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## Talking about ‘labour camps’ in post-2004 Europe: lived experiences of work, transnational mobility and exploitation among Central Eastern European Migrants

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The eastern enlargement of the European Union, and the freedom of movement of people associated with it, has been treated as one of the major steps in promoting the rights of Central Eastern Europeans. In this view, Central Eastern European workers should be able to exercise new mobility rights and secure dignified, legal employment in the enlarged European Union. The data presented in this paper casts doubt on this benign vision of intra-European mobility and the work experiences related to it. The analysis focuses on one workplace – a repackaging plant in the North of England. It has been described by interviewed workers as a ‘labour camp’, a notion which invokes memories of forced labour migration in Central Eastern Europe, carried out by 20<sup>th</sup> century totalitarian regimes. The discussion examines workplace experiences, explores workers narratives and, finally, offers workers’ testimonies against the official EU narrative of freedom of movement of labour.

Key words: Central-Eastern Europeans, EU enlargement, freedom of movement, labour migration, worker’s rights

### Introduction

EU enlargement in 2004 and labour migration from the new EU member states of Central Eastern Europe to Western Europe have been celebrated as two major achievements in the official EU canon. Denmark held the EU presidency prior to the Eastern Enlargement of the EU, and the rhetoric of then Danish Prime prime-minister Anders Rasmussen was representative of the celebratory discourse: according to Rasmussen, EU enlargement was “a great moment for Europe. 75 million people will be welcomed as new citizens of the European Union. Our common wish is to make Europe a continent of democracy, freedom, peace and prosperity. Our aim is One Europe” (Kvist 2004: 301)<sup>1</sup>.

The official narrative of EU enlargement both explicitly and implicitly stresses the newly acquired freedom of movement available to Central Eastern Europe. Such positive rhetoric of mainstream Western European politicians might be correct when one considers the mobility and transnational employment rights gained by the new EU citizens from former communist bloc in 2004. However, it should be noted that many of the old EU member states introduced temporary labour market restrictions for potential Central Eastern European labour migrants (Donaghey/Teague 2006). Moreover, millions of citizens from other post-communist countries such as Ukraine and Belarus were excluded from European integration and their future participation in the process is deeply uncertain (Wilson 2009).

There are further reasons to look at post-2004 intra-European mobility in a less pessimistic light. Some political economists (Hardy 2009) argue that migration from Central Eastern

European can be seen as a way for the neoliberal governments of post-communist states to export labour. Furthermore, they argue that it is part of new regional division of labour which turns Central Eastern Europe into a reservoir of mobile, low-wage labour which can be easily exploited by Western European capital. Moreover, both sociological and journalistic accounts of the employment experiences of new EU citizens in old EU member states reveal various levels of precariousness affecting the working and social lives of labour migrants, including unpleasant working conditions, unsocial working hours, dehumanizing management regimes and poor housing (McDowell 2009 and Cepaite 2011). The jobs taken by labour migrants tend to be concentrated in food processing and the service sector, industries characterized by low-pay and ethnic segregation. It is also argued that the allegedly excellent work ethic commonly assigned by Western employers to labour migrants is, in effect, a strategy to rationalise an intensification of the labour process (MacKenzie/Forde 2009).

Putting the general advantages and disadvantages of EU enlargement aside, from the point of view of the sociology of work, the understanding of the new mobility regime is intrinsically linked to the comprehension of labour market and workplace experiences of labour migrants themselves. As Stewart and Martinez Lucio argued in relation to the analysis of new management practices, the sociology of work should focus on analyzing “active and conscious worker voices and their place in the constitution of narratives and collective interventions and practices...” (Stewart/Martinez Lucio 2011: 328). In other words, although the new labour mobility is considered to be an unambiguous achievement by EU officialdom, it would be salient to ask how Central Eastern European workers themselves experience mobility, how they reflect upon it and how they would describe it. Moreover, what are individual and collective articulations of it? Do they differ and/or challenge official narratives of EU policy-makers? In other words, what is ‘the narrative world of people’ (Eder 2006: 259), as opposed to discourses of political, cultural and business elites of the enlarged European Union?

