

# CROSSING BORDERS

## movements and struggles of migration



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The 1st of May gives "Crossing Borders!" another opportunity for transnational political communication. The theme of migrant labour was already central to the first two issues of "Crossing borders!" ([www.noborder.org](http://www.noborder.org)), and it has become an important connecting point for the whole Frassanito Network. Remembering the huge migrants' mobilisations of the last year in the United States, as well as the struggles of migrants in Europe demanding the de-linking of residence permits from labour contracts, we want to discuss European policies for the management of migrant labour (page 1). Specifically, in this issue, we look at the conditions of migrant women as domestic workers and the key role they increasingly play in social reproduction (page 2). As usual, we report on some of the new experiences of struggle and communication emerging and consolidating everywhere (pages 3 and 4), signifying efforts in the autonomous organisation of migrant labour.

### Catching of migrant labour

One year ago, more than a million migrants in Los Angeles and other US-cities gave a new meaning to the first of May. One million workers, many of whom

had been forgotten by the official unions, clearly showed that it is possible to break with fear and silence. Since then, the first of May cannot simply be understood as a festival or anniversary anymore. It must be understood as the day when all those who have crossed borders, who experience similar forms of exploitation – despite the distance and different legal regimes that separate them – make their voices heard. Not only in the United States, but also in Europe, the main question is how to manage the demand for liberty of those free women and men who are the core of globalisation. "Cage migrants' freedom!" seems to be the slogan of European migration policies. This means that migrants are not allowed to freely look for work. At the same time, prohibitions and borders are not enough: nowadays, migrant labour must also be governed at its point of origin. Transnational job agencies, as opened for example in Bamako/Mali, are becoming a key instrument for the governance of the migrant labour force. They are spreading everywhere in the countries from which migrants come. They organise, control, sell the labour skills of thousands of people. Their aim is not to facilitate the movements of migration, but to choose in advance who is allowed to leave and who is not, when they can do so and what destination they may have. These agencies are an essential part of the system of transnational exploitation of migrant labour: migrants are forced to work for several months simply to pay back the commission that they have accrued. These agencies are central to the management of quota policies and seasonal or temporary labour within the European Union. This fosters a regime that keeps wages low in the countries of origin and motivates people to search for work elsewhere. At the same time, this regime ensures a "disciplined" arrival of thousands of workers in Europe, meaning that people who do not adhere to the conditions of their contracts or who stand outside of this migration regime altogether, are criminalised. The aim is to CATCH migrant labour. Such policies serve those who wish to buy the labour of others without any impediments, and most of all, without any demands. That is why the role played by these agencies is not only a migrant concern: they

are a fundamental instrument for the precarisation of labour also in the destination countries!

It is not by chance that the presence of transnational job agencies in Africa, Asia or east Europe takes place at the same time that there are stipulated re-admission agreements, which oblige the countries of origin to manage the more or less "voluntary" repatriation of migrants who are no longer, whether temporarily or indefinitely, useful to European economies. Additionally, not only private agencies, planned and recognised by the international organisations of migration management, but also the European trade unions are setting up offices in countries of origin. Unions provide support to migrants in obtaining all the documents necessary for migration. For instance CGIL, one of the largest Italian unions, opened sites in Casablanca and Dakar, helping migrants to get visas for Italy. This creates the conditions for those who should be defending workers rights, to become the very vehicle through which migrant workers obtain employment and "respect the rules".

The exploitation of migrant labour is characterised by arbitrary rules, duties, borders, and self-serving forms of tolerance when migrant labour is illegal and hidden, but takes place the right place at the right moment. For example, the sensationalist attention to the veiled muslim woman suddenly ceases in the face of domestic work of migrant women, who in turn disappear for hours or days behind the veil of European houses. As Europe changes its welfare systems and privatises social services, the domestic work of migrant women is becoming more and more necessary by the day.

