

Table of Contents

Organising in the Dark: Interviews about Migrants' Struggles 1

Organising in the Dark: Interviews about Migrants's Struggles

By Jaya Klara Brekke

Jaya Klara Brekke talks to four UK based groups working to improve conditions for migrants and asks 'how does one organise in the dark?'

[IMAGE]

Workers' struggles to improve conditions traditionally voice demands for visibility, rights and citizenship. But when visibility brings with it the risk of detention and deportation other strategies may be necessary. Equally, when rights are dependent on the whims of employers, how desirable are they? The experience of migration and illegality is multiple and contingent on the resources of class, race, gender and income. Campaigns and struggles therefore cohere around diverse experiences, involve different levels of risk and confrontation, and mobilise such disparate groups as church congregations, community groups, activist networks, unions, mosques, and national associations. The tactics and positions employed entail conflicting ideas about whether or not to collaborate with the state. Here Jaya Klara Brekke talks to four UK based groups working to improve conditions for migrants and asks 'how does one organise in the dark?' Their answers describe the day to day experience of a tightening immigration system and responses to it, from direct resistance and support work to proposals for reform

Introducing the Respondents

Sean Bamford, Trade Union Congress (TUC): Sean Bamford is the Policy Officer of Migration. The TUC holds conferences on migration and publish reports on the conditions of migrant workers and the effects of government policies, as well as working for migrants and advising them about their rights at work.

Matthew Bolton, Strangers into Citizens and The East London Communities Organisation (TELCO): TELCO is a campaign platform for community groups, putting pressure on politicians, providing training in building campaigns and community leadership. It consists of churches, mosques, schools and other community organisations. TELCO started the Strangers into Citizens campaign, which proposes a pathway for the regularisation of undocumented migrant workers in the UK with a focus on rights, legality, and changing the negative image of migrant workers in the media.

Ava Caradonna, International Union of Sex Workers (IUSW): The IUSW organises across the whole sex industry, traversing illegal and legal occupations. It operates within a complex area where conditions of legality and illegality, race and class overlap and are intensified. The 'double illegality' of someone working both in an illegal industry as well as having an illegal immigration status poses a challenge on all fronts to traditional political organising.

Sara, London No Borders (NB): No Borders is an anti-capitalist direct action network organising campaigns and actions against borders and border controls. They provide 'on the ground' detainee support, activist support in union campaigns for migrant workers' rights, and monitoring in reporting centres. No Borders carry out actions against detention centres, and collaborate with other organisations and activist groups around the needs and conditions of migrants and people in asylum. They produce a transnational newsletter entitled Papers For All.

The Terms of Visibility

Jaya Brekke: Conventionally, union struggle is built on rights, visibility and being out on the streets, but how does one organise in an illegal industry among people who may also have an illegal immigration status, where visibility could mean imprisonment and deportation?

Ava Caradonna, International Union of Sex Workers (IUWS): The name 'Ava Caradonna' is a collective name used by activists in the International Sex Workers Union to find productive ways to engage with the stigma of being associated with selling sex. In terms of visibility it is about playing with what it means to be invisible, and finding ways of being visible that aren't necessarily about the individual. I think this is one way to cut across illegality, and it means that both legal and illegal people can organise in the same place. It is not easy to organise in the sex industry. This is something that needs to be recognised from the outset. Combating the social isolation and stigma that sex workers feel is a big part of what 'workplace' organising is. When you are organising with people who are so marginalised and so hidden, you can't conceptualise around workplace organising within traditional models of, for example, putting pressure on employers, because it will result in violence in a really horrible way. There are certainly a lot of sex workers, but the ability to draw them together into some kind of coherent subjectivity is pretty hard. Many people don't really assume the identity of 'sex worker', but that is not to say that sex workers themselves don't have networks, that they don't organise, and they don't move in certain ways that are outside leftist politics and trade union struggles. People have a whole variety of strategies to deal with issues and conditions around safety within the industry such as moving to employers that are better and passing on information. At a day-to-day level the networks are made and practical projects are being identified around significant needs, and these are things we can do without having to draw people into visibility. I don't think that visibility, legality and citizenship are necessarily only one moment.

