

IMMIGRANT WORKERS, HOUSING AND MENTAL HEALTH

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Background:

Despite all recent reports (Rowntree, RC Bishops, TUC, South Holland and Boston Local Authorities, universities, CBI, etc) and legislation (inspection of three storey houses, GLA) NOTHING has changed in the life of immigrant workers.

There is virtually NO ENFORCEMENT of existing legislation.

Local Authorities DO NOT opt in to inspections of two storey houses in rural areas.

Numbers of HiMOs are increasing because of the enormous profits to landlords.

The numbers of inspectors for GLA and Health and Safety are NOT increasing.

ESOL provisions, which would make integration (and knowledge of employment rights) much easier, are NOT increasing but decreasing.

There are still no work contracts for immigrant workers, only "casual" or "temporary" ones.

The Labour government still adamantly refuses to abolish the difference between worker and employee as demanded by the EU (one of those lovely "opt outs" which make our Lincolnshire Maggie Thatcher so proud to be British).

Gang masters continue to switch from agri- and horticulture to cleaning, caring and building jobs which are not covered by the GLA.

1.0

Minimum Wage legislation is routinely flaunted in the care, hospitality, cleaning and building industries.

Farmers and others who **DIRECTLY** employ immigrant workers are not covered by the GLA.

The Board of the GLA is packed with agro-employers and ALP members.

A number of GLA inspectors are former agro-business employees.

"British Jobs for British Workers" is a fascist and duplicitous slogan. The Labour government and the CBI acknowledge openly the British economy needs 80,000 immigrant workers per year to keep inflation and prices down. The jobs this Labour government has created for "British Workers" are all low pay/part-time minimum wage - just what CBI members want

2.0 Housing:

Gang masters are still the largest group of landlords (60%) - although often through friends or family members because they are not, in legal terms, "fit and proper" persons themselves because of criminal convictions.

Slum-landlords are allowed to join political parties and manage to become local and county councillors.

HiMOs are rapidly increasing because of the enormous profits to landlords.

More and more investors discover this easy path to riches: minimum investment-maximum profit.

The number of unregistered people living in HiMOs has increased.

3.0

The number of inspections by LAs is going down because the number of housing officers and LA Health and Safety inspectors is going down because of central government spending cuts.

The basic quality of housing is going down.

There is still overcrowding and total disregard for human dignity (single people/families with children/male-female) and even basic hygiene.

On the whole, the cost per bed per week in rural areas has stabilised (£50-£60), mainly because of increasing competition.

Hotbedding is still endemic.

A very large number of landlords do not provide proper contracts or rent books.

A large number of landlords trick workers by first stating the rent includes bills but then charge for bills on top of the rent.

In HiMOs the name of one worker is, often without their knowledge, given as the recipient of all bills.

The number of "private" citizens who are not registered landlords but run profitable from HiMOs is increasing rapidly.

A significant number of workers are robbed by fellow residents.

A very large number of workers in HiMOs pay their rent in cash.

A very large number of workers in HiMOs have their rent deducted by their gang master before they get paid in cash.

A significant number of workers (perhaps 80-90%) who work for gang masters are paid in cash and have no bank account.

4.0 Mental Health:

Only two studies so far concern themselves with immigrant workers and mental health: (Castletown / Norfolk).

Both find that housing and mental health is inextricably linked.

The findings are also born out by practitioners in the field.

30-40% of immigrant workers arrive in Britain with a debt to a gang master/ agency, ranging from £600-1500.

Many workers live in filthy and utterly inadequate conditions.

A large number of migrant workers are separated from their family.

They have to adjust to an alien environment, lacking emotional, cultural, religious and language support.

They are only able to communicate with a small number of people (usually members of their own "gang") because the gang master/landlord prevents workers from mixing with other people and does not encourage the learning of English.

The only method of keeping in touch with home is via the internet or mobile phone. Very few HiMOs have internet access and mobile phones are expensive. HiMO "residents" don't get a mobile contract because there is no proof of residence or a bank account.

If the worker does not pay off the debt to the gang master, the family back home or here are under threat of recrimination and violence.

Many workers still have to live on £20-50 per week, cash doled out by the generous gang master.

5.0

There are a significant number of cases of malnutrition among immigrant workers.

Pre-existing alcohol related illnesses are exacerbated by the situation.

Workers who do not speak English adequately cannot communicate how they feel and what their emotions are.

Most workers feel lonely and lost in an alien society whose rules they do not understand.

A significant number of workers experience racism, verbal and physical, even from officials and civil servants.

Many workers do not have the vocabulary in English to describe fears, problems, anxieties or mental problems.

Many don't have adequate concepts of mental illness in their own language because their cultures do not provide such concepts.

They speak of being melancholic or sad when they actually mean depressed.

Many workers come from countries where mental illness is still a taboo (not that we are any better in this country!).

For many immigrants, mental illness is associated with social shunning, family shame or being locked up in an institution never to be seen again.

The inability to acknowledge and verbalise mental distress combined with the terrible emotional and degrading physical conditions many immigrant workers still live in are a potent recipe for a large number of people becoming mentally ill.

6.0

And what are we doing about it? Nothing.

Are we forced to wait for this time bomb to explode?

Obviously. There is no additional money or clinical places for specialist doctors and nurses, psychiatrists and psychotherapists or English speaking people, and none who would speak Eastern European Languages or Portuguese!

Where is the training for GPs and practice nurses, social workers, teachers or police to spot signs of mental illness?

Where are the initiatives to abolish debt bondage, trafficking and other physical and emotional exploitation of foreign workers?

Where are the legislation and the ENFORCEMENT to prevent wage abuses - and worse?

When will gang mastery be made illegal? It is an abusive and exploitative system unworthy a civilised society.

And where in all this are the UNIONS?

Everybody, especially the CBI and the Labour government, are happy to harvest the fruits of immigrant labour in form of gigantic profits, taxes and other financial contributions but nobody is prepared to invest in good living conditions, good working conditions, good education, good medical care including mental health, proper wages - and the strict enforcement thereof, and a general political and economic will to acknowledge what immigrant workers are: a tremendous cultural enrichment, a vital boon for the economy and an investment for all our future.