

Recession, Vulnerable Workers and Immigration: a pilot study in conjunction with the Public and Civil Service Union

Background

In recent years the debates on the economic impact of migration in the UK have taken place in the context of relative economic growth and stability. The Labour government and “pro-migration” lobbyists have long argued that migrants contribute to economic growth and should be welcomed on this basis. However, there have been counter claims (largely, but not exclusively from the right) that the “costs” of migration have been disproportionately carried by low waged and unemployed UK nationals. By early 2009 the context of the migration debate had changed considerably. At times of economic recession, competition in low waged labour markets, and more generally, nationalism and racism can flourish. The slogan “British jobs for British workers”, taken up by workers and some elements of the trades union movement in early 2009 suggests that such claims may gain ground. Moreover, vulnerable workers are often found at the intersection of changing regulations to do with benefits, work and citizenship and the recession is occurring at a time of intense legislative change in both the areas of welfare benefits and immigration, change designed before the economic recession began to bite.

Aims

This pilot study aims to

- Develop a research approach (theoretical and methodological) that facilitates an analysis of the positions of migrants in low waged labour markets in relation to other low waged and marginalized groups;
- Identify a potential research agenda and research partners;
- Identify local variations as well as national impacts;
- Facilitate discussion among stakeholders around points of division and commonality, key alliances and interventions.

Methods

To achieve these aims, COMPAS will produce a discussion document summarising the state of knowledge of the recession and its impact on vulnerable workers, particularly migrants. Given the recession is widespread affecting all sectors and regions there are likely to be significant local variations. The discussion document comprises a review of published material, and an outline survey of what’s going on at a local level.

Nottingham has been selected as it is a medium sized city with a significant population of vulnerable workers and migrants. Ten in-depth interviews will be conducted, focussing on the impact of the recession and legislative changes at the local level, and key actors’ concerns for the future. These will be supplemented by available quantitative data.

COMPAS will also produce a briefing on legislative changes to welfare benefits, immigration and citizenship.

The ESRC Centre on Migration, Policy and Society (COMPAS) at the University of Oxford conducts high quality research in order to develop theory and knowledge, inform public opinion and contribute to policy debates on migration.

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These documents will inform a round table discussion to be hosted by PCS and COMPAS in March 2009. This will bring together practitioners, policy makers and academics who are active and knowledgeable about issues that affect low waged workers and those marginalized from labour markets in particular migrants, and unemployed and inactive people. The discussion document will be finalized after the workshop in the light of workshop discussions.

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