Although some literature recognises potential discord, this issue has not been sufficiently addressed in accordance to its importance. Eder for example, believes that “the context of European integration offers a context in which communication crosses in diverse forms national spaces of communication. This is a unique situation, in the sense that well-established narrative communities are exposed to others with whom no narrative links exist. In such moments in which there is a crisis in established narrative bonds, political and cultural elites, above all intellectuals, propose cognitive constructs which do not necessarily resonate with the narrative world of the people” (Eder 2006: 259). However, before presenting the paper’s empirical contribution on this subject, it might be worthwhile to begin with a brief contextualisation of the discussed empirical material.

The empirical data presented and interpreted here originates from a community based fieldwork undertaken in a medium sized urban locality in the North of England between December 2009 and May 2010. The overall aim of the fieldwork was to examine the socio-spatial position of labour migrants in the local urban space and identify socio-economic difficulties facing labour migrants, particularly related to the use public services, as well as to identify the main, local employers of migrants. Although the analysis of the data in this article rests on a very small part of the collected research material, i.e. on the information provided by six participants in relation to one employer, its value to generate what Stewart and Martinez Lucio (2011) call collective narratives is strong. The data primarily originates from in-depth biographical interviews conducted at workers’ homes where participants could speak freely without being constrained by potential pressure characteristic of on-site organisational case-studies (Watson 2003)<sup>2</sup>. The testimonies can be seen both as specific to labour process experiences in a single organisation, but also as indicative of the experience of migration more generally. In their narratives, interviewees tended to contextualise their work experiences and relate it to their status of being labour migrants.

The analysis focuses on the testimonies of labour migrants related to their experiences of being employed in a glass repackaging company, which also acted as a national and, as it later appeared, a transnational employment agency. The factory is located in a medium-sized

Northern English town which has been a centre of the coal mining industry until the closure of the mines in the 1990s. The local employment shifted from mining, which was known for its job security and strong collective representation of workers after WWII in England (Warwick/ Littlejohn 1992), to low-paid jobs in recycling and meat-packing industries. These new sectors started to attract migrant labour in the late 1990s, primarily refugees and undocumented workers, however the number of migrants has dramatically increased since the EU enlargement in 2004. The name of this employer first surfaced in the early stage of the research when the researcher was primarily focused on locating the biggest local employers of migrant labour. A manager of local social services for young people (incidentally a former shop steward for the National Union of Mineworkers and an active participant in the 1984 watershed 1984 strike)<sup>3</sup>, mentioned it as a main employer of Central Eastern European labour migrants, adding that this firm had a reputation for mistreating these workers. Subsequently, more in-depth data on the experiences of migrant workers for this employer emerged from interviews with two migrant households and one focus group with labour migrants. All interviews were conducted in the migrants' mother-tongues, Polish and Russian, with the exception of a female Estonian migrant (Helle), who was interviewed in English.

Arguably, the most powerful phrase capturing the realities of work in this organisation was the description given by Pawel, a Polish labour migrant: 'It is not a workplace; it is a labour camp...'

After having been interviewed at his home, Pawel pointed to a building in the town centre while driving the researcher to the train station and said that it was the same glass repackaging factory which he had described as a 'labour camp'. He also added: 'Here it is...This is an English Auschwitz Birkenau...'

In the course of their interviews, other migrants subsequently shared Pawel's view and agreed with his description of the workplace as a 'labour camp'. One exception was Helle, the Estonian migrant. Although she did not use the description 'labour camp', her sentiments nonetheless reflected a similar perspective – she described the management's attitude towards its workers as 'inhuman'. An implicit relationship can arguably be drawn: historians of labour camps claim that the system of forced migration embodied inhumanity and rejected the dignity of the 'other' (Appelbaum 2004).

The aforementioned description should be utterly striking for any social researcher conscious of European history; it is simply impossible for a researcher with a Central Eastern European background (a Polonophile Lithuanian of Jewish/Ukrainian/Baltic German ancestry) to overlook its implications. Although labour camps as an institution are not exclusively found in totalitarian communist or fascist systems - Carley and Molina (2011), for example, examine agricultural labour camps in the present day USA - the social group to which Pawel belongs has a very particular set of historical, cultural and social associations related to Stalinist and Nazi labour camps.

