

Rights of migrant workers in the animal industry - Unemployment self-help Oldenburg e.V. (ALSO/Arbeitslosenhilfe Oldenburg e.V.)

Those who have to claim social benefits often feel helpless in the face of complicated laws, bureaucratic obstacles or even the threat of sanctions. Since 1982, the unemployment self-help organisation ALSO (Arbeitslosenselbsthilfe Oldenburg) has been offering free and independent help in dealing with a social system that all too often fights the poor instead of poverty. In addition to social counselling for the unemployed and people with low incomes, we have also been offering multilingual migration counselling in the Oldenburg district since 2020. We believe that poverty and unemployment should not be taboo topics that everyone has to deal with on their own. At ALSO, this belief is reflected in our counselling situations. If necessary, we accompany people to their meetings at state departments in order to assert justified claims. ALSO is also politically committed to improving the living conditions of poor and unemployed people. This includes not only informing people about their rights or demanding more money, but also fighting the stigmatisation of poverty. We also work against the exploitation of people, animals and the environment, as well as against racism and exclusion. We are networking with like-minded people to make demands and raise awareness of our concerns. ALSO is largely financed by donations. Except for a few employees, mainly volunteers are working at ALSO. We welcome other volunteers and also interns who would like to help with political actions or in the day-to-day consulting business. Contact and further information can be found on our homepage: www.also-zentrum.de

This following text was written by Guido Grüner from the Unemployment self-help Oldenburg (ALSO) (www.also-beratung.de, www.also-zentrum.de)

Contribution from ALSO, the Oldenburg unemployment self-help organisation, to the Tribunal

Life situations and experiences in labour migration have many facets. People see what they see depending on where they look and what they look at.

What migration really means for migrants is somewhere between the thesis of the "freedom of migration" and the statement of a person affected, "I would have to be a pig to earn good money as a migrant in the food industry - but I am not and I don't want to be".

We experience many things in our consultations and encounters. For this contribution, a look at the health consequences for the workers in the German meat industry was required.

We see how destructive work is in an industry that shines on national and international markets; Destructive, at the same time physical and psychological stress and work overload of workers and their family members.

We meet workers in our counselling services on social and labour law, wage refusal, lack of health and social insurance and regarding their experiences at the employment department and job centre. We are also asked many questions about pregnancy and we hear a lot about illness, injuries and exhaustion.

The hardships migrants experience is a consequence of the immense pressure put on them as workers in factories that produce on the basis of the cheap prices.

"Faster, Faster" or "Finished, Finished" are often the first German words that migrant workers learn when they are driven by foremen. Years ago a workers' council at a poultry slaughterhouse told us about their struggle to stop foremen shouting at the assembly line workers.

This year a worker at this slaughterhouse told us about being humiliated and beaten at work. He and another worker, beaten green and blue in the face by the German foreman of a German subcontractor, did not even have the intention to report their tormentors to the police. The reason; the idea that they had a right to physical and mental integrity at work in Germany had long been driven out of them.

These are the peaks we see in terms of the use of violence against workers and specifically migrant workers.

A general characteristic of the situation in the meat industry is the daily wear and tear of the workers: Shift work at high speed and cold, often until all orders accepted by the company have been processed, and additional shifts. Some workers work 7 days a week for weeks and months. We know of current examples from industrial cleaning in South Oldenburg.

Under this pressure, cruel accidents at work occur, for example when the workers' arms or legs are caught by cutting machines or when the knives of belt workers cut them up themselves.

The constant threat of dismissal from the very first illness, the usually six-month probationary period of fixed-term employment contracts, the lack of effective labour law protection, the high hurdles in accessing wage replacement unemployment benefits ("the official language is German", it says), the strict exclusion rules for EU citizens in the law for job centres, mean that even those who are ill - even against explicit, sometimes urgent medical advice - are forced to appear at work.

Even pregnant women continue to work on the assembly lines - in fear of being dismissed due to their pregnancy. Protection against dismissal of pregnant women, to protect life and health, is unknown to many foremen and managers or is again being ignored to better knowledge.

Recently, for example, the Nienburg Labour Court had to make these protection rules clear to a (German) manager of a meat processing firm near Diepholz. The manager had previously 'sovereignly' ignored any indication and evidence to it.

Against all the rules of the current Working Hours Act, a German industrial cleaner has his workers work the night shift seven days a week for weeks. Roommates in the accommodation call them "zombies" and thus find a term for their condition. Despite this work performance, they do not earn much more than 2,000 € net per month. They do not dare to think about sick leave, although their state of exhaustion would certainly justify it.

Attention should also be drawn to family members, especially children and young people. Just last week a schoolgirl from Vechta told me about her tiredness. She is the only one who speaks German. She is always in demand when it comes to contacts with the German-speaking environment, with employers, doctors, schools, job centres, employment agencies, health insurance companies, landlords, etc. She works around the clock. She doesn't dare to put the phone down or switch it off. In fact, she is responsible for many people, not just her family. We know of many children and young people in her situation, some of whom are the only 12-year-olds who understand and speak the language and are able to decipher the writing that is commonly used here. Not only physicians and

psychologists will be able to judge that such a childhood and adolescence is not 'appropriate for children' and will have consequences.

So what is currently missing?

1. Equal rights for all! No discriminational treatment of migrants at the job centre, employment office and family department,
2. a real ban on temporary work and work contracts in food production – The following must be applied: one company, one workforce
3. significantly higher hourly wages; 15 €/hour should be the minimum,
4. effective enforcement of the protection of pregnant women and the Working Time Act,
5. Schools and childcare that can also meet the needs of migrant children and youth,
6. a local, nationwide, independent and party-based counselling and support structure for all migrants without language barriers
7. sufficient, dignified and affordable housing.