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Migrant workers: time to tackle their problem

Draw up a list of the dozen most dangerous or dirtiest jobs and the chances are you will find most of them being filled by immigrant workers from outside the Community.

The immigrants, in addition, generally have to work unsocial hours; they are badly paid and they are the first to be made redundant in times of recession.

They live mainly in ghettoes, they are exploited by employers and landlords and are sometimes harrassed by the police. Their problems multiply if they have entered the Community illegally.

These workmen, mainly from North Africa, Spain, Portugal, Yugoslavia, Turkey and Greece have all come to Western Europe in recent years to toil at some of the most demanding jobs that frequently are the backbone of industrialized economies.

They come because job opportunities at home are limited, because there were vacancies in Europe and because they hope to make enough to feed their families at home or to enable their children to acquire a higher education in the West.

These third country migrant workers as they have been called, number about six million and represent some 5% of the labour force in the European Community countries. The families that also joined these workers in Europe bring the total of foreign residents to some 12,5 million.

The fact that their conditions of residence still vary from one Community country to another is a problem that the European Commission in Brussels would like to discuss and if possible to change so that national laws and situation are more identical.

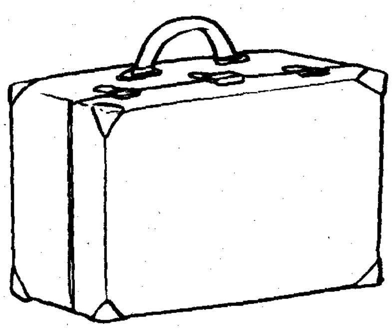
Recruiting of foreign workers has virtually ceased and the experts feel that now may be the best time to try achieve some general Community-wide policies in this field.

In a few years, the situation will be further complicated by the fact that Greece, Portugal and Spain—three traditional places of origin for foreign workers—will be entering the Community and will be on the way to acquiring unlimited access to all nine Member States.

This would cause additional pressures on the already tense industrial labour situation in the Community, where there are currently six million—ironically equal to the number of third country migrant workers—unemployed.

European Commission Vice-President Henk Vredeling, who is in charge of social and employment affairs, observed in a London speech recently that 'the distorted development brought about by the uncontrolled migration of the fifties and sixties faces society with serious consequences...'

But he adds that, currently, 'we have a breathing space which will enable us to consider the situation and lay down a new line of approach'.



What is being sought is a joint policy if possible on problems connected with foreign workers and their families. This approach would cover such matters as the training of migrant workers returning to their homeland, illegal entry and employment in the Community, the resumption of recruiting from outside the Community when the economies of some Member States make it necessary, the re-unification of families in the host country, and a number of other questions involving international treaties and accords.

In addition the Commission has proposed five principles that should be considered during these discussions. They are: the need to ensure equality of treatment for workers from third countries who live regularly in the Community, the need to provide for the professional development of members of their families, the requirement that trade unions and employers be included in such policy negotiations, the prevention of illegal immigration and punishment of those who encourage it, and the need to consider the policies of the Member States if there is a resumption of recruitment of workers from outside the Community.

What these negotiations would focus on would be ways of unifying the policies of the Nine on a number of specific legal and social areas. These would range from the conditions for entry and stay in a Community country to the welfare of the migrants and their families, including social security, housing, health and training.

Another related issue which should also be examined at the same time would be possible problems incurred by citizens of Community countries and their families who live and work in non-Community countries.

In discussing the need to work out an organized system of dealing with the issues, Commissioner Vredeling has warned against the simple-minded reaction that would resolve the unemployment problem in the Community by simply throwing out the foreign workers.

He emphazised that the right of free movement granted by the Community at its creation was economically necessary and the 'fulfillment of a great ideal' of opening national frontiers.

It should also not be forgotten, he added, that foreign workers have and are continuing to contribute to 'keeping our production going and powering our standard of living'.

Fund spends £380m. to aid 1m. workers

With the increase in employment problems throughout Europe, national Community governments have been stepping up efforts to assist their working population to find jobs.

The European Community's Social Fund can help. When national governments give financial assistance to training programmes or other remedial measures in their own countries, they can also turn to Brussels for aid.

This is what happened in 1978 with increasing regularity. The result was that the Community Social Fund had more requests for assistance than the funds the Member States had voted for such purposes.

The Community gave out the £380 million but had requests for about twice that amount. According to the rules decided upon by the Council of Ministers, the Social Fund can cover up to 50% of the expenses incurred by public authorities in the Member States.

