

CROSSING BORDERS

movements and struggles of migration



“What crisis?” was the reaction of an activist from Mali, as he was recently asked to comment the economical crash, “we live in a permanent crisis!”. And of course he is right, looking at the situation in many countries of the global south. Nevertheless, the last 9 months affected in a particular way the living conditions of millions of migrants, not only in the European space. Migration and labour in times of crisis is like a thread that we follow to describe the material effects of the recession in different sectors, but also experiences of resistance or refusal. The socio-political organization of migrant labour remains the crucial question from our point of view. Subsequently we - as Frassanito-network - intend to organize a series of connected discussions and events in various European cities in late autumn '09. Our aim is to create more exchange and transnational communication about practices of self-organization and union campaigns in the field of migrant labour. Who is interested in participating and/or in the preparation of these events, pls. contact us: frassanito@kein.org And please help to spread the new newsletter, in both its electronic and printed version.

Contact us at: frassainfo@kein.org

Website: www.noborder.org/crossing_borders

You mean the crisis?

transnational newsletter, 7th Issue, July 2009 Europe is facing the crisis. And it is not alone. From the United States to Africa and Asia (p.6), the crisis is a fact. Its immediate effects are at everybody's sight: drop of production, sackings, unemployment. Millions of men and women all around the world are paying the price for the crisis and are overwhelmed by fear. Looking inside the immediate effects and going beyond any promise of economic recovering, it is worth to consider the crisis pointing out its long term consequences, that will accelerate and stabilize the general transformation of labour relations, which is going on since a long time.

In the last years, we regarded migrant labour as a paradigm of the processes of precarization of contemporary labour (see CB! n. 3). Today we want to understand its role within the crisis, whether migrant labour provides an opportunity for “reading” the movements of the labour force today. In order to drain the labour market, institutional racism, illegalization and criminalization are enacted everywhere and they are producing a bundle of growing tensions among the different segments of the labour force. Migrants are permanently threatened by expulsion. The image of the “cleanex-worker” has never been as effective as it is today. Migrants are the first ones to be fired, therefore expelled from the workplaces. When sacking means to lose the residence permit, detention centers guarantee an expulsion within the European territory, before actual deportation. However, it is within that space between the possibility of being expelled and the effectiveness of expulsion that the practices of hierarchization and exploitation, on the one hand, and the subjective strategies of migrants to answer the crisis, on the other hand, are played.

The case of agricultural labour in Almeria (p.3) shows clearly that the labour of illegalized migrants is sometime preferred, like the one of the newcomers, in order to reduce the costs of production. A labour force docile and highly subjected to threat of deportation competes therefore with those workers who want to reclaim their rights and better wage conditions as well as with those (not only migrants) who are expelled from other productive sectors (like the construction one. See p. 4). These turn themselves to seasonal agricultural labour, producing new processes of internal migration. A new experience of labour mobility seems therefore to accompany the economic crisis. First, migrant workers move from a “regular” to an “un-regular” job in order to gain a wage, even a very low one. Second, they move within the country of residence, like those who migrate from the factories of northern Italy to the “green-factory” of the southern fields. Eventually, either legally or illegally, they move within and without the Schengen area, so complicating the already fragmented picture and the internal stratification of labour on a transnational scale.

At the intersection of every day more differentiated statuses (from undocumented migrants to citizens, passing by long period residence permit, or the new EU Member States' citizens visas) and the economic crisis, labour as such seems to be doomed to become informal, according to the matrix of migrant labour. This informality does not concern only the presence or the absence of a legal regulation of the labour relationship itself, i.e. the presence of the absence of a labour contract. Rather it means a complete reduction of the employment relationship into a relationship of power, often individualized, into a frontal crash between exploitation strategies, on the one hand, and the strategies practiced by migrants to escape exploitation on the other hand. From this perspective, and taking into account its almost

total individualization, care and domestic work of migrant women (see p.4) is the most effective example of both these features of informal and migrant labour.

