

# Alternative Trade Union Organizing of Migrant Workers in Northern Ireland in the wake of the Good Friday Agreement

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## Abstract

*The paper deals with an organised labour response to recent migration to Northern Ireland from the New Member States (NMS) following EU enlargement in 2004. A trade union's approach to the problems confronting migrant workers is analyzed in the context of neo-liberal reforms of the labour market and shrinking of the welfare state. These changes have taken place in the context of a specific region still struggling to overcome the legacy of a long-lasting conflict from the 1960s until 1998 Good Friday Agreement. Furthermore, an innovative approach to migrant workers organising combining elements of solidarity and membership mobilisation and aiming at promoting a political and class solidaristic cross-sectarian agenda developed by the Independent Workers' Union (IWU) is examined. The results are based on a research programme undertaken by the IWU to uncover the nature of the relationship between migrants, labour market changes and the trajectory of sectarianism in the north.*

**Key words:** trade unions, union organizing, migrant workers, sectarianism

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## Introduction

Consideration of the nature of the labour movement's response to migrant workers coming to Northern Ireland/the north of Ireland<sup>1</sup> after 2004 will of necessity require attention to be given to aspects of the North's economic and social restructuring during the period of the ascendancy of neo-liberalism. Furthermore, it is important to note that this restructuring has been inextricably tied to the nature of the North's political institutions, including the Northern Ireland Assembly, set up in 1998 as part of the so-called Belfast Agreement. While ostensibly created to overcome the problems of the long period of insurgency and civil conflict stretching back to the late 1960s, arguably the Assembly has institutionalised aspects of the previous divisive traditional social and political culture, known as *sectarianism*. In short, the current environment can be characterised as neo-liberalism meets traditionalism. Labour market reform and reduction in state spending have facilitated the opening up of the economy and society more widely and specifically to the marketisation and commodification of the welfare state. The impact on trade unions has been profound. Their response often has been problematical and especially with respect to their orientation to migrant workers, the majority of whom entered Northern Ireland after 2004 due to the economic changes being wrought by European-wide neo-liberal labour market reforms.

While the labour movement in the North was strengthened by its institutionalisation and structured participation in the fordist post war social settlement in the UK, of which Northern Ireland is a part, the attack on the welfare state, has weakened it profoundly. Although trade union membership in the north of Ireland is amongst the highest in the UK (33.6% in 2011, Labour Force Survey, Office for National Statistics) this has been more weakly associated with the private sector and where it was at its highest, the decline of traditional manufacturing, including most prominently ship building and engineering, has left the public sector as the last redoubt, to a significant degree, of trade union organisation. This institutionalised

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<sup>1</sup> Northern Ireland is contested socially and politically which, as some of the research participants pointed out, makes it normal in an abnormal way not immediately obvious to new migrants. Because this contestation over identity, extending to the definition of the statelet, reaches beyond those born into those extant social and political divisions commonly referred to as the Protestant-Catholic sectarian divide, we more usually prefer the term the 'north of Ireland' or the 'North' rather than Northern Ireland, as a reminder of that contestation.

public-sector facing industrial relations has, inter alia, left trade unions with limited flexibility when it comes to responding to the needs of new workers and more over, migrant workers in non traditional, or hitherto underrepresented, sectors of the economy. These include hotel and catering workers but also those working in newly privatised sectors of the welfare state and specifically the health care sector with its attendant activities (notably elder care, cleaning and catering). This chapter will initially consider aspects of the IWU's broader agenda to put in context both its response to migrant workers, and that of the traditional labour movement. Since our point of reference is with the agenda and practice of the IWU, a new union with a distinctive orientation addressing the needs of excluded workers especially (below), our concern with mainstream labour is not addressed here. Moreover, it is arguably due to the institutional and political failings of the mainstream labour movement, *at least with respect to their practical activities with regard to migrant workers*, that the IWU has found the space to develop a key aspect of its trade union agenda. Indeed, significant proportions of its membership are themselves recent migrants and not only from CEE states.

