

Solidarity and community among migrant and local workers

Dr Natalia Slutskaia and Professor Katie Bailey

University of Sussex

The TUC reports that migrant workers make a net contribution of £2bn a year to the UK economy (TUC, 2016). According to the 2011 Workplace Employment Relations Study, a significant number of workplaces employ non-UK nationals, 23.3% of small organisations, 43.1% of medium and 37.7% of large organisations (Hurrell, 2014). Overall, the number of foreign-born people of working age in the UK has risen to around 7 million, with the share of foreign citizens in work amounting to 10.7% in 2015 (<http://www.migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/resources/briefings/migrants-in-the-uk-labour-market-an-overview/#kp1>). Even though we are leaving the EU, the UK will still be totally reliant on foreign workers and a large number of UK workplaces will continue to employ a multi-national workforce.

Employers often cite the higher level of skills and work ethic of migrant workers as being among the key reasons for their recruitment (CIPD, 2013). However, the experiences of migrant workers are likely to be very different from those of local workers. For example, according to the TUC, migrant workers are often unaware of their legal rights and are in consequence at greater risk of exploitation than are local workers (www.tuc.org.uk/migration). They are more likely to be clustered into so-called precarious 3-D jobs (dangerous, demanding, dirty) than their local peers (Pajnik, 2016). This may be particularly true in countries with a neo-liberal approach to employment regulation such as the UK. The TUC has called for migrants to be treated in the same way as local workers in terms of pay, conditions and contracts of employment (TUC, undated).

Case studies conducted by the TUC point to the continuing concern that migrant workers are not only in danger of exploitation by unscrupulous employers, but also risk social and cultural exclusion among their working colleagues due, for example, to language difficulties which hamper integration in the workplace (TUC, undated). Alongside this, there is evidence that some communities are becoming fragmented, with migrants suffering from abuse and attack (TUC, 2016). Migrant workers are therefore exposed to the potential for exclusion both within the workplace and within wider society due to the interplay of a range of formal and informal factors (Rodriguez and Mearns, 2012).

Although the TUC (2016) has highlighted the need for strong and cohesive communities where locals and migrants alike feel integrated and involved, cohesion among locals and migrants within the workplace itself is also vitally important. Migrant workers can face a range of barriers accessing union membership and representation in the same way as their peers, for example, due to their often precarious and separate status as the 'outsider within' and potential incompatibility of interests (Rodriguez and Mearns, 2012: 586).

However, research has suggested that a sense of cohesion and associational solidarity among workers is important not only for securing employment rights, but also for individual wellbeing and ability to cope with increasing work-related pressures and strains (Fineman and Sturdy, 2001). Literature shows that employees often rely on establishing informal oral-based communities of coping within a workplace as

an important collective survival and resistance strategy (Korczynski, 2003). Associational solidarity can potentially reduce the level of staff turnover, increase employees' commitment to work, and help in dealing with stress (Korczynski, 2003). Whilst scholars stress the importance of associational solidarity, they also note that the communities of coping associated with this form of solidarity could be easily disrupted if migrant workers remain inadequately integrated in the workplace and local communities. Scholars call for re-imagining solidarity by recommending that unions should include such discussions as minority interests (interests that directly affect only a sub-section of the workers) (Simms, 2011) and concerns and solidarities that could unite workers beyond their workplace (Simms, 2011).

Why this contribution matters:

The review needs to take account not only of employment practices themselves, but also of the increasingly heterogeneous nature of the workforce. Individuals' experiences of work arise in a social context and employers should consider how the policies they enact impact not only on individual workers, but also on workplace dynamics. A large number of workplaces are multi-cultural, and finding ways to ensure both fair and equitable treatment across divergent groups, as well as fostering a *cohesive and welcoming environment, is critical both for individual workers, whether local or migrant, and for employers.*

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