In 1978 this type of Community intervention helped about one million persons throughout the nine countries. Nearly half of the total Community assistance given out was especially designed to benefit people in the hardesthit regions of the Community.

Some 31% went for programmes destined for young people and the rest for women, the handicapped, migrant workers and workers in agriculture and the textile industry.

These categories of persons are among the high priority targets of the Community Social Fund. For the first time the Fund was able to act to aid training programmes for women seeking work and it will be able to undertake additional measures to assist employment of young people in 1979.

INDUSTRY

£36 million loans to give workers better housing

Guest, Keen and Nettlefolds in Cardiff are to receive a 20 year European Community loan—at a reduced interest rate of 1%—of over £57 000 to help them build 31 houses for their employees. The money is part of a £36 million programme being carried out by the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC) to support the construction of houses for people working in the coal and steel industries.

The latest decision also covers a number of projects in other Community countries. In Germany, the funds made available total DM 1 887 143, in Luxembourg FL 2 100 000, France FF 5 447 500, Belgium FB 7 740 000 and Denmark Dkr 790 000.

Founded in 1952, the European Coal and Steel Community is the oldest of the three European Communities. The other two, the European Economic Community and Euratom, first saw the light of day in 1958.

Over the last 25 years coal mining in the Nine has had many ups and downs. In the early 1950s, it was a key industry in Western Europe and a necessary element of economic growth. Five years later, however, the oil boom plunged it into crisis and as demand declined so production fell by almost a half and the workforce shrank considerably.

During this period, the ECSC gave aids to pits in difficulties and established a system of Community aid which enabled governments to cover losses and avoid social or regional problems from untimely pit closures.

This phase lasted until 1973 when the impact of the oil crisis and the need to lessen the Community's dependence on imported energy saw a certain turn for the better in the fortunes of the coal industry, although difficulties still persisted with the general economic stagnation and the crisis in the steel industry.

Between 1954 and 1977 the ECSC made loans totalling £3,2 billion. It finances its operations by means of a levy on coal and steel production and by borrowing funds on the capital market.

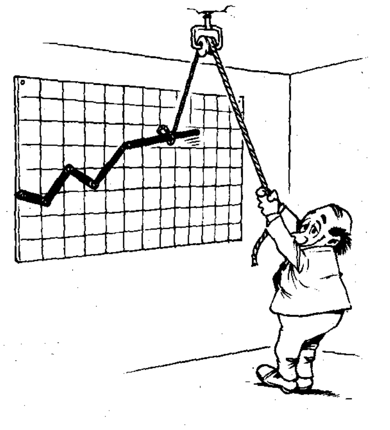
On the industrial front, the ECSC has given loans valued at over 20% of the total investment made by Europe's coal and steel companies. Between 1975 and 1977 the steel industry received over £1,2 billion and approximately £370 million was paid out to the coal industry during the same period.

In addition, the ECSC grants loans for purely social and regional purposes. It supports reconversion programmes that will provide alternative employment to people made redundant through structural changes. Over the last three years it is estimated to have created 11 500 jobs in this way. Meanwhile, the number of houses built and part-financed by the ECSC stands at over 150 000.

Our factories are still producing more

The industrial production index for the European Community reached 112 last year—a 2.3% increase over the 1977 figure. This growth rate compares with yearly rises of 2.2% and 7.3% recorded in 1977 and 1976 respectively (1975 is considered as the base year of 100).

But this increase was not evenly spread throughout the year. In the first six months the rate of expansion of industrial production fell sharply, while in the second half of 1978 the rate of growth accelerated steadily. By the end of the year the improved trends in industrial production appeared to be well established and commentators expected further expansion in the early months of 1979.



This general Community pattern was mirrored at the Member State level by Germany, France, Italy, the Netherlands and Luxembourg. The United Kingdom, on the other hand, has witnessed some slackening in industrial production growth during recent months, a trend, which conflicts with the noticeable upturn in production in Germany, France, Italy and Belgium over the last quarter.

IN BRIEF

The European Community is expected to have a 3.4% growth rate this year, compared with 2.8% in 1978. Predictions are that Ireland will top the Nine's growth league with 5%, followed by Italy (4.6%), Germany (4%), France (3.4%), Belgium (2.8%), Denmark (2.6%), United Kingdom (2.3%), Luxembourg (2.2%) and Netherlands (2.1%). The figures do not take into account recent oil price rises.