By practical activity is meant a mixture of solidarity and membership mobilisation in specific firms by IWU members both to augment membership and in at least one instance, irrespective of concerns with union growth, to promote a political and class solidaristic cross-sectarian agenda. The chapter is based on some of the results from a research programme initiated by the IWU to uncover the nature of the relationship between migrants, labour market changes and the trajectory of sectarianism in the north. The research established the Migrant Workers' Research Network (MWRN) project based in Belfast and Armagh. The research is also however a method of recruiting and mobilising a new membership on the basis that their knowledge of their employment is crucial to making sense of what it is that unions seek to attain. The research was based upon a democratic form of researcher-participant engagement (below). Due to limitations of space we focus on several examples of practical activities initiated by IWU members in support of migrant workers but will also, necessarily, make reference to a number of the IWU's broader activities, for example the union's work in the NHS (National Health Service). The activities of union building and solidarity, including working with a range of migrant workers, develops an understanding of the 'what', 'where' and 'how' of migration in Ireland today and democratic-participant research (Friere 1970) forms a vital part of the union's development agenda in the North. The point is not only to find out what its potential constituency requires. The research is also seen by the IWU as a mobilising device for member involvement in understanding and engaging with the changing

nature of the political economy of the north of Ireland. In reporting on the findings of an IWU research programme we are also highlighting some of the union's work of engagement. Many of those participating in what is on-going research were union members already and some of those we interviewed subsequently became members of the IWU after the research was concluded.

## **The Independent Workers' Union (IWU)**

It is against the backdrop of neo liberal restructuring in the Republic of Ireland and neo-liberal and political restructuring in the North that the Independent Workers' Union was set up although its proximate origins are to be found in the rejection of social partnership in the Republic of Ireland and the impetus given to this by the ICTU (Irish Congress of Trade Unions). Suffice for present purposes to note that the union's orientation is concerned with being able to respond to the needs of workers in precisely those sectors of the economy impacted by neo-liberal economic strategies. Since 2005 the IWU has supported calls to reject European Union treaties that were designed to lead to greater domination of the continent by neo-liberalism. Before it had been founded a decade, the IWU had moved to promoting a different approach to organised labour in an attempt to address the changing terrain on which the economy was built in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. One of the model's the union adopted, community unionism, was not new but had not been widely recognised in Ireland, North and South, as a means of dealing with the impact of globalisation on labour.

The IWU recognised that the shift in labour from manufacturing to service industries North and South, the exponential growth in agency work and part time employment, the marked rise in immigration post-2004 and the large numbers employed in small private enterprises hostile to unionisation required new forms of organising. The union activists combine traditional trade union recruitment activities (eg. leafleting factory gates, press coverage, establishing workplace committees) with creative direct action, street theatre and protest (against, for example, privatisation in the public health service and cuts in welfare provision); the hosting of meetings with small groups of workers in informal settings (houses, bars, community centres, car parks); and link with community organisations to instigate local community based projects. Home-helps, migrant factory and agricultural workers, café, hotel and bar staff, recycling plant employees, as well as public service NHS workers have added to the ranks of the organisation. Furthermore, counter to claims of inherent migrant

worker passivity, in several areas and workplaces, significantly in the north of Ireland, it has been for unionised migrant workers who have been winning contracts and improved conditions for themselves and their Irish born colleagues. For the IWU, these activities led it to adopt a form of community unionism in certain aspects of its organisation and activities.

