

## **Immigration in Portugal – New Challenges for the Trade Unions in a context of flexibilization of work and employment**

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Track 2 – Voice and Representation at Work

In the late 90s high economic growth and strong labour shortages in certain sectors, namely civil construction, linked with large infrastructure projects, led to a significant increase in migration inflows in Portugal. Number of immigrants more than doubled, most of them working as indocumented. In 2001/2002 an extraordinary regularization process took place with 183.000 people who were in employment to be provided annually renewable so called “stay permıt”. Trade unions had a significant role in this period as a voice of the irregular migrant workers at the national socio-economic decision making, including the new policies on immigration and in the process of regularization itself by developing special services to help immigrants obtain the documents needed for their regularization (mainly work contracts).

The economic slowdown and important increase in unemployment (from 4% in 2001 to 8% in 2007) led to a decline in immigration. In 2005 and 2006, the official numbers of foreigners went down for a first time since 1980. Though, it is difficult to evaluate the current numbers of immigration due to a likely ongoing irregular migration and the non-prolongation of some “stay permits”. It appears that Brazilian immigration didn’t decline and according to some estimates there might be about 100.000 irregular immigrants from Brazil only, apart from the 71.000 legal Brasilians (the most significant immigrant community in 2006).

In 2007 a new Immigration law took place and a possibility for regularization of indocumented was opened. Trade unions were given an active role in this process since they were granted the power to certify the existence of labour relation where employers would not provide the immigrant workers a written contract needed for their regularization. According to the Services of Foreigners and Frontiers between November 2007 and March 2008 some 31.500 people applied for residence but up to April only 14% of them received a permit to live and work in the country.

In this context, main trade unions positions seem to split when it comes to migrants: while the General Confederation of Portuguese Workers (Confederaão Geral dos Trabalhadores Portugueses - CGTP), strongly presented in the sectors where immigrant and other precarious groups of labour are most significant (civil construction, hotels and restaurants, industrial and domestic cleaning and industries), oriented towards contestation and close to the comunist political project defends regularization of all immigrant workers, the Portuguese General Workers Union (Uniao Geral dos Trabalhadores Portugueses – UGT), quite less representative in the sectors above, traditionally oriented towards collective bargaining, white collar work sectors

and public employment (administration, health and education) stands after tightening of control of inflows.

Several studies show that immigrants are overrepresented in the secondary labour market associated with low wages and poor working condition (Baganha: 2000, Pena Pires: 2003, Peixoto: 2004). Employment stability is weak, with less than half of this population to have a permanent contract.

A climate of desregularization of the labour market linked with increased flexibilization and precarization of labour is of great concern in trade unions agenda. The persistence of the informal economy, particularly in the sectors where immigrants are more represented is another concern.

Significant shortages in their members over the last decades, made trade unions face the need to change and adapt to the new realities of work and employment. Representing the so called problematic groups: young workers, old workers, temps, precarious, immigrants and so on, seems to be of importance for their survival in a labour market where untypical forms of employment gain more weight and workers lose their faith in the trade unions movement.

This paper, based on literature analysis and indepth interviews with trade unions leaders, examines two main groups of questions.

1. What is the role of trade unions as voice of immigrant workers, what changes in their attitudes towards immigrants in the last decade? What about conditions of work of migrant labour, main problems regarding their work and employment and main difficulties met by trade unions in reaching and representing this population? What is trade unions opinion on the positions of immigrants towards the trade unions movement? What is the role of the associations of immigrants as voice of immigrant workers?
2. Is there a privileged relation between flexible forms of work and immigration? What is the consequence for labour?

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