Looking at these processes of “mobilization” and “informalization” of labour in this age of crisis, the persistent capacity of migrant labour to point out the overall trends of labour as such is much more evident than ever. However, a gap also emerges and expands, a sort of growing distance between migrant labour and migrant workers. We are facing a paradoxical situation. Labour as such becomes migrant, but to migrants workers is not recognized their central role in contemporary labor. Migrant labour is really becoming the general condition of contemporary labour as a whole, for what concerns precarity, exploitation and loneliness, while the importance of migrants in the world of work is increasingly denied, with the consequence that they are forced in a condition of political marginality that is reserved to the residual segments of labour force. In the best instance, they are regarded as a part of a universal and undifferentiated subject, just insofar as they renounce their own specificities, first of all their complex and shifty relationship with productive and reproductive work.

Within the current crisis, economic policies of every countries established that migrants must pay the great part of the price for the crisis: sackings, the limitation of welfare provisions, and an everyday less regulated brutal

expulsion. It seems that national legislations are winning over the global movement of migrants. It seems that the borders, which nation states are re-establishing thanks to the crisis, are subjugating migrants’ movements. It seems that the hierarchies of finance, of international exchange and relations are again the only measure of every practicable movement. It seems that the European space is doomed to be nothing more than the sum of national spaces.

Yet, it also appears to us that no economic analysis sufficiently stresses that the crisis is, first of all, a struggle upon the internal and external borders of the global economic system. It does not matter to us who will enjoy the profits of the car production in Europe or in the World. We know that, whoever he or she is, profits will not come without the labour of thousands migrants. If the toxic assets are the malady so much feared and hidden by the financial system, migrants are labeled as the virus, which reveals the crisis of discipline and order of contemporary capitalism. The current crisis is, first of all, a crisis of order. Migrants seem never to be where they are pretended to be, stably confined, nor ready to move orderly when the economic necessities require. It seems to us that, against the apparent revenge of national legislations, and against the limitations imposed to global movements, migrant labour continues to point out some crucial trends of contemporary labour, and that the global movements of migrants continue to bring their disorder everywhere.

From Calais via Lesvos to Dikili: Noborder Camps on Tour



At the end of June a No-border-camp took place near Calais as a joint venture between French and Belgian activists and migrant support groups and the UK No Borders Network. Calais was chosen for two main reasons; it is an important location in the history, development and practice of European migration controls and has long been a major bottleneck for those seeking to get to Britain. But more importantly, it is also a focus of the struggle between those who would see an end to all migration into the EU, and those trying to break down the barriers between peoples, the borders that prevent the freedom of movement for all, not just the privileged few.

From 25th to 31st of August another No-border-camp will take place in Lesvos with three major goals. First, the camp is designed to provide a space for transnational communication about various experiences in resisting the EU-border Regime. For that purpose, initiatives to monitor the border in Hungary and the Ukraine, activists from Turkey, as well as members of European-African networks based in Morocco, Mauritania and Mali are invited. Secondly, the camp should strengthen the local support groups for refugees and migrants at this hot spot of migration-control. These groups, assisting immigrants arriving on Lesvos, have accomplished quite a lot and need more political and material support. Lastly, actions protesting and hampering the activities of the Greek coast guard and Frontex are in preparation. Denunciating and disrupting the “hunters and murderers of the boatpeople” remains a necessary element of our struggle for the freedom of movement and the right to stay.

Directly after dismantling the Lesvos camp and only a few km across the Aegean sea another No-border-camp will be set up in Dikili in Turkey, where already last year a first camp took place. More information at: lesvos09.antira.info

Wild Strawberries: Migrants and Crisis in Almeria

Almeria has become a field of desolation. The immigrants roam the streets of Roquetas, El Ejido, La Mojonera, Las Norias, and so on. No work for them. Or at least not for those who have papers. The victims of the real estate crash are now innumerable. When they try to get back into agriculture, foreigners with legal residence status have trouble finding a job in the plastic-covered fields: they are expensive. The farmers prefer workers without documents, who are defenseless and speak no Spanish. In the packaging stores it is the turn of the women from other countries who, after several years of loyal service, are denied the right to work. The beginning of the harvest season that is drawing to an end now was very hard for them. Several women lost their seniority. This is because they did not know when to appeal to the courts to settle a dispute, they fell by the wayside.