Community trade unionism is distinct from unionising the community and voluntary 'sector' towards which both Unison and SIPTU recently employed officials. Rather it recognises that in any working class neighbourhood today in Ireland: i) people are as likely to be unemployed as in work and there are a number of broader social and class issues impacting on people that the union movement must engage with; ii) working people are likely to be employed by a plethora of different individual businesses. This highlights the extent to which in the absence of a large industrialised workforce with its everyday place-based collectivism (walking through the same gates and sharing shifts, canteens and breaks), efforts must be made at the neighbourhood level to enable solidarity between currently disparate workplace struggles and issues confronting friends and family. It may not be surprising that the approach has been most popular in two areas of Derry and Belfast in the north of Ireland with stubbornly high unemployment and associated social problems but also with a strong history of resistance to a state sponsored discrimination which manifested itself in civil rights marches through to armed insurrection. This brings us to the additional challenge of community trade union organising in the North especially where the state reproduction of sectarian division manifests itself in the polarisation of working class communities and, within these, localised structures linked to political party or paramilitary interests<sup>2</sup> that often militate against class solidarity. The task for a militant trade union seeking to make Connolly's and Larkin's socialist labour legacies meaningful to communities emerging from a tradition of militarist Republicanism is not to be underestimated<sup>3</sup>. While rearticulating this legacy, the IWU seeks at the same time to appeal to working class Protestants, understandably

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<sup>2</sup> This often may mean violence or the threat of it as a means of dealing with dissent.

<sup>3</sup> It can be argued that James Larkin founded what at the time was a distinctive labour movement in Europe in that it was not only committed to national autonomy (independence from Britain) but one of its strands eventually developed an anti-capitalist politics and organising strategy. A syndicalist union, the ITGWU – Irish Transport and General Workers' Union – was formed by Larkin in 1908. In 1913, Connolly, a member of the ITGWU since 1910, founded the Irish Citizens' Army (ICA) to support workers involved in strike activities in Dublin. The ICA developed out of even more radical currents in the ITGWU, principally in Dublin. The ICA is considered to have been the first socialist trade union militia. It played a significant role in the Dublin insurrection in 1916.

cautious following 35 years of conflict, and whose political representation has been particularly reactionary.

In the public sector in the North the union, after achieving gains for community, mental health workers stepped up its campaign against privatisation in the health sector. In its conflict with management, it also challenged the accommodation between the organisation and pre-existing unions. In another area of the economy, migrant workers in a recycling plant sought union support against discrimination but soon found that formal and informal economy practices overlapped. Paramilitary threats to union members and organisers, including subsequent attacks on workers' property, have illustrated starkly the challenges to union organisation posed by the changing character of the working class in the northern part of the island.

Given also the relatively high density of union membership in the north of Ireland's public sector, it is perhaps unsurprising that the IWU has not made the large breakthrough given that recruitment of private sector and precarious workers is an arduous process. Coupling this approach, however, with the targeting of larger, rural based workplaces in geographical areas surrounding established union offices is having some success. In addition, the IWU members recently set up a workers cooperative café, arguably the first of its kind on the island, which has become both a social centre and a hub for organising activity. This development has increasingly attracted young people to the union, including the unemployed, politically committed activists, students and ideologically sympathetic Spanish, Basques and Catalans. A further and welcome challenge is linking this activists' dynamism with the ongoing requirements to service the diverse union membership within new and traditional economies. The chapter will now put the IWU's trajectory in the North in its socio-political context.

## **The Commonalities and Peculiarities of the North of Ireland**

The north of Ireland has been characterised as an economy comprising labour markets and political-spatial relationships premised upon social and political divisions around two central, determinate confessional identities and habitation boundaries (Maguire 1988; Shirlow and Murtagh 2006; McVeigh 2007). This is crucial to understanding migrant worker experiences at work, home and in the community. For more than eighty years, from the foundations of the state in Northern Ireland in

1920, labour market migration was predominantly that of emigration to Britain and its other former colonies but after European enlargement in 2004 the local labour market expanded with the arrival of 21–25,000 migrants from the new EU countries. This resulted in the region exhibiting one of the UK's highest concentrations of 'new' migrant workers from EU countries, although the overall share of migrant workers remains relatively low (DEL 2009). Attempting to make sense of the implications of the rapid and distinctive pattern of migration for new workers and their families and communities in the north is the basis of the research. Here we explore some initial findings from the Migrant Workers' Research Network (MWRN) project based in Belfast and Armagh. While the overwhelming majority of people in the network came to the North after 2004, a smaller number came from Africa, South America, and other European countries prior to this date.

