

Employment of migrant workers in UK agriculture: in whose interests?

Ben Rogaly, Sussex Centre for Migration Research, University of Sussex

Since the mid-1990s, there has been a dramatic rise in the proportion of international labour migrants in the UK agricultural and food processing workforce. This paper addresses the question of whose interests are being served by this change. In particular it will investigate the impacts of the employment of migrants on migrants themselves, on long-term residents, and on UK businesses involved in the growing, packing and primary processing of food. Secondly, it will seek to describe and explain the range of practices used by employment agencies (gangmasters and official migration scheme operators) active in the sector. It will also explore the role of government managed migration policy and recent legislation to regulate agencies and will make connections between the political economy of migrant employment in the food chain and wider government policy practices regarding cheap food and relations with large-scale corporate capital.

The main source of data for the paper was generated by a study commissioned by the UK Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) following a parliamentary select committee hearing on gangmasters in 2003. In-depth case studies were carried out by the author in 2004, including interviews with twelve company directors and managers of businesses, six employment agencies and thirty-six workers, including both migrants and long-term residents. The paper will draw heavily on new analysis of these interview transcripts, which were only referred to in summary form in the 2005 report of the study. These data reveal how and why the agrarian labour regime in the UK was intensifying, and migrant workers' roles in that change. They are also suggestive of patterns of difference in employment relations across work-places based on the type of crop produced, whether work was carried out in fields or packhouses/ primary processing units, and the size of labour-using businesses.

The paper will use a comparative and historical method, locating discussions of the impact of the changing composition of the UK agricultural workforce within a review of literature on the role of migrants in the UK sector since the nineteenth century and with reference to the large literature on the political economy of migrant labour use in United States agriculture. It will draw out points of continuity and change in the UK, and of contrast between national contexts, for example between the concentrated capital of retailers dominant in the contemporary UK and the alliance of agricultural and industrial interests arrayed against agricultural workers in mid-twentieth century California. Interviews with international migrant workers in UK agriculture create tension for the political economy approach taken here, as, for all the evidence of increasingly ruthless workplace regimes imposed by management, many of those interviewed were exercising agency and choice in supplying labour to the sector, albeit within a sharply unequal national and international structural context. The paper will conclude by drawing out the specific interests served by the employment of migrant workers in contemporary UK agriculture. It will make the case for further research to explore and explain differences in work-place regimes in the sector.