

Migrant workers, unfree labour, and the role of labour intermediaries in the creation of flexible labour markets

Symposium :

Quelles voix/voies pour les exclus du Wagner Act ?

Non-unionized Workers' Organizations:
counter or beyond the Wagner Act?

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Trends in the UK labour market

- De-industrialisation
 - Increasing casualisation
 - Declining union density
 - Migration
- All related to the ideological, political and regulatory project of creating 'flexibility'

Flexibilisation and unfree labour

What my paper argues is that these trends have resulted in:

- Labour market polarisation;
- A resurgence in forms of unfree labour; and,
- The racialisation (*pace* Satzewich and Miles) of unfree labour.

The rise of employment agencies

- Labour intermediaries increasingly important
- Temporary and contract work increasingly common
- Legal and regulatory status, and mode of regulation, contributes to complexity in tripartite employment relationships
- Agencies are *actors* in these processes

The temporary staffing industry plays a strategically important role in delivering labor market flexibility ... and hence the sector's geographical expansion has been affected by the extent to which processes of neoliberal labor market deregulation have been pursued at both the national and macroregional scales. The industry itself has lobbied hard for such deregulation, seeing itself as a crucial facilitator of wider globalization... agencies seek to make greater inroads into the business of client companies through diversification and thereby become structural rather than cyclical tools of labor management (Ward 2003).

Coe, Johns and Ward (2007)

Gang labour in the UK

- Gangmasters are labour providers who work in the agriculture, horticulture, food processing, shellfish gathering and forestry sectors in the UK
- First emerged in the 19th century → part of the active construction of labour markets
- Long cycle of emergence, regulation, decline, and re-emergence

Gang labour as unfree labour

Treatment of gang labourers demonstrates unfreedom:

- Tied housing and transport
- Excessive deductions for equipment, clothing etc.
- Confiscation of travel documents
- Violence and intimidation

The racialisation of unfree labour

- In 19th century gang labourers were women and children
 - The majority of contemporary gang labourers are migrants from Eastern Europe and Asia
 - Unfree labour has been racialised in many sectors and hence rendered invisible
- It was only as a result of the deaths of 24 cocklepickers at Morecambe Bay in 2004 that the Gangmaster Licensing Authority was established

Unfree labour and social reproduction

- Re-emergence of unfree labour is one result of the tensions between accumulation and social reproduction
- Political necessity of cheap food
- Downward pressure from supermarkets on producer prices passed down the supply chain
- Unfree labour and racialisation therefore linked to broader processes of polarisation and increased precarity in financialised welfare states

The double movement

Two main forms of 'push-back':

- Re-regulation (e.g. GLA)
- Organising (e.g. Living Wage and Strangers into Citizens campaigns, TUC Commission on Vulnerable Work)

Challenges:

- Regulation in some sectors goes against the grain of dominant policy
- Organising successes have been geographically limited
- Unions often ill-adapted to mobile, mostly foreign workforce