While there is significant research into migrants' experiences of coming to the North, including encounters with long term residents, this often reveals experiences not dissimilar to that of migrants elsewhere in the UK and the Republic of Ireland (Lentin 2009). Moreover, published work deriving from interviews has tended to rely on links with individuals tied into existing networks established by NGOs and trade unions (Jarman 2004; 2006, McVeigh op. cit.). While this continues to yield vitally important insights, these studies arguably feature a disproportionately high number of 'supported', English speaking, work secure and trade union protected migrant workers (inter alia, Bell et al. 2004; 44% of surveyed were in the health service and 44% were in a trade union). One of the objectives of the approach adopted here was to bypass well established networks to reach precarious and less 'visible' migrant workers. This would then allow us to explore the extent to which a well known and accepted definition of the labour market and spatial-living arrangements in the North, specifically sectarianism, impacts on their lives.

In addition, we are also concerned with developing an understanding of wider experiences of 'moving here' and as such we will begin by unpacking a range of other (beyond sectarian) themes, some of which are typical of the disruption caused by migration. Wills *et al.* (2009) explain new migrants' position in the political economy of London in terms of a hierarchy of the division of labour, with migrants occupying specific occupational roles and in particular sectors. We develop this, taking into account that occupational segregation by ethnicity also impacts on hierarchies *within* the workplace: If Wills *et al.* account for migrants' place-of-work (the type of work migrants do) is crucial, this also needs to be linked to an account of place-in-work (social hierarchy). Further, while globalisation has overseen the increasing

casualisation and deregulation of employment, labour processes and hierarchies vary depending on regional histories and social structure (Huws 2007) and in the North there is another feature of the migrant division of labour which is defined here as the sectarian division of labour. Clearly, this predates recent migration and, while traditionally a Catholic/Protestant division, its reproduction now draws in new workers whose experience of community and employment becomes shaped by it. It affects how migrants are viewed and treated and this paper explores their perceptions of this. In this regard, the paper also raises questions concerning the idea of 'community' including the notion, sometimes taken for granted by critical theorists, that it is of itself a 'good place', allowing for, while promoting, positive social relationships (See important research work reported in Holgate 2005; Holgate et al. 2012). Yet our research points up the salient and occasionally overlooked fact that communities are also spaces in which competition for 'place' can be exclusivist and subordinating not least for new entrants. Moreover, this very fact suggests that new entrants also may be faced with long term residents whose sense of place is constantly being renewed in the face of perceived challenges from those outside in other long established communities. This is where sectarian social and spatial relations become significant for it implies that migrant workers may be faced by already existing dynamics of competition over local social space. Indeed, one feature of the political economy of the North that sustains this sectarian spatial fix has been the creation of a 'political class' derived from community conflict (below).

Below, after a discussion of methodology, we discuss the two phases in the development of the political economy of the north of Ireland which define the context of the study. In considering a range of problems confronting migrant workers, we will consider the question of responses to migrant worker needs. The first, related to the above, is that a focus principally upon work and employment, precisely because it ignores the totality of a migrant worker's experience, will be limited since it presumes the separation of the nature of work from an examination of extra work concerns (Of note here is the recent discussion by Ciupijus 2011, of worker migration and labour market trajectories of Central Eastern European workers). Second and closely related, in addressing migrant workers' problems as though these can be ultimately accommodated by extant work and employment regimes, labour organisations risk a range of settlements that not only take these regimes for granted but fail to properly indentify, and thus engage with, prospects for wider structural change. *The research highlighted that the potential for significant engagement between native and migrant workers necessary for progress in labour relations and any wider structural change is often hampered by pre-existing forms of social closure (sectarian social and cultural*

*divisions*). While our central theme precludes a more sustained examination of mainstream union agendas, nevertheless, we can say that new, insecure, including migrant, workers, require determined and *atypical* trade union responses; that is, a political agenda reaching out to questions of the character of northern Irish society. But first we turn to our methodology which unusually involved migrant workers as participants rather than objects of knowledge. To understand the background to migration to the north of Ireland we locate it in the context of the impact of neo liberalism on the sectarian state. We then address the character of the North's migrant division of labour followed by an account of migrant workers' employment experiences in the relation to questions of passivity, resistance, solidarity. Finally we consider what we describe as 'subordination *plus*': parochialism, territorialism, racism, sectarianism and the consequences of these for family, community and social life: life-beyond-work.

