

General Workers' Union calls for action on irregular migrant work

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The General Workers' Union has formulated a policy document outlining its stance on the controversial issue of migrant workers in Malta. Framing the situation within Malta's European context, the union outlines a number of difficulties relating to this issue. The recommendations of the European Trade Union Confederation and the Pan-European Regional Council of trade unions serve as a platform for the proactive approach advocated in the document.

In September 2008, the General Workers' Union (GWU (<http://www.gwu.org.mt>)), Malta's largest trade union, published a policy document entitled Migrant workers (in Maltese, 260Kb PDF) (http://www.gwu.org.mt/documents/Migrants_Workers_Paper_110908.pdf), outlining the union's position on the issue of immigrant workers in Malta. According to the GWU paper, the steady influx of migrants without work permits from the north African coast threatens to destabilise the working conditions and standard of living which Maltese workers have managed to acquire over the years.

Immigrant workers vulnerable to exploitation

In the first nine months of 2008, about 2,400 illegal migrants arrived in Malta. This figure exceeds the annual birth rate on the island by 60%. The majority of immigrants living in Malta enjoy freedom of movement and a work permit, which entitles them to seek regular employment. However, the GWU document notes that many of these immigrants, adopting an attitude that 'a little is better than nothing', fall victim to exploitative practices at the hands of local employers, especially in the construction sector. Besides paying the workers wages that are far below the national minimum wage, these unscrupulous employers sometimes disregard occupational health and safety (<http://www.eurofound.europa.eu/ef/observatories/eurwork/industrial-relations-dictionary/health-and-safety>) standards. Furthermore, as these workers are not registered officially, they are not entitled to benefits such as paid leave and sick leave.

Irregular workers accept these conditions for fear of losing the little income that they are earning. The GWU paper also points out that regular co-workers may be afraid to report cases of undeclared work (<http://www.eurofound.europa.eu/ef/observatories/eurwork/industrial-relations-dictionary/undeclared-work>) as they would not wish to risk being made redundant. As a result, not only are the irregular workers being deprived of their rights, but ultimately the jobs and working conditions (<http://www.eurofound.europa.eu/ef/observatories/eurwork/industrial-relations-dictionary/working-conditions>) of Maltese workers are at risk. The document indicates that GWU is particularly concerned about the work of its members, and it acknowledges that one way of protecting such work is by improving the working conditions of migrant workers.

Proactive stance against irregular employment

Rather than taking a stand against the employment of irregular immigrants, the GWU paper insists that 'in the world of work, all workers, whomsoever they are, whether they are local or migrant workers, deserve all respect'. This respect ensures a level playing field for all current and prospective workers, hence guaranteeing their rights. Moreover, the document adopts the principles endorsed by the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC (<http://www.etuc.org>)) and the recommendations put forward by the Pan-European Regional Council (PERC (<http://perc.ituc-csi.org/spip.php?rubrique1&lang=en>)) of trade unions within the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC (<http://www.ituc-csi.org/>)).

GWU seeks to project a positive view of illegal immigrants as resourceful individuals who can enrich the host country both culturally and economically, particularly if they possess skills that are in big demand in the labour market. These principles and recommendations are condensed in a number of points that underline the responsibilities of trade unions, employers and the government.

Focusing on the local scenario, GWU takes it upon itself to 'be at the forefront in order to campaign vigorously so the recommendations listed... will be truly implemented'. The union proposes a 12-point action plan, starting with the formation of a working group to properly investigate the situation regarding immigration. Other measures include a nationwide campaign that addresses racial discrimination and advocates integration, the exertion of pressure on the authorities to evaluate the skills of migrant workers, and the naming and shaming of employers that exploit migrant workers.

Positive contribution of immigrant workers

The GWU document concludes that, once they are employed regularly, migrant workers will, 'like all workers, contribute to the economic welfare of the state'. Through their fiscal contributions, such workers will actually generate money in the economy rather than drain the country's limited financial resources. Since irregular immigrants will have an impact on the local economy, the paper urges practical collective action as a preferred option to inaction.

Views of employer groups

The opinions of GWU on this matter are generally shared by the other social partners. Commenting on the policy document, the Malta Employers' Association (MEA (<http://www.maltaemployers.com>)) and the Malta Federation of Industry (FOI (<http://www.foi.org.mt/>)) conceded that they were aware that some employers recruited immigrants illegally. These employer organisations also expressed concern that such practice is leading to unfair competition for the employers which only employ workers within the law. MEA argued that more law enforcement should be carried out in order to reduce illegal practices. For their part, FOI and the Malta Chamber of Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (GRTU (<http://www.grtu.org.mt/data>)) declared that they are ready to hold discussions with the trade unions and government in order to provide solutions for the issue of immigrant workers.

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