This confirms the traditional division of labour, which assigns to women all those tasks pertaining to attention and care. Affective relations are bought with a wage. But, above all, these women represent for European societies a priceless wealth, which is material and affective: this is the heart of globalisation and of capitalistic production! Migrants who work in the care services are not "new servants". They are workers who experience poverty and isolation as conditions imposed on them to prevent any demands they may make. Every day, increasing numbers of migrants experience a fragmentation of their labour as a warning of the kind of fragmentation that all workers will soon be facing. **(continued on page 2)**

# Unveiling domestic work

Speaking of migrant labour today means necessarily to speak about migrant women's labour in general and particularly about care and domestic work. We must take into account both the crucial role played by women's movements on a transnational level, how they challenge and change gender relations with their material experience of migration, and the governance of their movements in the overall logic of a "transnational sexual division of labour".

Everywhere in Europe there is a growing demand for domestic work due to the continued transformation of gender relations resulting from the struggles of women's movements, but also because of changes in the labour market and the systems of the welfare state and social services. The political management of this demand is not the same in every European country, but the common trend is to furnish an institutional guarantee for the exploitation of migrant women's labour, either directly through formal regulations or through their illegalisation. Taking Italian policies as an example, in recent years policy making has moved towards a "special quota system" designed for domestic work, bigger than that of generic waged labour, thus revealing the crucial role this type of work plays nowadays. The link between labour contract and residence permit aims to force women to accept lower and lower levels of wages and job conditions, and this, seemingly, is the condition which allows employed women to free themselves from their "domestic destiny". In contrast, Great Britain is now discussing the implementation of a points-based system which reduces or eliminates existing quotas for some "unskilled work", at the same time allowing rich and highly skilled migrants, as employers, to bring their personal domestic "servants" with them from outside the EU. A six month permit will be issued for those who remain tied to their original employer. The substantial demand for care and domestic work will be filled by cheap migrant labour coming from the new accession countries of Eastern Europe, while the new system will push migrant labour underground, contributing to its clandestinisation. The achievements made in the 1990s by migrant women workers organisations (e.g. "Kalayaan"), who secured the freedom to leave respective employers without loosing the permission to stay in the UK, will soon be erased. These are just two examples which reflect the same approach to the management of migrant women's labour. The crucial point is to politically ensure their exploitation, which is evermore necessary for social reproduction. Migrant women, mainly when undocumented but also when formally recognised, are therefore forced into a relationship of dependence to their

employer founded on a complete 24/7 availability for a wage, sometimes a lump-sum, that is the result of an informal negotiation within asymmetrical power relationships.

What cannot be measured is the emotional dimension of this kind of job, perceived by migrant women themselves, as exceeding a simple relationship of work. Sometimes, this can be the only way of surviving the pressure resulting from the all-pervasive and "live-in" character of their work. Nonetheless, these kinds of structures cannot erase the fundamental effects of women's migrations, which represent an overthrow or at least a crucial challenge to the patriarchal character of existing gender relations. Sometimes migration is consciously used by women as a way to achieve freedom from male domination while, anyway, the huge level of women's migration, for example from areas like Asia and East Europe, actually produce a subversion of the sexual division of labour, when women's waged work becomes the main source of family subsistence. But migrant women employed in domestic work also challenge class relationships. It is becoming increasingly evident that not only rich or bourgeoisie women employ domestic workers, but so do women who are themselves waged workers. What is experienced, therefore, is not a capital-labour relationship, but a wage that pays another wage. The kind of migration management deployed by European governments is, we believe, a crucial political point in the struggle against precarisation and the exploitation of migrant labour from a gender perspective, in so far as it reproduces the traditional sexual division of labour on a transnational scale, what is more, institutionalising it through a racist quota system which favours white-Christian women's migration. Therefore, it is merely an illusion to think that the employment of migrant women in the domestic sphere means freedom for European women from their "domestic destiny". Reproduction continues to be thought of as a female task, and the political management of migration furnishes an institutional guarantee to this structure. We cannot accept the recent sensationalist discussions about women wearing "the veil" in public, while no sensation is provoked by the everyday veiling of the exploitation of migrant women within domestic walls.

