

Immigrant Labour

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There is no Western European country where immigrant labour is a negligible force, or even a marginal quantity fluctuating with the economic conjuncture. Nowhere do immigrant workers provide simply a 'regulator' of employment, or merely an instrument for the bourgeoisie to increase the 'industrial reserve army'. They comprise 6 per cent of the active population and almost 14 per cent of the number of manual workers in Germany and in Great Britain; 10 per cent of the active population and from 20 to 25 per cent of industrial labour in Belgium (including the building and extractive industries); 11 per cent of the active population (i.e. more than two million) and more than 25 per cent of industrial labour in France; 26 per cent of the active population and 35 per cent of the industrial labour-force in Switzerland.

The functions that immigrants fulfil and the advantages that the capitalist class gains from them are of two kinds: political and economic.

Political Advantages. These are by far the most important, since massive reliance on immigrant labour enables a basic modification in the social and political structure of the indigenous population to be artificially produced. Recourse to foreign workers leads, in particular, to the exclusion of an important part of the proletariat from trade-union action; a considerable decrease in the political and electoral weight of the working class; a still more considerable weakening of its ideological force and cohesion. In a word, it achieves the 'denationalization' of decisive sectors of the working class, by replacing the indigenous proletariat with an imported proletariat, which leads a marginal and cultural existence deprived of political, trade-union and civil rights.

Reliance on immigrant workers cannot simply be summarized as a political *neutralization* of whole sectors of the working class—(sectors which could otherwise be especially combative, as can be seen in Italy where *internal* migration from South to North takes the place of im-

migration from abroad.) For the obverse of the subtraction of indigenous workers from manual jobs is their displacement elsewhere; to diminish the 'national' working class by 20 per cent is to 'promote' that number of workers into tertiary and technical activities; to depreciate the social and economic value of manual work and manual workers as a whole; to deepen the separation between manual work and technical, intellectual and tertiary work; to *inflate* correspondingly the social and political importance of the 'middle strata', and by racist and chauvinist propaganda, to encourage backward elements in the 'national' working class to identify themselves ideologically with the petty-bourgeoisie.

These political advantages doubtless surpass in importance the economic advantages which the bourgeoisie gains from reliance on immigrant labour. The latter have been, of course, much more extensively studied.

Economic Advantages. The import of 'ready-made' workers amounts to a saving, for the country of immigration, of between £8,000 and £16,000 per immigrant worker, if the social cost of a man of 18 is estimated for West European countries at between 5 and 10 years' work. A further saving for the country of immigration results from the fact that, just as it did not have to pay for their childhood and adolescence, it does not have to support its immigrant workers in their old age (which in no way means that they are absolved from paying insurance contributions). The fact that a large proportion of immigrant workers (90 per cent in Germany and Switzerland) are not accompanied by their families brings the country of immigration an additional and substantial saving in social capital (housing, schools, hospitals, transport and other infra-structural facilities). On these counts alone—not to speak of the under-payment of immigrant labour-power—immigrant workers are super-exploited by the capitalist class (i.e. a source of additional surplus-value).

The fact that the developed capitalist countries thus save a whole range of different social costs, and shift the burden of these costs on to the less developed countries, making them subsidize monopolist development, is economically important. But it is difficult to derive from this mobilizing themes for the political and ideological education of the 'national' working class. Third-Worldist arguments most often cut both ways and are a source of ideological confusion. While it is true that the super-exploitation of immigrant labour is a specific consequence of uneven development and of the pillage of the 'Third World', it is false and politically untenable to add that this super-exploitation and pillage are a source of enrichment for the population of the European metropolises *as a whole*—including the working class, and are therefore necessary to the maintenance of its standard of living.

This kind of argument, in fact, starts from the 'premise' that the imperialist metropolises dispose both of abundant means of production and outlets for their products, but lack the necessary manual labour needed to produce these. Under threat of a brutal fall in their standard of living, reliance on immigrant labour would allegedly be in the *common* interest of the working class and the bourgeoisie of the imperialist

metropolis. The mystification in this kind of reasoning is that it takes the social structure and division of labour on which it is 'premised' as unalterably *given*, whereas it is precisely perpetuated and consolidated by means of the massive reliance on immigrant labour. For in the absence of an imported and marginalized mass of proletarians, it would not be just the productive apparatus that would break down or the standard of living that would decline. The whole mode of life, social structure and balance of political forces in these countries would be radically changed today.

To appreciate this, it is sufficient to ask on what conditions the imperialist countries could do without the immigrant labour-power that now amounts to 20 per cent or more of their manual workers (i.e. almost as much proportionally as the black proletariat in the United States). This could only be done by transferring a significant proportion of the inactive (women, adolescents, children), tertiary or parasitic population to manual occupations. Demographically—in other words, as far as the physical capacity of potential labour-power is concerned—this transfer would pose no problem. Nevertheless, the inactive or unproductive population, although fit for work, could only be set to work in fatiguing, dirty or repugnant jobs now reserved to immigrants, under certain conditions. Hours of work, conditions and modes of work would have to be radically improved. These jobs would have to be accorded a standing corresponding to their social utility, which is primordial. Above all, they would have to be paid at the *historical value* of the labour-power of those who undertake them. This would be a wage that enabled manual workers to satisfy the historical needs of a Frenchman or an Englishman (or a German, a Swiss or a Swede) in 1970, and that compensated for the arduous, dirty, unhealthy or repugnant character of their social labour.

Such a wage would be very high; probably considerably higher than that paid in present-day capitalist civilization for jobs which are reputedly very skilled, but which—because of the desirability, conveniences and 'social status' they provide—are much more sought after than the jobs of building worker, bricklayer, navy, or iron-worker. In other words, the payment of this manual labour-power at its historical value—the price that would prevail on the labour market if the criteria of capitalist society were themselves fulfilled—is a structural impossibility for this society. The maintenance of the social hierarchy, and scale of values on which capitalist civilization rests, and thereby the survival of bourgeois society and its mode of domination, depend on the possibility of *excluding* from this civilization and its labour market a decisive fraction of the working class.

This is the root of the contradiction revealed by the permanent presence in capitalist societies of migrant workers representing 20 per cent of industrial labour-power. It is a fundamental contradiction, which demonstrates the factitious character not of the *standard* of living of the population in the imperialist countries, but of the *mode of existence*, civilization and culture of these societies.

The 'national' working class no more derives any immediate benefit

from the super-exploitation of immigrant workers, than it is injured by their presence. It is impossible to claim that, in the absence of these foreign workers, the capitalist class would be forced to employ local workers in their place at the historical value of their labour-power, and thus increase very significantly the level of remuneration of manual workers. For such a redistribution would be structurally unviable in the context of the capitalist system. It is incompatible with its pattern of consumption, its economic, social and political equilibrium, and its scale of ideological values. The absence of immigrant workers would not simply provoke an increase in wages and in the political weight of the 'national' working-class: it would detonate a general crisis of capitalist society at every level, by modifying the whole set of historical conditions on the basis of which the price of labour-power and the wage structure are determined.

Thus the political defence of foreign workers cannot be reduced to the claim for more 'decent' wages and conditions of living. This defence necessarily involves a total challenge to the social hierarchy and type of civilization that are only made possible by the super-exploitation of immigrants. It is no coincidence that in May 1968, when such a total challenge was made by the masses in France, unity between 'national' and 'foreign' workers flowered spontaneously.