Moreover, the way Pawel uses the notion of 'labour camp' might not be a classical example of what a second generation Durkheimian sociologist Halbwachs (1992) called collective memory. Halbwach's concept referred to public discourse created and sustained by the nation-state and society regarding the historical past. Eder and Spohn (2005) have also conducted research on a similar type of collective memory in conjunction with EU enlargement. However, Pawel's expression represents the use of historical symbols aimed at challenging exploitation; it is also related to the experience of labour migration. It exemplifies what some authors (McBride/Martinez Lucio 2011) describe as the politics of memory, i.e. the use of social identities by workers in articulating collective visions of contemporary employment. Specifically, it carries a simultaneous reference to the Stalinist system of forced labour migration and the Nazi system of extermination and 'Non-Aryan' labour exploitation. Both are the most quintessential symbols of what the European project in the institutional form of the EU would like to leave in the past. These symbols are firmly entrenched in the historical context of Central Eastern Europe, where between the 1930s and 1950s, to use a phrase coined by the historian Snyder (2010), this part of Europe was turned into the 'bloodlands' and its people became victims of Stalin and Hitler's versions of totalitarianisms.

Strikingly, these painful symbols of the historical past and totalitarianism were evoked in the interviews to describe the experiences of new labour mobility in a liberal-democratic Europe. What does this say about the experiences of Central Eastern European labour migrants in old EU member states such as the UK?

The questions posed above are going to be examined in the following order. Firstly, the analysis will look at the day to day experiences at the workplace described by labour migrants as a 'labour camp'. Secondly, the focus will move towards examining the ways employers can exploit freedom of movement in the EU. Thirdly, the analysis will look at workplace conflicts and worker's struggles for human dignity. Throughout the discussion, the data will be interpreted and contextualised, however a priority will be given to the workers' voices, hence the wide usage of quotations in the text. Such an approach is very close to that of Bourdieu et al. (1999), particularly their emphasis on studying suffering in contemporary societies and data presentation. Finally, a socio-cultural reflection will conclude the article.

### The nature and character of work

The firm's main economic activity has been built around a plant situated in the centre of a medium-sized town in Northern England. However, the firm has also acted as an employment agency, providing its workers to employers in nearby, as well as more distant locations. The workforce came from very different national backgrounds, both from the EU and non-EU countries, a factor, which, as it will appear later, was used by management to divide the workforce: 'Lithuanians, Ukrainians, Byelorussians and even people from Caucasus, such as Azeris worked there, it was a mix...not only people from the EU worked there.'

In the plant itself, the work consisted of checking and repackaging bottles, whilst the outsourced workers performed various semi-skilled tasks of a labour intensive nature in different localities. In the words of Pawel from Poland: 'Workers check bottles for damage. They go through and sort them. It is a horrible workplace. They have a number of departments, they also send people to other towns in England. A great number of migrants are working there'.

The labour process in the plant itself was seen as boring and exhausting by the workers, the absolute majority of them being labour migrants. Moreover, those workers who were posted in different localities complained about the culture of long working hours associated with travel. Furthermore, working in the main plant did not mean that work and employment relations were more positive in terms of worker outcomes. Here is what Masha, a Russian speaking woman from Latvia, said about her experiences:

*Then I came here and started to work in that place...My husband correctly described it as a labour camp...They treat people like dogs. I was slightly luckier because I got a permanent contract. Every morning we would leave at four o'clock in the morning and would return at eight in the evening. But they paid for the transportation; we would travel two hours one way and they would pay for four hours of travel costs. They would pay for the overtime as well. I did not like the work at all...but there was no other choice. I did not have time to find other work because we would return very late and also work during weekends, when everything was closed. At the end, I was so bored of working there... I just left.*

Several issues can be deduced from the labour migrant's testimonies. First of all, the unpleasant nature of work was augmented by the dehumanizing behaviour of the management. Labour migrants were not only antagonized by low pay and difficulties in leaving this employer, but also by the lack of elementary respect from the management. Moreover, the management regime operated within a strict framework of ethnic segregation. While the workforce consisted almost exclusively of labour migrants from Central Eastern Europe, the managers and supervisors, on the other hand, were exclusively White British.