Anna Mendy lives in La Mojonera and has worked in Costa de Almeria since 2002. In 2007 she went through a complicated pregnancy. She took her maternity leave, and when she came back to her employer the head of personnel told her that there is no work at the moment. Tired of repeating herself, and seeing that the colleague who replaced her continues to work, she appealed to the SOC (Sindicato de Obreros del Campo y del Medio Rural, that is, the union of agricultural workers) at the end of 2008. The matter was brought to the attention of the Labor Board. Since the two parties did not find an agreement, the matter went to the industrial tribunal. Anna won the lawsuit. People like her come to the SOC office in Almeria every day. All of them workers with several years of seniority in greenhouse work who get fired without any reason and against all labor standards.

Generally speaking, the xenophobic political discourse has gotten into the heads of ordinary Spanish citizens: "the immigrants are responsible for this crisis...", and the actions of the administration, with the prefecture at the front, show it every day:

Residence and work permits of people that have not paid enough into social security are simply not renewed. That means that workers who have paid into social security for three, sometimes four years, become undocumented foreigners from one day to the next because of the crisis! The police is permanently present at the central bus station and controls only people of color or with foreign-looking features. Expelling undocumented foreigners, in accordance with European policy, is an imperative, above and beyond all national legislations.

In the name of this brutality, police violence is winning against human rights. If it were not so, how to explain that people - refugees fleeing hunger - are arrested every day, harassed, put into prison and deported without ever having been brought before a judge, nor defended by a lawyer? How to explain that the people most rejected in the world of greenhouse agriculture, who live in dwellings made of cardboard and plastic, without water or electricity, are continually hassled by the "guardia civil"? With the crisis it has also become difficult to enjoy one's ordinary economic rights. People who would normally get four months of unemployment benefits have seen the duration of their payments reduced to three months. Around El Ejido, from April to the end of May, mysterious deaths were talked about a lot in the Moroccan community. Four people shot dead or hung in the fields. The investigation will never yield any result, as in all the other similar cases over the last few years...

In certain parts of Andalusia, as in Jaen during the olive harvest season, the return of the native Spanish into agricultural labor raised a lot of problems. The immigrants, who have been coming for the harvest for several years, found themselves face to face with the "masters" of the area, more demanding than they regarding wages. Near Antequera - in the region of Malaga - people almost got into fistfights.

In Huelva the immigrants, who showed up in large numbers, had no chance to get work: the employers continue to import workers from Morocco and Senegal, adding to the confusion of residents and undocumented immigrants. While people are waiting to see how the next harvest season in Almeria is going to shape up, fear about where this crisis is leading is beginning to strike the heart of even the most optimistic.

Spitou Mendy - Union activist - SOC Almeria



Crisis as usual: Migrating in and outside the domestic sphere...

The household has become one of the most important work places for migrant women worldwide. There are different modes of care work: cleaning and babysitting on an hourly basis, working as a nanny on a daily basis or living together with an elderly or frail person, supporting him/her in all aspects of every day life. Although there are legal gates of entry in some countries this segment of the labour market is significantly based on the activities of informally migrating and workingwomen, who use networks to organize their activities circumventing migration policy. Many of these migrant domestic workers support their families in their countries of origin financially by sending remittances.

Paid domestic labour corresponds to a specific sexual division of labour: care work is delegated to migrant women in order to solve the problem of managing job, family and household. Therefore, non-migrant women are able to free themselves from reproductive and domestic labour only insofar as other women are waged to supply for it. Thus, domestic work is not only 'ethnicised'; the migrants who are pre-assigned to the performance of activities that are regarded as feminine are also gendered in a specific way. This leads to the production of two antagonistic stereotypes: that of the emancipated, modern woman who works in the public sphere and that of the subaltern, traditional migrant who is bound to the house.

