The Seventh Man

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The following extract from John Berger's *The Seventh Man,* to be published by Penguin's in Spring 1975,* examines the political implications of migrant labour in West European countries.

In Germany and Great Britain, one out of seven manual workers is an immigrant.

Why do they come here? For the money. And they send it out of the country. That's why prices go up.

A migrant worker: If you want to earn the same as us, you have only to do the same jobs as us.

In a dream separate, even contradictory, truths can be entwined. A thing may be two things at the same time. A table of wood and a sledge. A hook and a beak.

Every time he goes to work he is the subject of three wagers: two are being made by others, and one is his.

For capitalism migrant workers fill a labour shortage in a specially convenient way. They accept the wages offered and, in doing so, slow down wage-increases in general. The significance of this is explained in a Report by the German Institute for Economic Research:

> Although opposition to the continual inflow of foreign workers is to be found here and there, it is necessary to realize that with a labour market cut off from other countries the pressure of wages in the Federal Republic would become considerably stronger, due to increased competition by employers for the domestic labour potential. This increased pressure of costs could hardly fail to affect the competitiveness of West German enterprises, both in the export markets and at home.

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Capitalism requires an ever-increasing accumulation of capital. This demands ever-increasing productivity. But the market does not always respond in regular correspondence with production: hence the cycle of recession and expansion and a rising tendency to inflation. Since the war these have been controlled, but controlling them involves fluctuations creating unemployment. The size of the labour force needs to be variable. There must be a labour reserve, which can be laid off during recessions and brought in when the economy is expanding. If the organized national working class formed this labour reserve and suffered accordingly, they might begin to demand that an end be put to the system: they might become a revolutionary proletariat. If, however, a large part of the labour reserve is made up of migrant workers, they can be 'imported' when needed and 'exported' (sent home) when made temporarily redundant, and there need be no political repercussions, for the migrants have no political rights and little political influence.

The migrant is in several other ways an 'ideal' worker. He is eager to work overtime. He is willing to do shift work at night. He arrives politically innocent – that is to say without any proletarian experience. Those who apply for work at Citroen are often asked to show their tickets to prove that they have just arrived in France.

Any individual who does become a leader or 'militant' can be immediately and easily expelled from the country. The trade unions are unlikely to defend him. He pays taxes and social security contributions but will not draw many benefits during his temporary residence. His cost to the system in terms of social capital can be kept to a minimum. It is made difficult for his family to join him: hence his children don't have to be educated: as a 'single' man (a man made single) he will not greatly exacerbate the working-class housing shortage. By German law a migrant must have a living/sleeping space of 6 square metres. Seventy per cent of migrant workers in Germany live singly, using not much more than that guaranteed minimum space. It is true that he may send a third of his wages out of the country but, as has already been pointed out, a large proportion of the money sent away is spent on goods manufactured in the country where he works. Inter-governmental agreements about the reception of migrants often involve trade agreements in the obverse direction.

Further, there is a global convenience. The employment of migrant workers relieves unemployment in their countries of origin. If all the twelve million migrants now in North West Europe

returned home, their presence at home could well lead to explosive political situations; the most interested imperialist country would then be forced to intervene in order to preserve 'law and order'. A Spanish migrant worker:

> If we started a large-scale social revolution today in Spain, we would have to reckon with possible American intervention tomorrow. The countries of origin (where we come from) are becoming increasingly more dependent.

With many workers abroad part of the wage is that social revolutions in their countries of origin is less likely.

Most of all, however, is the political clause of the wager. Migrant workers do the most menial jobs. Their chances of promotion are exceedingly poor. When they work in gangs, it is arranged that they work together as foreigners. Equal working relationships to indigenous workers are kept to a minimum. The migrant workers have a different language, a different culture and different short-term interests. They are immediately identifiable – not as individuals – but as a group (or as series of national groups). As a group they are at the bottom of every scale: wages, type of work, job security, housing, education, purchasing power. Thus indigenous workers see another group, less privileged than they are, who differ from them. A Marxist would immediately point out that their differences are secondary, and that they share the same class interest. The recognition of this truth is necessary for any revolutionary movement. But the political convenience of migrant labour for capitalism lies precisely in the fact that this theoretical truth is overlaid daily and disguised by experience.

The indigenous worker sees the migrant in an 'inferior' position, and what he sees and hears emphasizes how the migrant is different. Different to the point of being unknowable. Imperceptibly – there is no moment of decision – the two characteristics fuse. From being unknowable the migrant comes to be seen as being beneath understanding: as being intrinsically unpredictable, disorganized, feckless, devious. And then the inverted commas around inferior disappear: what has become the migrant's intrinsic inferiority is now expressed in his inferior status. What he is paid to do reflects what he is. The fusion has occurred.

Such a view, widespread in the indigenous working class, can in certain circumstances lead to overt and violent racism. An acute housing shortage or any other form of urban frustration can spark off riots or systematic racial persecution. When this happens it is not particularly convenient for the ruling class. They will call it a

regrettable excess. The convenience for them is less dramatic and may be more lasting.