According to Marek from Poland: ‘In reality, for checking those bottles they employed migrants, primarily Poles but also others. The English only worked as supervisors and would always try to increase the speed of work....’

Such an arrangement created additional boundaries and further emphasized the alienation of labour migrants. At work they were seen as automatons, or ‘dogs’, to use Masha’s words, whose only role was to obey the British management’s orders. According to the participants, commands such as ‘speed up’ and ‘faster’ were repeated endlessly by the management. Helle, an Estonian woman, described, as was mentioned earlier, the management’s attitude as ‘inhuman’. She also described the practice of soldiering when it came to shift patterns. Migrants would be ordered to work certain shifts without any consent from their part or prior consultation. In many ways this picture is not unrepresentative of the wider realities of low-paid workplaces and is not limited to the experiences of labour migrants (see, for example, the study of Pollert (2010) on low-paid British workers). However, the fact that the workforce was migrant in origin brought with it an additional layer of exploitation.

The workplace was viewed as ‘labour camp’ for two reasons; firstly, because the abuse had had a distinctive ethnic element, and secondly, because accepting employment with such organisation had not been perceived as something purely voluntary. In the words of Aldona, who also agreed with the use of the notion ‘labour camp’, life had forced labour migrants to leave their countries of origins and work at such places. Thus, the following interpretation could tentatively be put forward: if in the recent historical past, from the 1930s to 1950s, the term ‘labour camp’ was associated with the foreign i.e. Stalinist and National Socialist totalitarian regimes forcefully removing and deporting workers and using them as slave labourers, in the contemporary context, Central Eastern Europeans may use this term to point to two elements. Firstly, it reveals that the dehumanisation of workers by employers has an ethnic dimension and, secondly, it points to the view that migration itself derives from inequality and poverty in the former post-communist states, something which is covered in the literature at length (Hardy 2009). Those two elements are interlinked, and decoupling one from another renders the mentioning of ‘labour camp’ meaningless and overlooks the socio-cultural context of workers’ testimonies. It is a further reminder of the need to incorporate the analysis of Central Eastern European cultures into the study of post-communist transformation (Müller 2010), of which, as one might argue, post-2004 European labour migration is one of the main legacies.

### Freedom of movement: an advantage for labour and/or capital?

As was mentioned above, and as Masha’s testimony suggests, the organisation acted as an employment agency, in addition to running the main plant. It further intensified the labour process by extending hours of work; labour migrants recounted their experiences of waking up at four o’clock in the morning, spending two hours on one way journeys and returning home at ten in the evening. It had a negative impact on their personal health and on their ability to find work elsewhere. It also reduced their chances for participating in the social life of the surrounding communities. Furthermore, the employment agency model of supplying workers to other employers on temporary basis was not limited to the UK; labour migrants were sent as far away as Germany and Belgium. Upon their return, and after having to endure long journeys, they were told to work night shifts at the main plant. In this context, Helle, a part-time Estonian worker, described the experiences of her son, who also worked there:

*They send people even to work in another countries...My son was working in Belgium... when he came back, he arrived here at one o’clock day time and at six o’clock he needed to be at workplace working twelve hours at night. This is fair? No! I ask him: it’s more people than just you? He says, yes, everybody.*

The 'labour camp' climate of employment relationship prevented workers from refusing to work such time patterns. It created further problems; since the worker's main activity was ensuring the quality of repackaged bottles, migrant employees could be blamed by the management for mistakes and could also be made to face disciplinary action. Moreover one can see the wider implication of such occurrences. Open borders and the freedom movement, both being much celebrated by EU officialdom, do not always bring any tangible gains to mobile workers. On the contrary, the freedom of movement within the EU can help employers to maximise profits without any concern for the well-being of mobile European workers. It challenges the common wisdom of win-win implications of the freedom of movement in the EU. Far from being a zero-sum game, internal labour mobility can be used by employers to intensify labour process and exploit vulnerable groups of workers such as labour migrants.