The struggle against the exploitation of migrant labour must be faced from a gender perspective. This is not only a concern for migrant women.

**(continued from page 1)** It is wrong to identify migrant labour exclusively with hyperexploited and underpaid jobs. Every day more and more migrants crisscross all kinds of labour. They move through states borders, but also within labour. The challenge we are facing is a transnational challenge. The transnational space is the one of migrants' movements, of the institutional organisation of migration management in Europe and beyond, but also of the extreme mobility of capital. It chases migrant labour beyond national borders, while the threats of "outsourcing" or "externalisation of production" weaken the political force of workers struggles everywhere in Europe. More and more, externalisation runs after the cheap and unorganised labour force, following migration routes in reverse. To confront this challenge, today, workers struggles must be transnational, starting with migrant labour! In Europe, on the first of May, we must demand the de-linking of labour – be it precarious, legal or undocumented – and the right to stay in Europe. We must demand a permanent legalisation of all migrants, unbound from work or wages. These demands have been strongly claimed during the third migrant's transnational day of action, on October 7th 2006, but today they can become common to all the workers. Not only because the particular condition of migrants is a lever to the precarisation of the labour as a whole, but also and most of all because migrants' mobility enables us to place our struggles within a transnational dimension. This is both a chance and a challenge, we must accept it.

# Chronicle: Movements and Struggles of Migration ...

In our last two issues we collected chronicles of various fragments of resistance against the border regime and deportations, and for freedom of movement and the right to stay. For this issue we have two focus points: Recent developments in the USA and initiatives, strikes, struggles and upcoming actions around labour and migration.

## **Euromayday and Precarity Webring**

"Mayday" was created some years ago by Italian networks to revitalise and reorganise the 1st of May mobilisation in terms of content as well as form. With the focus on the whole process of precariousness, whilst not separating labour- and living-conditions from this, loud and colourful parades appeared on the streets, first in Milano, and in the last few years in more and more European cities. "Euromayday" was born! And in many mobilisations the precarious situation of migrants became a central issue, with legalisation as a key demand for equal rights. 1st of May 2007 will witness Euromayday-activities again -- in at least 15 cities all over Europe ... [www.euromayday.org/](http://www.euromayday.org/)

The Precarity\_WebRing is an open platform which connects various militant groups and initiatives from all over Europe and beyond already involved in the MayDay mobilisations. The WebRing brings together militant research and activism and aims to create a space for debate, research and political action on precarious living and working conditions... [www.precarity-map.net/](http://www.precarity-map.net/)

## **Self-Organisation of Migrant Workers in the Agricultural Sector, in Southern Spain and other European countries**

Since the racist pogroms against mostly Moroccan workers, the SOC, a small Andalusian land-workers trade union, became active in the region of Almeria not far from the strait of gibraltar. Almeria is very well known for its huge plantations of vegetables for exports, a vast plastic sea of over 35.000 hectors. The vegetable-sector is a very labour-intensive one. Consequently, the agricultural industry depends on a huge number of cheap and flexible workers. Almost 90.000 immigrants, coming from Mahgreb countries, subsaharan Africa, Latin America and Eastern Europe are employed in the green houses. As the workers often face inhuman living and working conditions (e.g. use of pesticides without protection, housing in so-called "chabolas", barracks made out of plastic and wood waste, refusal of wage payments, ongoing racist aggressions, illegalisation...), they have started to organise themselves from below within the structure of the above mentioned trade union SOC. For this aim, rather than focus on the big bureaucratic unions, the SOC has started to build up social centers (similar to the model of workers centers known from immigrant workers in the US). The European Civic Forum (ECF) supports the self-organisation process of immigrant workers and at the end of April 07, an international delegation will travel to Almeria for the opening of the second social center for migrant workers run by the SOC. Already in 2004, the ECF published a book called "Bitter Harvest", that brought together different experiences of struggle, life and work of harvest workers in France, Spain, Switzerland, Austria, Germany, Netherlands and Poland. One example of a successful self-organisation prozess was

the strike of more than 240 harvest workers from Mahgreb countries on a large peach plantation in the province of Bouches-du-Rhônes in southern France in July 2005. The workers had not been paid for months, had lived in old barracks without running water or electricity and had been forced to use health-damaging pesticides. After one week, the entrepreneur had to give in to the demands of the workers. Find more at [www.forumcivique.org/](http://www.forumcivique.org/)

