay some healthy foundations for the debate. The ILO will aim to make the most of this opening by reiterating both the human approach and the need to take account of the social dimension in our policies on immigration. This can be done by underscoring the role played by labour ministries as agents in the management of migratory flows, shoring up the social dialogue in both the host nations and immigrants' countries of origin, and of course by respecting the fundamental rights of migrant workers everywhere, as demanded by the respective international instruments. As Manolo Abella, the chief of the ILO's International Migration Branch, says (see page 1), the tripartite approach gives the organization an undeniable comparative advantage in its treatment of the issues at the heart of immigration.

The fact that migrant workers are used as scapegoats remains a sad reality. As soon as economic or political crises are upon us, both in the North and in the South, the spotlight unfailingly shines on immigrant workers. Unfortunately, and – as we have seen – despite a whole array of international agreements, the rights of migrant workers are increasingly being flouted.

For all that, there is no need to promulgate new laws. Appropriate standards already exist. Naturally they can be improved, but governments should also have the political courage to ratify them and above all ensure that they are respected. That too is part of the human dimension of globalization.

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