### The conflict and its consequences

The degrading treatment was not limited to the transnational deployment of labour migrants. Stable employment, i.e. the work within the central plant, was characterised by the causal abuse of workers by management. Aldona, a Polish woman remembers the demeaning atmosphere at the workplace:

*Five years ago there was a horrible racism there... It was very discriminatory. In this workplace, most of the people were migrants from Poland, Englishmen worked only as supervisors. The supervisors would always scream – faster, faster...They would use abusive language and insult. Particularly they would insult those who could not speak English. The abuse was directed at Poles, Azeris and Ukrainians. Verbal abuse was horrible. When we complained to management, they stopped paying overtime, paying holiday pay. They started to treat us worse.*

The prevailing employment relationship inevitably brought protest and resistance from labour migrants. Aldona, a former school teacher from Poland, who became a *de facto* personnel manager at the plant, tried to formalise the employment relationship, to introduce a basic system of documentation and, more importantly, to ensure that every worker had a written contract. However, when she tried to bring about some basic improvements, including stopping supervisors from verbally abusing workers, the management resorted to the practice of divide and rule. It tried to pit non-EU migrants against Aldona's fellow Poles, accusing her of trying to promote the interests of her own ethnic group at the expense of others. In her words:

*We had a very cordial relationship with the Russian-speakers...When a female supervisor wanted to hurt me, she collected this Russian speaking group and told them that I was complaining over the working conditions to people outside because I wanted to hurt non-Poles, because non-Poles did not have (legal) documents. She tried to manipulate, knowing that they were undocumented. However, they knew me very well, they knew that I could not hurt them in any way.*

When the manipulation failed – workers, irrespective of their nationality, including those with ambivalent migration status, supported her - she and her husband were sacked along with ninety additional workers, almost half of the workforce. But she did not give up; Aldona travelled to a nearby English city and saw a Polish counsel, which then intervened. Aldona, who was not herself reinstated, still believes the intervention had had a positive impact. She remembers vividly how the events unfolded:

*The Russian speaking workers were grateful and they brought mushrooms and berries which they collected in the forest as a gift...I was very honoured. The female supervisor, who saw it, told that I was taking bribes. I responded by telling: it is you who are taking bribes in envelopes from people when you accept them to work. So in order to tell how they treat people, how they treat us, I decided to go to the Polish consulate in a nearby city. We went there, we explained how the Polish people were fired without being paid overtime, holiday pay. I went in the name of all people who worked there...And afterwards there was an intervention.*

Workers started to receive a written contract and the most abusive supervisors were sacked:

*They paid for holidays, transportation expenses. Things have changed and that woman, the supervisor, has been fired. Now they have a written contract. Before they only have a note with name and surname, and national insurance number. Now there is more – contact details, bank account numbers. Importantly, there is a contract which says everything from A to Z.*

Aldona's testimony points to three important issues. Firstly, labour migration sanctioned by the EU excludes workers from the outside of the EU, for example, Ukrainian and Byelorussian workers. It allows management to divide workers based on nationality and try to curb resistance. Thus, it is worth remembering that the EU's freedom of movement has perpetuated existing divisions. The labour market was opened only to those Central Eastern Europeans whose countries entered the EU, allowing those mobile workers to claim certain citizenship rights. However, for the workers from countries such as Ukraine or Belarus, irregular access to the labour markets of the old EU member state often remains the only realistic option. It makes them extremely vulnerable to exploitation from employers, which is another kind of human rights violations. One can note sincere concerns over the autocratic regime in Belarus among liberal commentators, combined with calls for the EU to intervene in support of civil liberties, e.g. Ash (2010). However, the issue of civil rights for labour migrants from Belarus in the EU does not receive similar attention

Secondly, Aldona approached a consulate rather than the local branch of national trade union, a sign that trade unions have been unprepared to support such vulnerable workers as Aldona. Moreover, it is worth noting that Aldona mentioned envelopes of cash taken by management in exchange for securing employment. Such practices are usually associated with what some scholars call the corruption of the post-communist workplace in the former Eastern bloc (Williams 2009). It involves relying on 'cash in hand' payments, a form of informal employment relationship aimed to benefit employers through tax evasion (Woolfson 2007). On the other hand, managers can engage in this form of extortion, asking employees or job applicants for cash payments in return to job offers and promotion (Round et al. 2008). Evidently, the accession has not ended such corrupt practices. On the contrary, the precarious position of migrants related to weak language skills and rudimentary knowledge of local employment laws allows opportunistic managers to recreate post-communist corruption in the old EU member states.