JB: How did the Strangers into Citizens campaign come about?

Matthew Bolton, Strangers into Citizens (SiC): The Strangers into Citizens campaign sprung out of our other campaigns for housing and the living wage. We realised more and more that people in our churches, schools and communities were affected by immigration policies. It took a long time and many discussions among our members to agree to set up Strangers into Citizens, as many people saw it as being way too radical. But after many public talks where migrants spoke out about their conditions as living with illegal status or under the threat of deportation, and people saw that they actually are friends, neighbours or colleagues, we were able to develop and start this campaign. But it was difficult because we are an extremely diverse organisation where you have some people that might be church based, who one would consider conservative or Tory in their politics, but have a very liberal take on some social issues. And then you might have a Mosque heavily critical of market-based economics but which might be quite conservative when it comes to social issues. Often media or politicians will call up and ask about our position on some issue, but TELCO does not have a position on things, we work only on specific causes. Our members are so diverse that if we were to take positions on things we would end up spending all our time discussing and fighting about them, and have no time for actually doing anything!

JB: What are the long term goals of a one-off campaign like Strangers into Citizens?

Matthew Bolton (SiC): The long term goals are firstly to build up our membership and capacity. Through this campaign we will hopefully get stronger and bigger as an organisation, which is the most important thing because if we are not strong as an organisation we cannot achieve anything.

JB: What are some of the specific changes or developments that trade unions have undergone when having to consider organising migrants, especially undocumented ones?

Sean Bamford, Trade Union Congress (TUC): We are a country that is used to migration, although the present wave of migration is different because migrants are coming from different parts of the world than before. For the union movement there is an element of self-interest in that if we don't embrace diversity we will be an increasingly declining force within the workplace. That is the pragmatic side of it. The ethical side is that we see our mission as achieving fairness within the workplace. So our concern about migrants and the most recent wave of migrants is located within that wider perspective.

JB: What are the main activities and long term goals of No Borders?

Sara, No Borders (NB): Our politics and where we are coming from is a desire to have freedom of movement for all, to have no border controls, and to ultimately have no capitalism and no nation states. However, in order to achieve something here and now and in the world we live in, we don't have a campaign against capitalism or states, but have medium term and short term goals, such as anti-deportation work and closing down detention centres, and we use different strategies aimed at realising those goals. Even if we don't stop the new detention centre near Gatwick airport from being built, through the campaign we are learning, building up a network, trying to develop different tactics, building links with the migrants that are directly affected, researching into the companies that are involved in the detention industries and starting a process of developing action against those companies.

[IMAGE]

Rights or Wrongs?

JB: What does legality and illegality mean on an everyday level? Class, language, race and so on play a big role. How useful is it to organise around these terms?

Ava Caradonna (IUSW): In a completely deregulated sector there are no rules around how things are actually run. The only way that rules are abided by is either through threats or violence or coercion of some kind, which you could also say about many other 'normal' jobs. The debate about trafficking and by default prostitution is dominated and contextualised by legislation, research and a moral position that selling and purchasing sex is something that is fundamentally wrong. That it is damaging to the 'women' involved and to society more generally. And I think it is very much about legality and illegality, and about policing women's migration. Two weeks ago the UK Human Trafficking Centre launched Operation Pentameter 2, the UK government/law enforcement response to human trafficking which focuses on prostitution. It involves the raiding, arrest and 'rescuing' of migrant sex workers who are classified as trafficked victims. So there are raids and deportations going on. I think that such police operations can be understood clearly as controlling and 'policing' the boundaries of legality and illegality. At the centre of concepts of 'victims and criminals' is the need to 'protect' migrant women and 'punish' migrant men. Casting good migrants against bad ('illegals'), really only creates the conditions that ensure and maintain exploitation in the sex industry and ensures that there will always be this stream of exploitative migrant labour to the UK.

JB: Are there ways of enforcing your rights when you are illegal?

