

# Ensuring Decent Work Standards for Migrant Workers in the Current Labour Market



Summary Document of Roundtable Event  
October 2012



Migrants Rights Centre Ireland (MRCI) in collaboration with  
the Coalition to Protect the Lowest Paid

↑ Participants in The Coalition to Protect the Lowest Paid were  
pictured in front of the statue of renowned trade union organiser,  
James Connolly.



## INTRODUCTION

The roundtable event was organised by MRCI in collaboration with SIPTU (Services, Industrial, Professional and Technical Union) and the Coalition to Protect the Lowest Paid to examine strategies of how to include migrant workers within the broader struggle for decent work for low paid workers. The International Labour Organisation's (ILO) framework of decent work was used to examine these issues. The ILO defines Decent Work as fair, progressive and sustainable work that delivers:

- Access to productive employment and income opportunities;
- Rights at work, particularly with respect to the core labour standards;
- Systems of social protection; and
- A voice at work through social dialogue.

## IDENTIFIED THEMES

The recession along with labour market and economic policies have led to a disproportionate impact on low paid workers and the most vulnerable, paving the way for the increase in precarious work. The following themes were identified as of particular relevance.

**Deterioration of working conditions:** The erosion of labour standards has led to an increase in precarious, poorly paid and insecure employment that in many cases cannot support households. Precarious work is on the rise and involves atypical employment contracts, limited or no social benefits and statutory entitlements, high degree of job insecurity, low wages and high risk of occupational injury.

**Non-compliance:** There is a progressive deterioration in working conditions and non-compliance with basic employment legislation. This is particularly prominent in sectors that are poorly regulated such as agriculture, restaurants, domestic work, cleaning and catering.

**Access to rights:** Migrant workers face increasing restrictions in access to the social welfare system. In fact, the economic

recession, and the resulting austerity measures enacted by the government have produced a further erosion of rights and welfare provision to the most vulnerable in society. Women are particularly at risk of poverty and destitution.

**Participation of migrant workers in Trade Unions:** Migrant workers' are often afraid to seek representation of Trade Unions. Many migrant workers' immigration status is tied to their employment situation. Therefore if they complain, they are at risk of losing their jobs and their immigration status. There is an increase in the number of migrants joining Trade Unions, but this is not necessarily leading to greater organisation of migrant workers.

**Intersection between Labour and Immigration:** Irish labour migration policy is to issue work permits to high skilled workers only, mostly to fill positions in sectors like ICT<sup>1</sup>, engineering and medicine. There is no strategy to address the continuing demand for essential skills within the labour market. While demand for a broad range of skills continues to exist within the economy, without the corresponding legal channels of migration some unscrupulous employers will inevitably exploit workers to meet their on-going needs.

## CASE STUDY: LONDON CITIZENS GROUP & DECENT WORK CAMPAIGN

London Citizens is an alliance of community organisations founded in London in 1996. It is a collaboration between civil society and Trade Unions that aims to create a common platform of action among stakeholders in civil society. The group works to improve the lives of disadvantaged communities across the country through building power and participative democracy. Among its members are Trade Unions, student organizations, schools, citizen organizations, migrant organisations, think tanks, and charities, but also religious institutions like mosques and churches. The coalition organised the Living Wage Campaign in 2001 which calls for every worker in the country to earn enough to provide their family with the essentials of life. The campaign has won over £70 million of Living Wages, lifting over 10,000 families out of working poverty. The Living Wage is a number. An hourly rate, set independently, every year (by the GLA in London). It is calculated according to cost of living and gives the minimum pay rate required for a worker to provide their family with the essentials of life. In London the current rate is £8.30 per hour. Outside of London the current rate is £7.20. The Living Wage Foundation has now accredited over 100 Living Wage Employers. [www.citizensuk.org](http://www.citizensuk.org)

<sup>1</sup> The Minister for Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation Richard Bruton, addressing to a meeting of EU Employment Ministers, stated: "Addressing the ICT skills gap will be a crucial part of the EU's employment strategy, given projections that there could be up to 700,000 unfilled vacancies in the EU by 2015". See <http://eu2013.ie/news/news-items/20130208postepscoprdjei/>

