

Rural Migrant Workers

Are rural migrant workers who pick and pack our crops being exploited?

"We was 200 peoples and managers don't know what's your name. You have a number. '231, Come here' was the supervisor's word...Last year I live in caravan and there was about 12 peoples. Terrible."

Migrant Worker from Russia

"There is no way of knowing how many gangmasters are operating in the UK. Only estimates are available...with the latest suggesting that there are 3,000 gangmasters and some 60,000 gangworkers."

T& G Website

"One corrupt gangmaster, found guilty of money laundering and a breach of immigration laws, was said to have amassed a £5 million fortune in three years from a workforce of 700 exploited Eastern Europeans."

Methodist Recorder 10/2/05

"Not all gangmasters are the same. One ethical gangmaster from the West Midlands has been at the heart of calls for the industry to be licensed, and has worked closely with the NFU to help develop the legal parameters of the trade."

Landmark

For hundreds of years British farmers have depended on migrant labour to help tackle a variety of tasks. From planting to picking, from Cornwall to Scotland, migrant workers perform a range of services for fairly basic wages. Today an estimated 60,000 seasonal migrant workers come from diverse cultures and for different reasons:

- **People from local towns and villages** who usually work for a labour provider and may be bussed to where the work is.
- **UK Travellers and Gypsies** sometimes from families who have lived this way for generations.
- **Students** working under the Seasonal Agricultural Workers Scheme. This scheme was set up to enable overseas students to experience life in a foreign country, to earn money and to learn about our agriculture.
- **EU Nationals** who have the right to work anywhere in Europe.
- **Illegal workers.** Illegal working can arise from having a visa that does not allow work, from being an asylum seeker or as a result of being recruited by an illegal recruiter overseas.

[\(See the Trade and General Workers Union campaign website for more information\)](#)

It is migrant workers who help to grow and pick our food. We benefit from their labour; we cannot ignore them if they are being exploited!

Migrant workers are often organised by "Gangmasters". Workers may be paid on an hourly rate, or on a piecework basis. Because this type of work has long been unregulated these workers are at risk of exploitation and illegal immigrants or asylum seekers are particularly vulnerable. A recent survey by the [Ethical Trade Initiative](#) in the UK found evidence of migrants: being paid too little, working too long, being charged extortionate fees for housing and transport and working in dangerous conditions with inadequate attention to health and safety.

([The T&G campaign website has a collation of media stories on Gangmaster abuses](#))

After the death of the cockle pickers in Morecambe Bay, The Gangmasters (Licensing) Act 2004 established the Gangmasters Licensing Authority to set up and operate a licensing scheme and create a register for labour providers operating in the agriculture, shellfish gathering and associated processing and packaging sectors. The Authority began work in April 2005 and will start to issue licences towards the end of 2005. If the Authority meets this timetable the principal offences established by the Act will come into force mid 2006. Once the licensing arrangements are in place it will be illegal for a gangmaster to operate without a licence. It will also be an offence for a person to enter into an arrangement with an unlicensed gangmaster.

([For more information on the Licensing Authority see the Defra website](#))

Licensing is an important step forward in the fight to end exploitation and other illegal activity in this sector. Licensing will help to distinguish between legal and illegal operators, and will bring much needed transparency to the labour supply sector. This will help ensure that lawbreakers do not continue to break the law and ensure that there are no excuses for anybody to use labour providers in this sector who exploit vulnerable workers.

The Authority will become a clearinghouse for information about the activities of gangmasters. Once the Licensing arrangements are in place they should be informed if it is suspected that a gangmaster is operating without a licence. Workers who are concerned about their treatment by a gangmaster should be encouraged to contact the Authority.

([Details of Health and Safety standards for all farm labourers \(even illegal immigrants!\) can be found on the Health and Safety Executive website](#))

Migrant workers often face hostility from the communities they pass through. Misunderstanding, distrust and dislike are common reactions. But in the vast majority of cases these migrant workers have done nothing wrong. They need and deserve help and support, not abuse and hostility. Think how vulnerable the Chinese cockle pickers were in Morecambe Bay! Christians have a God-given responsibility to care for strangers and socially excluded people. Rural churches are challenged to offer what help they can.