Yet, with the crisis, even this stereotyped relationship is affected by meaningful changes. On the one hand, non-migrant women who are expelled from the labour market could be forced to turn to domestic occupations, and the reduction of the family income could be an obstacle to the possibility of employing migrant domestic worker. On the other hand, waged domestic work represents again a possibility of employment also for non-migrant women. All women, migrant and non-migrant, will be in some way or other forced by the crisis to migrate continuously in

and outside the domestic sphere. From many points of view, this is a usual crisis for women, insofar as there is not a clear distinction between the "inside" and the "outside" of a labour market, which, in a much more violent and forced way, expands into the domestic sphere. At the same time, it is clear that the crisis will determine a further definition of the relationship between productive and reproductive labour.

Furthermore, just because of the crisis, the level of wages will be probably further lowered. Indeed, the crisis will not reduce the demand of women's labour force for domestic services. Yet, the mainly informal character of the domestic labour-relationship makes it much more difficult to negotiate over wages and working hours, often un-contracted and left to the decision of a power relationship. Given the increasing vulnerability of migrant women determined by the crisis – insofar as racism, criminalization and illegalization of migrants are its direct consequences – they will experience a blackmail even stronger than before. The reduction of the employers' income, in other words, will affect indirectly domestic workers wages, and the effects of this trend must be considered also on a transnational scale, given the huge importance of remittances in the countries of origin.

In spite of these problems there are some strong examples of care workers who got organized to make themselves and their work visible and fight for decent working and living conditions, like "Kalayaan" in London, "Respect" in Berlin and many others. What is at stake, in front of the crisis, will be the possibility to improve and multiply these organization processes, knowing that what is happening concerns not only working conditions but also the organization of the sexual division of labour on a transnational scale. The question is: how the crisis pretends to reposition women within and without the domestic sphere?

Under construction: Crisis, Migrant Labour and New Organizing in the Construction Sector

It is well known, that the construction sector is very much affected by the economical crisis, and as a lot of mainly East-European migrants are working on construction-sites all over Europe, it seems to be clear, that they loose their jobs first and probably leave the host countries. But, in facts, the picture is much more complex.

It is right, that the construction in Spain, one of the most growing sector in the last years with thousands of Romanian and Ukrainian workers, collapsed quickly as a consequence of the crisis. Obviously a lot of Romanian workers returned, but as the crisis has even stronger impacts in their own country of origin, a lot of them decided to stay. Partly they tried to find another job in agriculture, and subsequently the competition in this sector increased, the wages went further down this season (as the harvest-work was already very low paid before – see the text about Almeria). „Waiting“ is a main

tendency among migrant workers for example from Ukraine, who are affected not only in Spain but also in the Czech Republic or Russia, where they represent the main labour-force in construction. And, in contrast with migrant workers from Poland or Romania, the Ukrainians often undergo strong EU-visa-restrictions. As they cannot move freely as the citizens of the new EU-Member States, they consider much more probably the option (not) to leave „Schengenland“. Instead they stay in the EU, then try to survive in their communities or drawing on savings and waiting for new opportunities to come.

A few more impressions from Norway and Germany can contribute to this complex picture. In both countries construction also suffered through the crisis, but as it is also known at least the West-European governments have started economic stimulus-programmes, which concern also the construction sector for example by

renovations of public buildings as schools, universities ... Of course as these state-interventions compensate partly the collapse of private investments, construction work is still required. In Norway some East-European workers left, mainly people who arrived not long time ago and without families. Yet other came, for example from Ireland or UK, where the situation is worse, not only economically. „British jobs for British workers“ appeared as slogan in UK, partly used by protectionist unions and nationalist groups to start a campaign in which migrant workers serve as scapegoats for the crisis. But other examples are given, looking again at the construction sector in Norway. Already 2004 the union „Byggningsarbeiderforening“ in Oslo made an important decision: they stated clearly that they were not a union for Norwegian workers, but for workers working in Norway. Since then, they have connected people who speak Polish, Russian, Lithuanian, Latvian, Bosnian-Croatian-Serb, Romanian-Moldavian, German, Bulgarian and Slovakian to the union. This has been crucial, as the need to have someone speaking your mother tongue is

important in an alien society. Their newspapers include pages in Polish, Lithuanian, Latvian, Slovakian and Serb-Croatian - instead of making separate information bulletins for foreign members. They try to avoid all kinds of "natural" separations that tends to come along by themselves, thus creating a common platforms for Norwegian and foreign workers - also in their political demands and campaigns.