## CONCLUSIONS

Migration is a global reality which will not change in the future. The government must recognise the EU's changing demographics and Ireland's on-going need for both high-skilled and essential workers. Likewise migrant workers and their families are part of Irish society and must be treated equally. Those who have made their home here need to be protected and have access to a range of rights and opportunities. Given the impact of the current economic crisis on low paid workers, it is vital that decent jobs become a governmental policy objective and the reality for migrant workers in their employment.

Migrant issues need to become part of the overall struggle and agenda for decent labour standards. This will require civil society organisations to integrate these issues as part of their agenda to protect the rights of the most vulnerable workers. Using an approach based on solidarity and equality for all vulnerable workers will ensure that the pursuit of decent work conditions for all workers will not be undermined.

Building solidarity between migrant workers and Irish workers is a key strategy to a decent work agenda and to combat discrimination and racism. Stakeholders advocating for the rights of the lowest paid workers need to develop creative and innovative ways to engage workers and build solidarity.

Key stakeholders in civil society, such as Trade Unions, Church groups and community organizations should reach out to workers using a range of approaches and methods. Space/platforms also need to be created across civil society for strategizing and taking action with workers to address appalling and deteriorating conditions across all employment sectors.



## PARTICIPANTS

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- Suzanne Griffin SIPTU
- Kirsi Hanifin Labour Party
- Robin Hannon European Anti-Poverty Network Ireland
- Adam Hartman MRCI
- David Joyce Irish Congress of Trade Unions
- Edward Keegan Immigrant Council of Ireland
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- Gráinne O'Toole MRCI
- Caroline Reid MRCI
- Patrick Taran Global Migration Policy Association
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## RELEVANT DOCUMENTS AND FURTHER READING

*Situating Migrant Workers in a Decent Work Agenda: The Need for Solidarity in Recession Ireland*, Migrant Rights Centre Ireland, 2012.

*Decent Work Agenda*, International Labour Organization's website: <http://www.ilo.org/global/about-the-ilo/decent-work-agenda/lang--en/index.htm>

*Crisis, Migration and Precarious Work: Impacts and Responses*, Patrick Taran, Global Migration Policy Associates, November 2011.

*Decent Work? The Impact of the recession on Low Paid Workers, A Report For Mandate Trade Union. Survey: Behavior & Attitudes*. Camille Loftus for Mandate Trade Union. May 2012.

*An Introduction to the Situation and Experience of Women Migrant Workers in Ireland*. Equality Authority, Jane Pillinger, November 2006.

*Decent-work-and-poverty-eradication-literature-review-and-two-country-study, A study for the Decent Work and Labour Standards Forum*, Stuart Bell and Kirsten Newitt, Ergon Associates Limited, January 2010.

## ORGANIZERS

**The Migrant Rights Centre Ireland** is a national organisation working to promote the rights of migrant workers and their families living in situations of vulnerability throughout Ireland. [www.mrci.ie](http://www.mrci.ie)

**The Coalition to Protect the Lowest Paid** advocates for the rights and working conditions of thousands of the lowest paid workers in Ireland such as cleaners, hotel and restaurant workers, security guards, farm labourers and shop workers. The Coalition is made up of workers, SIPTU, Mandate, Communications Workers' Union, UNITE, Migrant Rights Centre Ireland, Poor Can't Pay Campaign, Community Platform, the European Anti-Poverty Network Ireland and the National Women's Council. [www.protectlowestpaid.ie](http://www.protectlowestpaid.ie)

**SIPTU** (Services, Industrial, Professional and Technical Union) is Ireland's largest Trade Union representing workers from several sectors as construction, health, transport, education and manufacturing. [www.siptu.ie](http://www.siptu.ie)

The Migrant Rights Centre Ireland is a national organisation working to promote justice, empowerment and equality for migrant workers and their families.

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