## Methodology

The active research nature of our work places participants at the centre of a common effort to, in the words of Freire (1973), 'understand the reality which we seek to transform'. Rather than being the 'object' of research (De Tona and Lentin 2010), the participants are subjects in extending knowledge of her or his own experience and through the project, sharing this with other participants in order to overcome potentially individualised anxieties or insecurities, transform relationships and experiences, imagine new ways of finding community, and build networks of support, solidarity and resilience.

With the support of a community based trade union with links to several employment sectors with strong migrant worker representation, a group of 13 people from eight nationalities attended a workshop in Armagh City in April 2010. The research focus, methodology and outcomes of what became known as the Migrant Workers' Research Network (MWRN) were agreed while individuals' contributions to the design of the study, their participation in the research and its delivery was invited. Significant time was spent discussing both the nature of research and the most effective way to engage migrant workers in precarious employment. Under the themes of migration, work, family and community life participants worked in groups of four devising relevant questions. These were summarised in a set of final questions, circulated to all for approval forming the basis of the semi-structured interviews.

People agreed to work in pairs to set up two to four focus groups engaging five to six participants each with an experience of migration and precarious employment in the North. A lead researcher was available for support for each meeting. The workshop group decided that individuals whose stories were particularly representative or poignant would be invited for a more detailed interview and would be, with agreement, filmed<sup>4</sup>. Film was chosen as a way to present given situations and pose problems to an audience with the intent of prompting discussion with people in similar circumstances, neighbourhoods or workplaces film with a view to a creative and collective search for solutions (Solorzano 1989). In doing so participants' experiences and ideas may reflect a reclamation of notions of citizenship, identity and rights (Standing 2009) including the challenges to organisations and contemporary labourist models of social reproduction (Harvey 2010; Wills et al. 2009).

Following our non-mainstream approach to conventional labour and voluntary sector institutions, participants in MWRN, by contrast, used the snowball technique to reach precarious workers outside well-established, visible networks. An example of the success of the approach was the involvement of participants, first invited to a focus group, who themselves set up new focus groups and subsequently presented outcomes from the research. This had the benefit of uncovering the precarious living and working experiences of those seeking employment in the North together with their perceptions of what it means to enter an already divided society.

Over a period of eight months, 92 people, from Liberia, Nigeria, Spain, Ghana, Romania, Poland, Lithuania, Brazil, Portugal, Czech Republic, Cameroon and Slovakia participated in focus group sessions held in cafes, community centres, fast food car parks, kitchens and living rooms. Eight people provided in depth interviews for a film that to date has been shown in four community settings thus opening dialogue between the participants, the community or labour organiser, policy maker and the academy.

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<sup>4</sup> See film, *The New Workers*.

## Neo-liberalism and the Sectarian Welfare State of Northern Ireland – Background to Migration in the North of Ireland

The situation facing migrant workers and the context for our research is the neo-liberal restructuring of the sectarian welfare state of Northern Ireland (SWSNI). It is necessary briefly to identify the nature of the SWSNI and political economy as it has emerged from a protracted civil insurgency which began in 1968 and ending, formally, with the Good Friday Agreement (GFA) in 1998. We then consider the impact of this history principally on new migrant workers moving to the North beginning 2004 as a consequence of the rise of neo-liberal work and employment regimes which were important contributory factors in the flight of labour from CEE countries (Ciupijus 2011).