Sean Bamford (TUC): I think I can say that in the UK at the moment there are not. And this is a massive problem because some employers don't exactly fall into employing undocumented workers by accident. There is some evidence that the particularly unscrupulous go for them because they know

they can exploit them; they know they have got no recourse to the courts etc. We would ideally like to move towards a separation in the legal system between actual rights of workers and the person's status of residency and work permit. But at the moment there is a problem for the employee – 'will I end up being deported if I go to court?' The enforcement of rights is a big issue, because the trade union movement is patchy in terms of identity, and we have an imbalance where we are stronger in the public than the private sector. This is not a problem for the more skilled migrants going into areas of public sector administration, the NHS, and indeed for those highly skilled workers going into IT, partly because they have real economic clout. I think the problem lies where you have a lack of union organisation together with the fact that many of these workers are easily replaceable, in the sense that if you are pulling up carrots from a field and there are other people available to do it, you are not in a terribly strong position. Government is sitting down with us to look at the issue of enforcement. If the laws are there we must have the means by which to enforce them.

JB: When viewed in a 'positive' light by media and state, migrants are portrayed and treated either as an economic resource, or as victims. Are there ways people are taking action that do not rely on these two stereotypes?

Sara (NB): Yes, where either economic migrants or asylum seekers stand up and take action for themselves and demand things. This challenges those stereotypes. And particularly when people in detention take action. For example, when quite a few people recently escaped from Campsfield [Campsfield House, a notorious 'immigration removal centre' in Oxfordshire opened in 1993], and also the large scale riot in November in Harmondsworth detention centre, where they destroyed a 200 capacity building in the detention complex. There have been several reports recently about how undocumented workers are contributing to the economy, while there is huge scaremongering by the government and the mainstream media against asylum seekers and how they are a drain on resources to the point where people really hate them. With the points-based system and the possibility of an amnesty for economic migrants, I do think they are moving towards a professionalisation of migration, selecting who is useful, who has the particular skill-sets necessary, etc. In the case of asylum seekers there are many legal challenges that you can mount when you are facing deportation. But if someone is an undocumented worker it is a lot more difficult because there are almost no legal options. No Borders doesn't make any political distinction between political and economic migrants, we support undocumented workers as much as asylum seekers but on a practical level it is much more difficult because they are not out in the open and don't have the same networks of assistance.

JB: Could you briefly describe your proposal for an amnesty for illegal workers?

Matthew Bolton (SiC): We are asking that those who have been here for four or more years are admitted to a two-year pathway to full legal rights ('leave to remain'). During that period they will work legally, whereby they can demonstrate their contribution to UK economy and society.

JB: What is the reason for the four-year criteria?

MB: The four-year period, with the fifth trial year is set because we see it as a realistic target. It is based on the fact that people who come to the country legally to work can extend their permit to stay up to five years, and then apply for leave to remain. And so we can't really ask for fewer than the five years for people who enter illegally because then one would argue that we are rewarding the illegals. So what we are campaigning for is that whether you have entered the country illegally, are an over-stayer or have become illegal after having your asylum case refused, if you have been here for five years you can enter this pathway, go through the two year trial period and then apply for leave to remain. After the two trial years you need to show that you have not committed any serious crime (and here it is important to emphasise that any crime related to papers will not count as a serious crime!)

and you have a sponsor. This could be an employer, but not necessarily, because that would place too much power in the hands of the employer, so also a colleague, a priest or someone in your community – someone who can vouch for you.

JB: Do you support Strangers into Citizens proposal for ‘regularisation’ of immigrants (legal residency and identity documents) and amnesty?

