

EU: Cartographies of Baltic labour resistance

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The conjuncture between the thirtieth anniversaries of the fall of the Berlin Wall and the disintegration of the USSR is an apt occasion to revisit the trajectories of change in the post-Soviet space. In their article ‘[Baltic Labour in the Crucible of Capitalist Exploitation: Reassessing “Post-Communist” Transformation](#)’, recently published in the *Economic and Labour Relations Review*, Andreas Bieler and Jokubas Salyga assess ‘post-communist’ transformation in the Baltic states from the perspective of labour. The authors argue that the uneven and combined unfolding of ‘post-communist’ transformation has subjected Baltic labour to doubly constituted exploitation processes. First, workers in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania have suffered from the extreme neo-liberal restructuring of economic and employment relations at home. Second, migrant workers from Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) in general, trying to escape exploitation at home, have faced another set of exploitative dynamics in host countries in Western Europe such as the UK. Nevertheless, workers have continued to challenge exploitation in Central and Eastern Europe, in Western Europe, and have been active in extending networks of transnational solidarity across the continent.

In the wake of ‘post-communist’ transformation, liberal triumphalists heralded the falling apart of the so-called ‘Eastern Bloc’ as a success of representative democracy and the free market, facilitating CEE countries’ ‘historical return’ to Europe. Dissatisfaction over economic recessions during the early 1990s was pacified through the promises of economic well-being as a result of European Union (EU) membership. The Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, Poland, Slovenia, Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia joined in 2004, followed by Bulgaria and Romania in 2007 and Croatia in 2013. The hopes of working people were, however, soon dashed by the harsh realities of capitalist exploitation at home as well as abroad.

Netherworld of production during transformation cataclysm

The drive towards labour market deregulation proceeded in the milieu of dramatic sectoral restructuring induced by opening up to global market competition. Over the course of transformation, Baltic labour regimes have become synonymous with casualised and informal types of employment, simultaneous lengthening and intensifying of work and deteriorating workplace environments. The rhetoric of autonomy and flexibility was used to depict ‘self-employment’ as an attractive ‘choice’ both in higher and low value-added sectors. Further, many occupying relatively stable positions in the private sector experienced informalisation due to a common employer practice to pay officially only a minimum wage alongside a supplement in the form of unreported compensation (‘envelope wage’). These discretionary measures subject workers to near-total managerial control, enabling arbitrary wage reductions in cases of ‘underperformance’.

The deregulatory effort translated into pushed-up rates of exploitation, subjecting Baltic workforces to a punitive juxtaposition of higher work intensity and lengthened durations of work. Labour force surveys in Estonia and Lithuania indicate a rise in the annual working hours after 2004. In 2006 Estonia ranked fifth in the EU (with an average of 1,942 hours per year) recording an 0.5% increase

compared to 2000, despite a 25 percentage point increase in hourly productivity (GDP per hour worked) throughout the same period. A small (0.5%) increase in Lithuania (1,855 hours per year), the tenth highest score, has been similarly counteracted by a 30-percentage point rise in GDP per hour worked ([OECD 2019](#)).

Chains of European migration and capital's thirst for labour from the East

Eastward enlargement has led to a split between 'sender' and 'receiver' countries of the European labour market. Herein, the new EU members from CEE have occupied centre stage, registering negative demographic developments and waves of emigration to Western Europe. According to the CEE Development Institute ([Duszczyk and Matuszczyk 2015: 13](#)), compared to 2004, by 2013 Latvia registered an estimated 513% (23,000 to 141,000) increase in the number of citizens residing in the EU-15, with similar numbers observed in Lithuania (436% - 50,000 to 268,000), Romania (325% - 541,000 to 2.3 million) and Poland (210% - 580,000 to 1.8 million). As many as 11.6% of Romanian, 9% of Lithuanian, 8% of Croatian and 7% of Latvian nationals were estimated to reside in the EU-15.

The United Kingdom's (UK) immediate post-accession opening up of the labour market for Eastern European migrant workers had nothing to do with notions of philanthropy or hospitality. That migrant labour constitutes an invaluable resource to increase the degree of exploitation and thereby raise the rate of surplus value can be inferred from the propensity to recruit Eastern Europeans in food processing, hospitality and agriculture, the sectors that are experiencing major problems filling job vacancies and tend to be those most exposed to competitive pressures. Excessive working hours, inadequate duration of breaks, bullying, problems with obtaining employer references, disproportionately high fees imposed by recruitment agencies for job search, as well as instances of lower-than-agreed (below the National Minimum Wage) remuneration and withholding of wages have been widely documented.

Given the young profile of CEE migrant workers (81% were aged between 18 and 34 in 2008), employers can subject this segment of the working class to worst possible health and safety conditions and stockpile savings related to the organisation of work ([Fitzgerald and Hardy 2010: 132](#)). Migrant women, who upon entering the country do not qualify for social support for protracted durations, suffer disproportionately from the workplace- and (oftentimes) household-based exploitation that intertwines with sexual discrimination, including unfair and non-compensated lay-offs over pregnancy or 'unacceptable' clothing requirements.

It would, however, be wrong to assume that workers have simply accepted the intensification of exploitation. Whether at home, abroad or across borders, they have been an integral part of significant moments of resistance.