## **Strike in the Agricultural Sector in Morocco**

At the beginning of December 2006, a campaign against the Spanish enterprise "Innovation agricole", specialising in the production of asparagus for exportation, was organised in the province of Chtouka Ait Baha (Agadir-Morocco). The Spanish boss intervened directly against the workers who were protesting, dispersing them, burning the banners and calling the police, so that 40 workers ended up at the police station. The Moroccan authorities are clearly interested in protecting the Spanish bosses in order to avoid any kind of diplomatic difficulties with them, as they continue to attract foreign investors, mainly Spanish and French ones, for the privatisation of public fields. The Spanish union CGT substained this struggle, denouncing the exploitation of Moroccan workers and demanding the recognition of the freedom to unionise, the re-admission of all the workers who had been fired and the respect for workers rights. Find more at [estrecho.indymedia.org/newswire/display/67237/index.php](http://estrecho.indymedia.org/newswire/display/67237/index.php)

## **IWW and Tavolo Migranti**

In Italy, the IWW (Invisible Workers of the World) network – till now active mainly in Veneto, Emilia Romagna and Tuscany – was created as a space for politicisation of migrants around some experiences of autonomous struggle and rank and file trade unionism. IWW emphasise the emergence of a new mongrel and insurgent presence through struggles in the workplace and for social rights, squatting, in struggles for income and against processes of being made invisible, disempowerment, and exploitation of living labour. They also organised civil disobedience against European and national laws intent on controlling the mobility of migrants and the flexibilisation/precariation of work and against detention centers. Find more at [www.globalproject.info/index-it.html](http://www.globalproject.info/index-it.html). Other attempts at organising migrant labour in the Italian context are the autonomous coordinations of migrants, which since 2001 have simultaneously been developing at a local level and networking on a national level within the framework of Tavolo Migranti. They organised demonstrations against Government institutions and, recently, also outside the offices of the main unions. Their emphasis is on ending the coupling of residence permits and employment contracts, freedom of movement and legalisation as crucial demands against the exploitation of migrant labour. Find more at [www.coordinamentomigranti.splinder.com](http://coordinamentomigranti.splinder.com)

## **Precarity and Migration in the coming Anti-G8-Program**

From 6th to 8th of June the next G8-summit will take place near Rostock in Germany where the "world's elite" must expect another mass protest and powerful block-

ades. Already in the weeks leading up to the summit, three marches will cross Europe: "Precarious of every country, let's march to Heiligendamm near Rostock! Against the precarisation of our lives and our jobs! Against Unemployment, poverty, misery, exclusion and discrimination! For equal social rights for everybody, everywhere!" (see the call at [euromarsch2007.labournet.de/](http://euromarsch2007.labournet.de/)) On June 3rd, various networking meetings, also about migration, will be organised, with workshops for transnational initiatives and campaigns around legalisation, anti-deportation and migrant workers rights. The day after, on June 4th, a migration related day of action will follow... before the blockades begin! Further information: [www.nolager.de](http://www.nolager.de)

### NoBorder Camp in Ukraine in August 2007...

...will take place from the 10th to the 20th of August in Transcarpatia, the main region not only for transit- but also for labour migration. Half of the employable population is working abroad... More soon at [www.noborder.org](http://www.noborder.org)

### This Tuesday - Logs on migration, labor, transnational organising

... gathers best-practice information on organisations, projects and campaigns mobilising and researching contingent and migrant labor. [thistuesday.org](http://thistuesday.org)