Sara (NB): In the London No Borders group we had a lot of discussion about this and were very divided on the issue. It is a hard thing because it is not just a demand coming from Strangers into Citizens; it is also coming from a lot of migrants themselves. When you are working with people that are facing deportation or detention on a day-to-day level, anything that will help some of them is something you would support. However, the conditions that are attached to the proposal are problematic. You will have a lot of people coming out in the hope that they will get amnesty, but many will be refused and then be facing deportation. What we might see is that people who are most directly in the firing line, often families who are failed asylum seekers because they can’t go underground, are to be the first people who get rounded up and deported. Also, amnesties are generally coupled with a stronger clamp down. David Blunkett in 1997 proposed an amnesty for some people, coupled with ID cards and much stronger border controls for everyone else, and with a total crack down on migrants afterwards. But one thing that was very positive about the Strangers into Citizens campaign was the 7th May march, which to my knowledge was the first public march of undocumented workers that there has been in London. It brought people out of the shadows, out on the streets together and gave people confidence. So whatever we thought about their proposal, we went to the march and it was a great opportunity to engage with these people. Finally, I think it is a problem when you have a campaign asking for so little. The position we eventually came to in No Borders was to ask for papers for all and to not leave anyone out. Because we see it as our job to make the demands, and not enter a situation where we are the ones proposing the parameters that in the end are established by governments. Imagine somebody who can prove they have been here for four years, who can prove that they have been working, whose employer is willing to stand up and say ‘yes, this person has been working for me illegally’, who can speak English, when English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) classes are being cut back: it is going to be hardly anyone. So, yes, an amnesty will help some people, but personally I would not get into the business of excluding and setting the governments parameters for it.

JB: Do you support proposals for amnesty such as those of Strangers into Citizens and the Joint Council of Welfare of Immigrants?

Sean Bamford (TUC): The TUC doesn’t have a position on amnesty. I think it is an interesting discussion and certainly we want to be part of it. No one knows the exact amount of undocumented workers but the estimate is 600,000 people. There is no way that the government has the resources to get rid of 600 thousand people from this country, and given that they are going to have some dependants etc. we could be talking about a million. It would also be deeply unsavoury to say the least, if not incredibly distressing! This is where there are double standards: on the one hand we deny these people a right including their rights to be here, and on the other hand there are sections of the economy that depend very heavily on such workers to do the jobs they are doing.

JB: Do you know of the Strangers into Citizens campaign for amnesty?

Ava Caradonna (IUSW): Yes. I don’t think anyone is really including the sex workers in their amnesty proposal. That is a classic example of who is excluded from such proposals.

JB: Is it possible to work towards larger structural changes and long term goals with illegalised people and work places?

AC: In terms of larger structural changes, sex workers are a long way behind a lot of people in things like having decent working conditions, stability, a pension, and real things that make a difference in how people can make decisions in their lives. But I think that sex work to a large degree and for lots and lots of migrant women does provide a way of making fuckloads more money than if you were a domestic worker or a cleaner. We are talking about £100 per hour easily, maybe £50 per hour, substantially more than £3.50! So it does actually translate into good things for people – being able to send a good amount of money home or be able to pay for dreams and projects of their own. This situation only exists because the industry is so illegalised and stigmatised; in fact some process of visibility in the sex industry would be somewhat threatening to this – for example, if it was legalised the state would tax it. In that kind of way it's not that the state manages work well, prostitution remains an incredibly coercive environment to work in. The Netherlands are a perfect example, and so is Australia – their legal brothels are just as exploitative as working in London, but of course there you don't run the same risk of being arrested. What we are really talking about is criminalisation. In somewhere like London where the industry is so diversified, even something like prostitution is so racialised that where you end up in the hierarchy has a lot to do with whether or not you have papers.

JB: The immigration system is changing a lot with increasing incarceration and the introduction of the points-based system. How does that affect the way you work with migrants?

Sean Bamford (TUC): We accept that there is a need to have a system in place that manages migration from outside the EU. However, we want to ensure that such a system is fair and respects workers and indeed human rights. And we have had problems both with the existent system and the one that is going to replace it. To give two examples: the work permit system effectively ties an individual employee to an individual employer. This is a contravention of workers rights, where the employer invariably has more control over the situation than the worker. If the employee feels he is being abused he cannot just walk away and sell his labour elsewhere, because he could get kicked out of the country for breaching the terms of his work permit. This gives too much power to the employer. Also, in tier three of the points based system, which regulates the less skilled workers that they want to bring into certain sectors like agriculture, people have no right to bring relatives into the UK. That is in contravention of the right to family life. And I could go on and on. We are hoping for equality in the way people are selected, so that the system once it is in place will be free of bias. I think it is about joining together and saying that there are a lot of us out there that are concerned about migrant workers, how can we work together to actually support these people? In our case, get them into the union because that is the clearest way that they will have protection in the workplace.

Beyond Pragmatism

JB: In what way does everyday organising translate into long term transformations? For example, could you explain your project, x:talk?