They have spent a huge amount of energy on informing their foreign colleagues about their rights as workers in Norway. And the migrant workers have responded duly: Thousands have organized in unions and more than a third of the membership in Oslo Byggningsarbeiderforening are Polish now. Probably this is one of a few positive examples in Europe but at least keeping vivid the idea, that „another labour movement-world is possible“, much more important in times of crisis!

More information about the union in Oslo:
<http://www.constructionworker.no>

“You know what? Next year I am going to go to America!”

Migrants and the crisis in the mechanic sector: the case of the district of Suzzara (Mantua – Italy)

The crisis hits hard even in the southern district of the city of Mantua, usually an agricultural region in the middle of the Po river basin, where an important industrial district developed after the Second World War. The mechanic sector, led by the “Iveco” factory (owned by the FIAT company), created thousands new working places in the last ten years, both with the opening of new plants and the enlargement of the already existing ones.

If, on the one hand, the crisis affects all kinds of labor assignment within the firms, on the other hand migrants are the first to be affected by redundancy “cassa integrazione” measures: “We are 45 people made redundant, 35 migrants, we all have open-ended contracts”. What is worse, is that almost all short-term contracts – the majority of which are from temporary-labour agencies – will not be renewed. Insofar as these contracts concern mainly migrants (or workers coming from southern Italy), it appears that migrants occupy the unqualified positions within the labour hierarchy. In other words, thanks to the link between labour contract and residence permit established by the “Bossi-Fini Law”, and thanks to the role of temporary-labour agencies, the great factory produces a deep fragmentation of labour as such: ‘The bosses told us that they would have renewed our contracts, if we accept night-shifts and overtime hours. Yet, I don’t think so, giving that so many colleagues were fired!’ The obligation to have a job in order to have a residence permit, therefore, was exploited in the aim of optimizing the provision of labor force when it was necessary. On the contrary, with the crisis, workers are expelled from the factory through dismissal or with the expiration of their labour contracts, even without being formally fired.

Migrants who are unionized and active within the RSU (the representation of the workers within the factories) explain clearly that, during this crisis, the union is

“protecting” the workers with a open-ended contract without taking into account that the current organization of labor is based upon the hierarchization of labour-force and upon the employment of temporary workers according to the waves of production. The logic of division which emerges from the words of some migrants (‘I do not know why they allow new people to come to Italy, if we do not have labor enough’) is fed by the unions themselves, insofar as they contribute to the fragmentation and isolation of those workers who, within the RSU, are trying to change a union which is increasingly far from the reality of labour organization.

Looking at the subjective answer to the crisis given by migrants, some of them are moving towards other countries. “Go to America”, the mirage of a fortunate migration comes back during the crisis of a seemingly stabilized migratory project. However, the American myth loses its power in front of the selective sackings, of the institutionalized racism and, most of all, considering the many things already realized by the migrants in their lives in Suzzara. Indeed, a quarter of the migrants living in this area bought a house, they are currently paying mortgages loans, their children go to school. This area has been the theatre of a family immigration whose protagonists are strongly settled and ready to reclaim their rights. If the government with the Bossi-Fini law pretends an available-labor force to be accepted only according to the needs of production, in facts migrant men and women simply want to stay. Just in Suzzara an autonomous coordination of migrants was born few months ago. In a short time, the coordination mobilized two hundred migrants to participate to the national migrants’ and antiracist demonstration held in Milan on May 23rd, within the campaign “Take a side” (www.dachepartestare.org). Against the policy of criminalization and expulsion of migrants enacted by the government to face the crisis, against the racism institutionalized by the so called “pacchetto sicurezza” (security law) just approved by the Italian Parliament, migrants are ready to reply: here we are, here we stay, here we fight!