This is a story, in part, of the sectarian welfare state meeting the new era of neo-liberal transformation in which the old social settlement of 1945 (the rise of the Keynesian Welfare State) and 1998 (GFA) has been disrupted, if not (yet) abandoned, by a tide of neo liberalism dispensed by London and the Northern Ireland Assembly. Moreover, in addition to communities facing the neo-liberal challenge, a new political class whose roots lie within divided communities, was given institutional backing in 1998 and together with the attendant social and economic relationships supported by the state, is now under threat from UK neo-liberal state strategies. This is important to note because state and society in the North still reflect enduring social divisions founded on an historic compromise between the dominant parties of Ulster Unionism and Irish Nationalism which the new political class reflects.

The Sectarian Welfare State of Northern Ireland (SWSNI) has had two phases. The first beginning after 1945, SWSNI-1, was marked by the adaptation of British Keynesian welfare state strategies designed for social and economic inclusion to the institutions of the Northern Ireland Orange State, *sui generis* (O'Dowd et al 1980). Keynesian policies of social inclusion sat, antagonistically, alongside the state repressive apparatuses founded upon the social and economic exclusion of northern Irish Catholics (*inter alia*, Coulter and Murray 2008 *op cit*). While the civil insurgency which began in 1968 would effectively end with the harnessing of this particular pattern of subordination the UK government extended elements of Keynesianism in order to maintain employment in the face of social and economic

sclerosis accompanying the civil insurgency. This was a key feature of the second phase, SWSNI-2 which began in 1998 with the Belfast Agreement, and it has been marked by the institutionalisation of sectarian political. This is codified by the deHont principles defining the distribution of political patronage in the Stormont (government) Assembly. This has depended upon the creation of what has been described as a new political class (Shirlow and Murtagh 2007) providing the social and institutional relationships with significant leverage over the disbursement of state (EU, UK and Republic of Ireland) funding for community associations linked to Protestant and Irish Nationalist community networks: in local parlance, 'the price of peace'.

Specifically, the European Union Special Peace Programme for Northern Ireland allocated some €1995 million (EU component €1335 million) between 1995–2013 to encourage stable economic development and community cohesion. From 1995–1999, 13,000 projects received support and the Special Programme included a specific budget for ex-prisoner groups to encourage 'conflict prevention and transformation'. By 2003 a total of 61 political ex-prisoner groups and a further 29 affiliated projects received €9.2 million from EU peace funds (Shirlow et al 2005) reflecting both the high percentage of the population who are politically motivated ex-prisoners (14–31% of the male population; Jamieson, Shirlow and Grounds 2010) and, by offering a stake in the new dispensation, sustained political concern for the survival of the 'peace process' (McKeever and O'Rawe 2007).

This is important in describing some key aspects of the background to labour market and extra labour market concerns facing migrant workers. It also serves the purpose of explaining one aspect of the IWU's mobilising agenda we focus upon migrants' experiences in work. We address these through the prism of 'place', 'passivity', 'resistance', 'solidarity'. First however, we consider briefly the character of the migrant division of labour in the context of the North.

## **The Migrant Division of Labour and the Migrant Division of Labour in the North of Ireland**

By 2008, 25,000 public sector jobs had been created since the GFA and the region was enjoying the greatest increase in employment in the UK, with 10,000 new jobs per year being created (DEL 2009). Economic inactivity levels in certain working class neighborhoods however remained stubbornly high. The manufacturing and

hospitality sectors were among the key destination workplaces for migrant workers, and these typically lay outside of organised union sectors and specifically the public sector, especially with the decline in traditional, male, blue collar employment (shipbuilding, engineering and aircraft). Again, their concentration in low-skilled and low wage jobs despite a relatively high level of education is consistent with findings across the UK (ONS, DETI 2009).