Finally, Aldona's views on a positive change at the workplace should be treated carefully, as the potential improvement is very limited. By her husband's own admission, the workplace offers dead end jobs at a minimum wage. Furthermore, the situation after the 2008 global economic recession has brought about its own dynamics. Helle, an Estonian migrant, noticed that because of the insecurity brought about by the current recession, workers feel they are in a weaker position *vis-a-vis* management. Workers fear losing their jobs and are thus more likely to consent to such work-related demands from the management as excessive travelling and insufficient breaks between shifts. Helle stated that: 'Nobody can say no...Everybody is worried about work especially now... this credit crunch... Everybody is

afraid to refuse because they're afraid that they can lose work...especially if you are foreigner. You know, you can't be as flexible as the English'

Clearly, even though there has been a move to what might be described as a more civilized personnel management, the old dynamics of power within the employment relationship still play a role. The lack of collective workplace representation combined with specific migrant vulnerabilities, renders labour migrants vulnerable to the unilateral dictate of management.

## Concluding remarks

The Polish writer Gustav Herling-Grudzinski, who, along with tens of thousands of other Polish POWs, was exploited as a slave labourer in the Stalinist labour camp, remembers that "the whole system of forced labour in Soviet Russia – in all its stages, the interrogations and hearings, the preliminary imprisonment, and the camp itself – is intended primarily not to punish the criminal, but rather to exploit him economically and transform him psychologically" (Herling 1987:65). Herling's book, with its shocking depiction of the Soviet labour camp and crimes of the Stalinist state, provoked a wave of protest from the Soviet loyalist, including such notorious figures as the state-sanctioned embodiment of the Soviet socialist worker, Alexei Stachanov. Stachanov defended the official narrative claiming that the labour camps were benevolent and corrective institutions. The letters of Soviet loyalist, which can be found in the cited edition of Herling's book, are examples of the clash between collective experiences of individuals and official propaganda. The empirical material discussed in this article also points to the narratives' clash, albeit in a very different socio-historic context.

Clearly, there are differences between the two: the prisoners of the Stalinist (or Nazi) camps could not freely leave and could be arbitrary or selectively murdered; in contrast, the contemporary labour migrants are guarded by a liberal democracy and can leave if they found a better job. However, the term 'labour camp' used by labour migrants is not simply an extreme comparison, it arguably offers an important insight into how labour migrants view mobility and the work experiences associated with it. It is a further reminder that, contrary to conventional claims, labour migration is not a purely voluntary process (Cohen 1987). The interviewed labour migrants came to the UK not because of the enthusiastic embrace of freedom of movement but because of socio-economic problems in transition countries, particularly low-wages and unemployment.

Nonetheless, some authors (Woolfson 2010) polemically compare current migration from the new EU member states to the Stalinist deportations of the 1940s, particularly its scale in terms of the number of people moving. Certainly, there are literary similarities between the labour camps of the Stalinist era and the 'labour camp' where the interviewed migrants worked. The classic account by Appelbaum (2004) of the Soviet forced labour system and experiences in the discussed site have certain commonalities, including ethnic divisions and abuse, manipulations of management, 'soldiering' and the degradation of labour. For example, Appelbaum (2004) told the story of a merchant from the British Raj who was rescued by a British counsel from the infamous Solovki labour camp in the 1920s. Similarly, Tooze (2006) described exhausted Central Eastern European forced labourers being moved across Europe to sustain the Nazi war machine.