Chronicles from the crisis

Confronted by the global economic crises, all governments in Europe and outside Europe, in Americas as well in Asian countries, introduce policies that aim at draining 'superfluous' of migrant workers out of national labour markets. In some cases, they adopt policies of "voluntary" repatriation, in some others they restrain the rules to get visas and increase the length of detention. Also the measures of "voluntary" repatriation hide the new trend of increasing deportations. Moreover, the crisis increases unemployment for all workers, putting migrants and locals against each other. Some new laws foster racism by stigmatizing migrants as criminals. These are collected fragments about the crisis and migration. These chronicles do not aim at showing that migrants are the targets or the victims of increasing repressive policies. Rather, they allow stressing the structural importance of migrants into the understanding of the crisis. All the facts described below produced relevant political answers on the migrants' side. While the majority of the interpretations of the crisis start from the financial dimension, what we are proposing here is to turn the crisis upside down, i.e. to look at it from the migrants' perspective.

Romania

The crisis causes growing racism. Last December, Chinese construction workers were fired and their fellows had a sit-in at the Chinese embassy. Labour market changes: on the one hand, the crisis seems to reduce the need for long-term migrants. On the other hand, it restrains "free labour", like in the case of Bangladeshi migrants "imprisoned" in garment factory housings.

Spain

The unemployment rate raises and racism raises as well. The rate of unemployment has already gone above 31% mainly affecting migrants, insofar as a large number of North African workers were employed in the sectors most hit by the crisis: construction and services.

France

Economic troubles trigger racism and protests as well. A unions' building, squatted by "sans-papiers" for months because the union doesn't represent them, have been evicted recently. The law is still somehow in "favor" of illegal migrants in case they apply to courts for money or other work issues. However, in time of crisis courts' decisions for expulsions are multiplying.

Germany

Some thousands migrants and refugees, who got a test-residence for 2 years after the "right to stay-campaign" 2006/7, are in danger now again to fall back in a precarious status or even to get deported if they cannot prove to have their own income until December. Yet what jobs they can find in times of crisis? Meanwhile "Verdi", the service union, supported a domestic worker to succeed in a wage claim, hopefully a key-case for the future.

Hungary

Many enterprises are bankrupt while racism and anti-ciganism are used to divide people. In Budapest, on May 16th 3000 Roma people and locals demonstrated. Also some craftsmen fight against subcontractors and temporary working agencies at bridge-constructions for payment by the state or big enterprises.

Italy

The Government divides the working class addressing migrants as the cause of the crisis. New laws are worsening the situation: government aims at putting migrants out of labour market by favoring deportation and increasing the length of detention. The crisis made all this worse: particularly in the North and North-East of Italy, migrant workers are the first to be fired, in several cases with the support of local workers and unions.

USA

The economic crises are widening the gap between illegal immigrants and Americans in the labor market. Those who lost their job are turning for help to the government, but undocumented migrants are not entitled to state support. Despite the growing pressures, many of the illegal immigrants are resisting leaving the country. Instead, as the recession deepens, illegal immigrants are clinging to low-wage jobs, often working more hours for less money, and taking whatever work they can find, no matter the conditions.

Ukraine

Construction and other workers in larger quantity than last year came back from Russia in winter. But this time it might be difficult for them to come again because work is diminishing. Because of the crisis, a lot of companies do not pay their employees. Even worse it is the condition in Eastern Ukraine mines.

Malaysia

Migrants occupy a quarter of the working places in Malaysia, now they are victims of the crisis. Factories closed or work half scale. Job centers have no work, have not paid any salaries during the last months and the immigration office threatens with detention migrants who cause trouble.

Russia

The increasing disemployment of migrants from Armenia, Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan working in Russia, in construction sites or factories, dropped the cash they used sending to their families in home countries. In some cases, this cash accounts for nearly half of Gross Domestic Product. So, the economic effects of crisis are felt thousands of kilometers away.

United Kindom

Migrant workers are increasingly threatened with checks and raids by Immigration Police in the workplaces, which often end with the deportation for those who are undocumented or with sackings for those documented, especially if they are active in the unions. Recently, despite the ambivalent position of the unions refusing to support migrant workers unfairly dismissed by cleaning companies in London, migrants are fighting back on their own pushing politicians and progressive unionists to take their side. The recent mass raid followed by fast-track deportation of Latin American cleaners at the Institute of Oriental Studies in London have been opposed by an occupation by students, academic staff and unionists in solidarity with their colleagues and protesting against the penetration of migrations controls into public institutions.