The predominance of manufacturing, hospitality, food processing, as a route to employment was reflected in the labour market destinations of our research participants. Moreover, many of the labour process issues they confronted are to be found in other places, with intensification, increasing casualisation and insecurity (and some hostility from locals) typical of this current phase of neo-liberalism. Indeed, the concentration of migrant workers in some of manufacturing industries was such that new arrivals expressed surprise at the nationality of their colleagues,

*When we first arrived we went to one English class, but didn't go back, because most people at work were Portuguese. [Igues, Brazil]*

And as Barbara [Poland] found,

*Russian is very useful! I have to say that when I came here I had thought I had some basic English I would work with English speaking people I would learnt few new words a week so I would learnt English quickly. I started my work on the farm and as turned out I had to refresh quickly all the Russian that I had learnt 9–10 years ago and it came very handy!*

## **Migrant Worker Experiences in Work 'Place', Passivity, Resistance, Solidarity**

The research suggests that migrant workers are far from passive since in a number of sectors they are actively engaged in protecting labour rights and fighting iniquitous employment conditions. For example:

*I was a member of trade union in Poland – Solidarność. But I wasn't active. Here life taught me to be active. We had enough of our manager. And we were there from*

*the start and we knew what was going on and that somewhere wages were better or conditions were better. I am shop steward here [Joanna, Poland].*

And for Gosia [Poland]

*'There was no union at work. Nobody had contracts but we joined the union. The manager heard some people had joined and shouted and said he would find out who had joined. But after some time we told him we wanted contracts and now everything is much better. I believe that if you want something and you know you are right, you should go and get it. We didn't lose our jobs. People shouldn't be afraid. We got contracts for everyone, even the Irish, everyone, for almost 200 people.'*

Finding themselves isolated at work or undermined by workplace segregation, migrant workers offer a telling critique of society in the North: revealing one aspect of limits to practical work place resistance in a sectarian society. This is important because despite the nature of the North's otherwise highly politicised 'equalities rights' culture there remain gaps more usually served by sectarian politics. One significant case from the fieldwork exemplifies the relationship between 'typical' managerial paternalism, worker competition and sectarian division. This complexity presents further problems for migrant workers fighting for better working conditions and what makes it especially notable is that for many participants, it is local workers who have eroded work place protection leaving many migrant workers exposed to unfair treatment.

This was illustrated in recent case work by the IWU at a recycling plant in Belfast. Lithuanian workers in dispute with management found that unionisation and improved conditions were being undermined by local workers (who maintain the practice of separate indigenous-migrant respite rooms). Specifically, in highlighting victimisation as a result of a fight for improved conditions one of the migrants argued that, 'Only the Lithuanian guys at work will support me... the others [indigenous].. no chance'. (Vaidas)

This subordination – 'divide and rule' – was highlighted by the instance when a Lithuanian worker attempted to ask an Irish colleague where he kept his mobile phone (after Lithuanian workers had been instructed they must keep theirs in their car), only to be instructed 'forcefully' by the manager that he was not to ask any questions of other staff. The effect of this oppressive managerial approach, which, following Burawoy (1986) we term despotic, combined with an absence of any workplace solidarity from co-'native' workers as was soon demonstrated. After the workers were informed that working hours were to be reduced to a three-day week when the company allegedly lost a contract, one Lithuanian worker was advised to

ask the employer what contract was lost, as it appeared there had been no reduction in waste coming through the company. He replied, laughing, 'no chance, if we can't ask a co worker where he keeps his phone, how are we going to question management?' The fact of migrant-led union organisation in spite of indigenous worker passivity, or indeed hostility, was reinforced by 'L',

At 11am in the food processing plant, the machines were stopped, all staff called to the central floor as the manager brandished a union form. He told staff he would find out who was behind this, threatened them that the company had its own solicitors and it was illegal to join a union<sup>5</sup> if you had not worked for two years or more in the plant.

Nonetheless, Lithuanian workers in the plant organised, raised a collective grievance and gained contracts for everyone, significantly reducing supervisor bullying while obtaining health and safety assurances. Despite the relatively large workforce (almost 90) and large number of 'native' born workers, contact between foreign and locally born staff remains limited.