### USA - news from the "Sleepy Giant"

"A sleepy giant was awoken", was the comment of many activists about the amazing and never expected mass-mobilization of migrant workers last year in many US-cities. Find an update about states' and authorities' reaction below. The "giant" seems to be disappeared again. Obviously such social explosions can hardly be calculated by anybody, but at the same time their dynamics would be unthinkable without daily projects and campaigns from and with migrant workers, which have been quite strong in the US for many years, inside as well as outside the unions. More than 130 (immigrant) workers centers have been opened within the last 15 years (see for example [www.garmentworkercenter.org/](http://www.garmentworkercenter.org/)). And the famous Justice for Janitors campaign is still vivid and even "goes global" as you will see in one of the following reports.

### Update on the US migrant worker struggle

In the last few months, the US immigration enforcement officials have been raiding workplaces and have increased their efforts in deporting undocumented migrant workers. Last year, the US saw millions of workers and their supporters come out to protest proposed laws that would criminalise undocumented workers. The proposed law was not approved due to the large protests in cities across the nation, but the immigration issue has remained a hot topic of debate. Several cities have passed their own laws to make it illegal to rent accommodation to undocumented people and have tried to make it harder for employers to hire workers without papers. Immigration raids on workplaces have also torn thousands of families apart since children born in the US are citizens and are left behind as their parents are deported. While the US government is debating a new set of legislation to address the immigration issue, community activists have

been organising more mobilisations to show that undocumented workers have strong community support and are an integral part of our society. The latest proposals focus on allowing guest worker programs to use workers for short periods of time, then sending them back to their countries without any path to citizenship or way to bring their family with them. One proposal does allow workers to apply for citizenship if they work a certain amount time, fulfill a list of requirements and leave the country for a short period of time. While this may bring some relief to workers, the underlying problem of worker exploitation, lack of social support services, police and military harassment and substandard wages still exists. We continue to fight for better working and living conditions for all workers. This May 1st, not only in Los Angeles, we are calling for:

- Better working & living conditions for all!
- Legalisation & human rights for all!
- Peace & dignity for all communities: stop the violence & harassment by the police, military & ice (la migra)!

### Justice for Janitors in Houston

After a large 4 week strike and an intense escalation which included large mobilisations, 5,300 Houston janitors won the right to form a union and a first time collective agreement. This victory is seen as an historic breakthrough for the south of the U.S. where the Republican anti-labour environment has traditionally kept unions out and labour conditions the lowest in the country.

The City-wide union contract will double janitors income within 24 months, increase their working hours to full time with benefits and secure affordable health care for the workers and their families. Houston janitors, migrants from Mexico and Central America, did not only fighting for economic justice and better working conditions, but also joined the on-going national fight for legalisation. The Houston campaign was won through building strong local community and political alliances, solidarity strikes from fellow janitors in major cities in the U.S. and well synchronised global support actions against international building owners Chevron and Hines in London (T&G), Berlin (No One is Illegal), Hamburg (Verdi), Milan (Chainworkers), Amsterdam (Bondgenoten), Mexico City (el FAT), Moscow, and Panama City.

### Justice for Janitors Goes Global

For the past 3 years we have been sharing our campaigning experience and social justice unionism approach with allied service sector unions, working jointly at the ground level in major organising campaigns in the UK (London Justice for Cleaners Campaign), the Netherlands (10 Euro Campaign), Australia & New Zealand (Clean Start Campaign), Houston (Global Support), Hamburg (Security Workers - Respect & Better Jobs) and Warsaw (Security - Living Wage Campaign). Our joint work with these key unions and social justice networks is helping us all to organise and campaign against common multinational corporations and equity funds in the cleaning and security sub-contracted low pay industries. We are actively campaigning now, if you would like to know more or join our fights please log on to [www.union-network.org/uniproperty.nsf](http://www.union-network.org/uniproperty.nsf) or [www.labourstart.org](http://www.labourstart.org)