Ava Caradonna (IUSW): X:talk [pronounced- cross talk] involves teaching English based around language needed in the sex industry to migrant sex-workers. It is run from an NHS sexual health clinic in central London, once a week over the course of three months covering topics such as health, dealing with employers and customers, what they do and don't do, how much they charge and so on. It is specifically for sex workers, you don't have to say what kind of immigration status you have, and it is free. It is in recognition of the fact that 60-70 percent of the sex workers in London are migrants, so it is not some minority we are talking about. We did x:talk because it was the type of project we could

do that was practical, that would enable us to make networks and contact with migrant communities. I was sick of having ideological conversations and tried to think of what were some of the root causes of sexual exploitation and meaningful ways in which those things could change the power dynamics. But I don't think that x:talk is really entering a debate around, or directly challenging, legality and illegality. It does run the risk of becoming simply a service that can be co-opted really easily in the running and maintenance of the current border regime. Yet we have decided that language is really central to organising, so it is a building block to greater ideas and possibilities.

JB: You have recently become part of GMB Trade Union. What are the benefits and limitations of this?

AC: The IUSW became part of the GMB in 2000 so it has actually been quite a while now. And in many ways the branch has left us completely alone. There was the first unfair dismissal case in the sex-industry for firing a sex-worker recently. But that kind of stuff is just weird, it is not the reality of how the GMB works. I think of it more as a very important thing to have on paper. And I use it as such.

JB: Is the organising of sex workers limited to a very pragmatic level, or is there space to go beyond that? Do you have political goals on a broader level?

AC: Not here at the moment, no. But is there any movement that is ready for that now here in the Global North? I think people are ready to make alliances.

JB: Can everyday pragmatic organising and campaigns translate into, or provide a basis for, long term transformations?

Sara (NB): This has been a big discussion in the London No Borders group. When focusing on anti-deportation and detainee support on an individual level it was very hard to look at and fight the asylum system as a whole. Nevertheless, this work enables us to make contact with people inside the detention centres. So when there was a hunger strike of Zimbabwean women in detention that went across multiple detention centres, those who were doing detainee support could visit the different detention centres, give them phone cards and put them in touch with each other. All those people were released. And this was not on an individual level, but a struggle that we were able to support won by the Zimbabwean women collectively. When we started to do regular demonstrations outside Colnbrook and Harmondsworth detention centres, we were able to distribute leaflets inside the centres because of our previous visits there. During the demonstrations people were ringing us from inside and telling us 'the guards are locking us in our rooms', 'the guards are beating us and not letting us come to the windows'. Another example of work that has been really successful is No Borders in Glasgow as part of the Unity coalition. The Unity coalition set up an office opposite the reporting centre in Glasgow, and everyone who went into the reporting centre first of all could leave their children there, because they can't detain you if you don't have your children with you. Also everyone who went inside would first write their name down at the Unity office and then cross their name off after, so that they could ring around to contacts and start support work immediately if a name was not crossed off by the end of the day. It was a relatively new thing in Glasgow to have asylum seekers, so once people living alongside them found out what they had been through there was a huge amount of community support. People were doing lookouts and letting them hide in their houses. They managed to make dawn raids in houses of failed asylum seekers completely unworkable to the point where they stopped altogether. Successful campaigns that help people on a small everyday level empower many of the asylum seekers themselves to support each other and organise and get involved, as well as local people. And in the case of Glasgow, it had the actual effect of making a government policy unworkable. So I think that at the moment we need to work in a more structurally focused way and

create networks that are powerful enough to have a lasting effect.

Jaya Klara Brekke <jayapapaya AT gmail.com>, together with Dagmar Diesner, recently released *Underground Londoners*, a documentary addressing the life, working conditions and struggles of undocumented migrants working as cleaners in the London Underground. She waitresses, teaches, does graphic work for the journal *Occupied London* and works on other media and performance projects in London and Copenhagen

Info

International Union of Sex Workers: <http://www.iusw.org/>

No Borders Network: <http://www.noborder.org/>

Strangers into Citizens: <http://www.strangersintocitizens.org.uk>

TUC: <http://www.tuc.org.uk/>