Indeed, and notwithstanding the optimism presented in these testimonies, the difficulty of forging workplace co-operation-cum-solidarities is a common theme and friendships at work are described more often as 'superficial' acquaintances that are difficult to sustain. This has the effect of leaving workers to reflect on the larger structural and social peculiarities of the North and their impact on work and social and family life. Thus, migrant workers are confronting a range of subordinations at work (place) and space (hierarchy) but these in turn are refracted through the sectarian nature of the North which also continues to reproduce relatively static spaces of habitation. As Shirlow and Murtagh (op. cit.) have demonstrated, Protestants and Catholics continue to live where they always lived ('more or less') and incomers must accommodate to this ('more or less') but for sure, migrants will find that their often less desirable accommodation will dovetail with their lower status in job hierarchies and outside already existing and often intergenerational and sectarian friendship networks.

So while Wills significantly identifies the *places* where migrants work, it is still the case that where they are positioned *in* these 'places' matters. Thus we find that where indigenous workers were present alongside migrant workers often the division of labour extends to a hierarchy of roles or duties within the workplace, as was expressed by Dan, from Romania,

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<sup>5</sup> An entirely spurious pretext on which to intimidate workers since industrial relations in the north follow UK law.

*I worked through an agency, in the big supermarkets. The Irish workers were full time staff. The agency workers were Russian, Polish, Romanian, Brazilian and it was ok, but we did the heavy work and nights.*

Indeed, when we attempt to link workplace subordination to the peculiarities of civil society in the North, we see immediately that the normal terms by which we might refer to the interaction between work and life require additional refinement. We now turn to a brief discussion and conclusion

## Discussion and Conclusion

Since the end of the 20th century the changing secular composition of the working class, in part wrought by the current phase of neo-liberalism, has been creating new difficulties for labour organisations that grew out of the post war fordist Keynesian compromise. In Ireland, North and South, patterns of trade union affiliation derived from the respective trajectories of very different types of dependent, subordinate variants of welfare state economies, have been severely tested. The Irish labour movement never fully recovered from the division of the country in 1920 and its over-eager pleading to be heard in the councils of the powerful (labourist welfarism now under assault in the North, side by side with a humiliated labour sponsorship of Social Partnership, in the South) only serves to demonstrate its many current political limitations. This is of course despite the many brave commitments of union members on both sides of the border. The new political economies in the North and South, differences notwithstanding, require a redrawing of the boundaries of precarious employment, extending into the welfare state (historically more limited in the South and more recently febrile than in the North) through privatisation, 'flexibility' and work intensification. Since the sociological basis of the labour movement(s) has changed and while in the North, especially in the period since the Good Friday Agreement 1998, it has been dependent largely on the maintenance of the public sector, trade unions need to find new sources of vitality on the basis of where their potential new memberships reside. In this chapter the concern has been to describe the innovative approach of the IWU in the North to organising and mobilising although throughout the island of Ireland, the union strategises in a variety of ways, including by means of more conventional mobilisation strategies. Moreover, in the North, a considerable time is also devoted to servicing of the union's small but growing membership. In fact, the recent origins of the IWU arise from a crisis for labour,

together with its organisations, in the new world of neo-liberalism. This is putting increasing pressure on worker organisations that have grown up during the period of post Second World War reconstruction in Western Europe and the outworking of what is known as the Keynesian social settlement. It is a tough world for labour today, with both its economic-workplace and forms of political representation in crisis. Yet it also means that the trade union commitment to remake the world as it was in the post-war period, with highly centralised labour unions committed to retaining ever diminishing Keynesian social settlements, is highly problematical. It would be good if this were possible, notably in the public sector in the North, to retain worker and citizen hard fought gains and rights. But so many workers in the new neo-liberal world labour beyond this environment without mainstream labour movement support. Organisation, solidarity and positive gains are required for these workers too. In Ireland, as elsewhere today, these workers will be migrants and living and working in communities with greater or lesser degrees of 'resources for hope' (Williams). This is a key constituency to which the IWU is responding.

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