Bringing 'post-communist' labour struggles back on the radar

What emerges, for example, from the various issues of narrowly circulated independent Lithuanian labour weekly *Opozicija* is a rich mosaic of labour and societal unrest that followed immediately after the launch of 'Shock therapy'. In 1993 alone, the education workers' trade union engaged in nation-wide industrial action, managing to secure an eight-fold wage increase over twenty-four months. Additionally, in the spring of 1993, pickets against rising food prices, uniting workers, pensioners, students, unemployed and disabled persons, took place at the parliament square, which also became the meeting point for mass demonstrations over wages and unemployment as well as the European-wide 'right to work' campaign. While in May the transportation system in Lithuania's third-largest city of Klaipėda was brought to a standstill due to a three-week strike, a month later protestors organised a tent camp 'against the destruction of Lithuania's industry' in front of parliament.

More recently, the Lithuanian labour scene has witnessed the creation of the social movement 'Life is too expensive' (*Gyvenimas per brangus*), fighting to defend the rights and conditions of workers, tenants and students. In 2016, activists boycotted supermarkets over price-hikes and low wages, organised flash-mobs highlighting precarious employment conditions in retail trade, held city- and neighbourhood-assemblies uniting students, pensioners and service sector workers and resisting the Labour Code liberalisation. They staged occupations in two of the country's largest cities that attracted broad public support. The outgrowth of these organisational efforts has been the newly founded G1PS trade union (*Gegužės 1-osios profesinė sąjunga*), which stands out from its counterparts due to the emphasis on class struggle as opposed to a class compromise-led politics of tripartism. Espousing the principles of class solidarity that extends to other forms of oppression, the union also defines 'resistance' open-endedly to include mobilisations against rising prices of food, rent or living expenses, the fight for widely available and quality healthcare, education and other public services.

Approaching resistance against capital abroad

Migrant CEE workers in Western Europe have been involved in resistance too. Trade unions in the UK and Ireland have played a pioneering role in reaching out to Eastern European migrants via developing international linkages and adopting innovative organisational strategies. The Polish trade union Solidarity's use of internet promotions to encourage departing workers to unionise in the UK has been complemented with the British Trades Union Congress (TUC) members' attendance at job fairs in Warsaw and the pressure on local unions to develop Polish-language website sections and application forms ([Campbell 2006](#)).

Innovative organisational methods have included the forging of partnerships with ethnic associations (Polish Catholic Association in Birmingham) and founding Polish-language union sections in Southampton and Glasgow by the General, Municipal, Boilermakers (GMB) union and Transport and General Workers' Union. One recent example of successful recruitment is the Bakers Food and Allied Workers Union's Midlands branch, whose 6000 strong membership includes about 1000 Eastern European workers ([Chaffin 2017](#)). In 2006, the same union concluded a far-reaching agreement with an employment agency in the UK, allowing it to audit comprehensively the recruitment of Polish workers and encourage unionisation ([Hardy 2015: 195](#)).

To varying degrees, these creative tactics have inspired union organising activities in the Netherlands, Germany, Finland, Denmark, Norway and Sweden, most notably in the construction sector. In consequence, Eastern Europeans stood on the picket lines shoulder to shoulder with their colleagues, including migrant workers from Latin America and the Caribbean. Industrial action at the Iceland distribution warehouse in Enfield, pay and pension disputes with First Bus in the Midlands, as well as demonstrations alongside Irish workers in protest to management's recourse to migrant recruitment on worse pay and employment conditions, are cases in point ([Hardy 2009: 160-161](#)).

In May 2018, it was the warehouse operatives, drivers and office staff, who went on strike at Tesco Dagenham distribution centre demanding a 15% pay increase. Organised by the Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers, most were taking part in industrial action for the first time. The sizeable proportion of Eastern European workers has been described as devoted and vocal, at times even shaming picket crossers in their own languages ([Campanile 2018](#)).

Towards transnational solidarity

Finally, CEE workers have also been involved in moments of contestation across borders. Recent efforts at unionising the global retail giant Amazon provide a hopeful glimpse. Soon after workers

had started to organise at German Fulfilment Centres (FCs), the company started to build three FCs across the border in Poland, from which it intended to carry out deliveries to German customers in case of strikes at German FCs. At times, Amazon combined this strategy with an explicit threat to move jobs from strike-prone Germany to its eastern neighbour ([Boewe and Schulten 2019: 27](#)).

Thanks to direct contacts between workers at German and Polish FCs, it was possible on occasions to engage in transnational solidarity. 'When employees at the Polish amazon FC in Poznań (POZ1) were told that their shifts would be extended by an hour at short notice at the end of June 2015, spontaneous protests broke out, resulting in a go-slow strike' ([Boewe and Schulten 2019: 31](#)). They had realised that their extended shifts were supposed to counter the walkout at the FC in Bad Hersfeld, Germany.

In conclusion, the twin dynamics of exploitation should not be taken to imply that the CEE region as a whole denotes nothing else but a social wasteland where capital dominates labour. Nor is there some pre-existing hierarchy of nationalities according to which some are more prone than others to organising around the demands for social justice. Postulations about alleged 'post-communist' labour's quiescence tend to discount the many instances in which those workers actively contested capitalist exploitation at home, abroad and across national borders.

Andreas Bieler is Professor of Political Economy in the [School of Politics and International Relations](#) and Fellow of the [Centre for the Study of Social and Global Justice](#) (CSSGJ) at Nottingham University, UK and currently a Core Fellow at the [Helsinki Collegium for Advanced Studies](#), Finland.

Jokubas Salyga is a fourth-year PhD student in the [School of Politics and International Relations](#) and a Fellow of the [Centre for the Study of Social and Global Justice](#) (CSSGJ) at Nottingham University, UK and of the [ZEIT-Stiftung Foundation](#) in Hamburg, Germany.

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