However, even more important than any literary comparisons, the testimonies of the 'labour camp' should be seen as a discourse created by mobile workers, a symbolic counter-narrative of new European mobility in the era of neo-liberalism. Unlike the members of the post-communist Central Eastern European elites who largely embrace a neoliberal view of society (Bluhm/Trappmann 2008), the presented data shows that workers' narratives and experiences can diverge, as well as contest, the official neoliberal rhetoric of work in the new Europe. Interviewed Central Eastern European workers challenged and contested the supremacy of the employer prerogative, a principle fundamental to extreme free-market ideology. The experiences in the discussed 'labour camp' reveal several features, for example,

management behaviour and working conditions, which workers consider unacceptable at the workplace. In doing so, Central Eastern European labour migrants emerged not as passive victims, but as articulate fighters against injustice<sup>4</sup>. In addition, the discussed case of the 'labour camp' should not be simply viewed as a problem with one rogue employer trying to opportunistically exploit foreign workers. The features uncovered here reflect the realities of low-wage employment in Britain and elsewhere (Pollert 2010), where loose employment regulations and the lack of trade union representation renders workers defenceless *vis-a-vis* management.

Finally, on a more positive note, the case shows a very different way of challenging social injustice, compared to some previously documented cases. In one such account, Kalb (2009) focuses on a Polish trade union activist who increasingly became disillusioned by free-market reforms and drifted towards supporting a far-right, anti-Semitic and homophobic political party. For Kalb (2009) and other sociologists of post-communist transition such as Ost (2005), the far-right xenophobia among Polish and other workers from Central Eastern Europe is in actuality misplaced class anger against the neoliberal economic order in post-communist societies. The discussion in this article demonstrated that the rejection of social injustice by Central Eastern European workers can take other forms, which are principally different from what Tismaneanu (1998) called 'fantasies of salvation'. Instead of constructing ethno-nationalist fantasies in which blame is passed to the 'other' – the Jew, the Gypsy, the intellectual – in the discourse identified in this article, the protest is directed against the unambiguous abusers, namely the employer and managers who willingly and knowingly violate social and employment rights. Furthermore, its expression relies on historical imagery which is used not to dehumanize the ethnic 'other' but to re-claim one's own dignity. In contrast to the often politically opportunistic use of historical memories linked to the experiences of the Stalinist and Nazi totalitarian regimes (Judt 2010 and Finkelstein 2003), the politics of memory exhibited in this mini case study are used to reject exploitation of labour and social injustice in contemporary society. Progressive social scientists should not overlook such powerful narratives and metaphors used by ordinary people, because the dissemination of its imagery can bring sociology closer to the ideal of fulfilling its liberating potential (Ossewarde 2007) and also help to reconnect the discipline with the wider public.

On a final note, it might be suitable to recall how deeply ironically Eyal et al. (1998) had re-interpreted the image of Havel's (1985) green grocer, a metaphor for the everyday lives of ordinary people in communist countries of pre-1989 Central Eastern Europe. Eyal et al. employ these famous narrative to criticise the neoliberal reforms of the 1990s: 'the soul of Havel's greengrocer had to be rescued quickly, even at the expense of his shop, so that he could live in truth, even though it might also mean that he will live in poverty' (Eyal et al. 1998: 181). In the light of the article's discussion, it might occur to a critical observer to ask two interlinked questions: why are the contemporary liberal, democratic societies of EU member states oblivious to Havel green grocers' employment in the 'labour camps' of post-2004 Europe and what should be done to change it?

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Rasmussen later became the general secretary of the NATO. Interestingly, during the NATO intervention in Libya in 2011, the justification of which was underpinned by a similar liberal discourse, the NATO ships were also preventing migrants from crossing the Mediterranean. Moreover, their actions sometimes endangered the lives of migrants. It shows that when it comes to the interests of Western nation-states, the liberal rhetoric does not lead to the adaptation of liberal immigration policy.

<sup>2</sup> It should be mentioned that some ethnographic workplace-based studies on labour migrants, such as Hopkins (2010), provide excellent accounts of ethnic dynamics in the selected plants, however its focus lies with specific dynamics of labour process, and the wider European dimension is not an issue per se.

<sup>3</sup> The strike and its aftermath are vividly portrayed in Ken Loach's documentary film *What Side Are You On* (1985)? One of the interesting features of the film is the images of striking miners and members of their

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families revoking historical memories of working-class struggles particularly fight against fascism. The fight against police brutality is seen as continuation of international working class struggles.

- <sup>4</sup> The act of migration itself can be seen as a form of apolitical protest over the lack of social dialogue in post-communist countries – workers whose voices are not heard are voting with their feet and are leaving (Meardi 2007).

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