

## Polish and Lithuanian Workers: Opportunities and Challenges for Trades Unions

### A Joint COMPAS/TUC project

#### Background

On 1<sup>st</sup> May 2004 ten countries joined the European Union. These included the Accession 8 or “A8” states of Czech Republic, Estonia, Latvia, Poland, Slovakia, Lithuania, Hungary and Slovenia, plus Cyprus and Malta. Workers from A8 states may take up employment in the UK. However, unless officially exempt from doing so, they are required to *register* their employment under the Workers Registration Scheme (WRS). The stated policy objectives of the WRS are to control A8 workers’ access to certain welfare benefits and services; to encourage participation in the formal economy; and to provide empirical data to facilitate monitoring of inflows and the formulation of evidence based policy.

According to the Home Office’s latest registration figures, about 345,000 workers from the A8 states registered for employment during the period between May 2004 and December 2005. The largest nationality represented is Poles (59%). On receipt of registration documentation, workers also are given an English language leaflet from the Trades Union Congress (TUC) outlining their rights as workers. They may also request a version of the leaflet in their first language.

#### Aims and objectives

The research aims to explore the kinds of difficulties experienced by Polish and Lithuanian workers in the labour market, and their potential for joining trades unions. More specifically it addresses:

- Who is a member of/wants to join a trades union and why?
- What are the obstacles to joining a trades union?
- Where are prospective union members working?
- What are the kinds of difficulties that Polish and Lithuanian workers face in their employment relations and conditions?

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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## Methods:

We did not attempt to obtain a representative sample of Polish and Lithuanian workers in the UK, but chose rather to focus on workers who were interested in obtaining information on their rights. A mail survey was distributed by the TUC to some 2,210 workers who had requested TUC leaflets in Polish and in Lithuanian. This survey was developed from that used in the COMPAS project '*Changing Status, Changing Lives?*' in order to facilitate future comparative analysis. It asked workers for basic socio-demographic information, and comprised principally closed pre-coded questions. Questions on problems at work and attitudes to unions were open ended. The response rate was high (n=504) for a mail survey at about 25%. Data has been coded and is currently being analysed using SPSS.

## Data gathered:

It is interesting to compare our sample with the data from the Home Office Accession Monitoring Report. Our respondents are those who asked for a leaflet on workers' rights and who replied to a request from the TUC to complete a questionnaire. They are, one might anticipate, particularly likely to be interested in trade union membership. While only 18 respondents were members of a trade union, 274 or 54% said that they would be interested in joining a trade union in the future.

Compared to the registered population of A8 workers as a whole our sample is somewhat more male biased (64.2% male 35.8% female), with the Polish workers more likely to be male, and in general slightly younger than the Lithuanian respondents. The average age is older than that of the registered population, but is still young - fifty seven per cent of our respondents are aged 30 or under. It is striking that, despite their relative youth, 43% described themselves as having at least ten years of work experience. However, most of that experienced was accrued in their country of origin, as over three quarters had worked for a year or less (and many not at all) in the UK. Most had entered after EU Enlargement (1<sup>st</sup> May 2004). Nearly one third described their English as "basic only" or "none", and one half described it as "adequate". Slightly over 10% said that they were fluent English speakers.

Key sectors of employment were manufacturing (31.9% n=150), hospitality (23.8% n=112), transportation, storage and communication (10.6% n=50) and health and social work (10% n=47). Respondents were almost all concentrated in "elementary occupations" or were process/machinery operatives. Those who were in health and social work were predominantly in personal service occupations, principally care assistants. They were working throughout the UK, with the highest concentration in London (13.6%) and the lowest in the North East (1.3%).

**Outputs:** Completion of report to be sent to the TUC in mid-September. A working paper will be published on the COMPAS website in Autumn 2006.

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