What do the migrant workers need?

- **Advice.** Access to [Citizen 's Advice Bureaux \(CABs\)](#) etc. to get advice on entitlements. Information about driving, vehicle licensing, insurance etc. Advice may be needed in the evenings and/or by phone.
- **Health care.** Doctors' surgeries, hospitals and dental care need to be available. For those living remotely, access to basic toiletries may be a need.
- **Social contacts.** Particularly where migrant workers are students, involvement with the [Young Farmers](#) may be appropriate.
- **Shops.** Hours worked may not fit with the opening hours of the local shop.
- **Spiritual needs.** How do Migrant Workers know when services of worship are taking place and that they would be welcome? Faith groups or individuals may need facilities for daily prayer.
- **Communication facilities.** Increasingly the Internet provides a way of keeping in touch with home – but foreign migrants might need help understanding UK systems.
- **Interpretation facilities.** Hospitals, [CABs](#) and the [Health & Safety Executive](#) may be useful for accessing these.
- **Embassy facilities.** Some foreign nationals may need access to their embassies.

What can churches do?

- **Invite migrant workers** to be active members of the church, identify their faith and help them to find ways to practise it. Offer support and sanctuary if necessary.
- **Fight prejudice** in the local community and explain the positive role that migrant workers play.
- **Be informed.** Find out what labour local farms use.
- **Focus on the role and needs of migrant workers** during key festivals such as [One World Week](#), Racial Justice Sunday and Harvest.
- **Is there a village IT centre or community sports facility?** Could designated times be set-aside for Migrant Workers with advice available and hours for sport be extended?
- **Ensure that Health and Safety regulations are being adhered to** and offer to report infringements so that migrant workers don't risk being victimised (**Call 0845 345 0055**).
- **Share resources and work in cooperation.** A single church in an area might feel unable to do anything, but working together all sorts of things are possible, such as provision of toiletry packs for men/women, clothing, provision of meeting place/coffee bar facilities.
- **Appoint a co-ordinator** to find out what is happening and advise and resource local churches to counteract negative prejudices & press.
- **Network information.** Let the Arthur Rank Centre know what you are doing. We can 't work in isolation.

Key Allies, Authorities and Reference Points:

Defra and the Gangmasters Licensing Authority. Information on how to contact the Authority will be made available on the Defra website as soon as it is available:
<http://www.defra.gov.uk/farm/gangmasters/index.htm>

The Health and Safety Executive. Their remit is to report on violations in the workplace, they will not investigate the legal position of the workers, or notify other government departments about migrant workers. They do, however, have access to a bank of translators for dozens of languages and they also have [a self-assessment programme that can be downloaded or sent out on CDrom!](#) The contact details of their local offices can be found at: <http://www.hse.gov.uk/contact/maps/index.htm> or report suspected violations to their help line on: 0845 345 0055

The Temporary Labour Working Group, a consortium of major retailers, growers, suppliers, labour providers and trade unions was set up in September 2002, convened by the [Ethical Trading Initiative \(ETI\)](#), with co-operation from government. Its aim was to establish a set of minimum standards for labour providers, which could be enforced by new statutory controls. <http://www.lpcode.co.uk/index.asp>

Citizen Advice Bureaux have long campaigned for the rights of those exploited by some disreputable gangmasters:
http://www.citizensadvice.org.uk/index/campaigns/social_policy/consultation_responses/cr_consumerandebt/gangmasters

Transport and General Workers Union spearheaded the campaign against disreputable gangmasters and in support of licensing legislation:
<http://www.tgwu.org.uk/Templates/Campaign.asp?NodeID=89606&int1stParentNodeID=42437&int2ndParentNodeID=89576>