The presence of migrant workers, seen as intrinsically inferior and therefore occupying an inferior position in society, confirms the principle that a social hierarchy – of some kind or another – is justified and inevitable. The working class comes to accept the basic bourgeois claim that social inequality is finally an expression of natural inequality.

Once accepted, the principle of natural inequality gives rise to fear: the fear of being cheated out of one's natural and rightful place in the hierarchy. The threat is thought of as coming from both above and below. The working class will become no less suspicious of the bosses. But they may become equally jealous of their privileges over those they consider to be their natural inferiors.

Certain political theorists will now say: Yes, yes, the old tactic of Divide and Rule; the working class must answer: United We Stand! Divided We Fall! It is more subtle than that. We are in a labyrinth.

The principle of natural inequality rests upon judging men and women according to their abilities. It is obvious that ability varies, and that abilities are unequally distributed. It can even be admitted that in a certain field an inferior can show himself to be a superior, e.g., a Greek may be a better dancer than a German, a Spaniard a better guitarist than a Dutchman. What determines a person's position in the social hierarchy is the sum of his abilities as required in that particular social and economic system. He is no longer seen as another man, as the unique centre of his own experience: he is seen as the mere conglomerate of certain capacities and needs. He is seen, in other words, as a complex of functions within a social system. And he can never be seen as more than that unless the notion of equality between men is re-introduced.

Equality has nothing to do with capacity or function: it is the recognition of being. The Church arranged earth and heaven hierarchically. But to make the idea of the soul convincing it had to concede that all men were equal before God. Karamazov went further: if all are not saved, what good is the salvation of one only?

Only in relation to what men are in their entirety can a social system be judged just or unjust: otherwise it can be merely assessed as relatively efficient or inefficient. The principle of equality is the revolutionary principle, not only because it challenges hierarchies, but because it asserts that all men are

equally whole. And the converse is just as true: to accept inequality as natural is to become fragmented, is to see oneself as no more than the sum of a set of capacities and needs.

The above argument may show why the working class, if it accepts the natural inferiority of the migrants, is likely to reduce its own demands to economic ones, to fragment itself and to lose its own political identity. It does not have to be argued abstractly for this to happen.

Unhappily, it can be argued proverbially by the worker so that in his attitude to other men, to society and to himself – in his attitude to his own sense of hope and purpose – he reinforces and completes the fragmentation which society is already imposing upon him.

That this will continue happening is the wager of the ruling class.

Most migrant workers are not politically conscious of their exploitation. Their thought is traditional – either Catholic or Muslim; their expectation of change, their humanism, is gathered into hopes of individual and family achievement. It is too soon to know how they might become politicized if they stayed longer. The employers, aware of the inconvenience of a politically conscious sub-proletariat, plan for a continual 'rotation' of foreign labour so that no workers will stay too long.

A very small number of migrant workers do think politically. Sometimes this is the result of their experience of oppression in their own countries; sometimes the result of their disillusion, their clarity, about what they see in the metropolitan countries. A migrant's experience of capitalism, because he is exploited in every field, becomes, if he is politically aware of it at all, a very unified experience. In his life he is brought face to face, always negatively, with the unity of the entire system. The steps of his thought become correspondingly large: far larger than those of theorists within the system. Thus a few migrant workers, a handful, become revolutionaries. Their position is highly vulnerable because they can always be deported within twenty-four hours. Their position is potentially influential because they speak the same language, live the same lives, as the mass of their politically unconscious compatriots.

This is the situation in which the second wager is made: the wager of the official trade unions.

All the trade unions in the metropolitan countries once opposed the use of immigrant labour. They feared it as a weapon (he has not thought of himself as a minute part of a weapon) to be used

by the employers to keep wages down. Despite the opposition of the unions, immigrant labour was increasingly brought in. This forced the unions to change their policy and to try to attract the foreign workers as members.

Migrants have the right to join existing trade unions. In France and Switzerland they may not hold an official union post. In every country they are barred from political activity – what constitutes political activity being left to the discretion of the authorities. In Germany about 30 per cent of migrant workers are unionized; in France and Switzerland about 10 per cent. The majority of migrants, whether they belong to a union or not, are sceptical about the unions being willing or able to fight for their interests.

In fact, the unions have not resolved their original dilemma. (There is no reason why their policy about immigrant workers should be more global or radical than the narrow reformism of their general policies.) They proclaim that the working class is international. They demand equal pay for equal work, and in most countries this is the law – although it can fairly easily be got round because migrants are often not aware of their rights, or if they are without papers, have no rights. Certain unions publish papers in the language of the principal migrant groups. On occasions the unions support strike action by migrants. (The unions' fear that migrants would act as scab labour proved wrong; they have nearly always followed official strikes.) The unions appeal for improved living conditions for migrants. But they have never been able to think or act beyond the proposition that the migrant worker belongs to the country he has left and therefore does not belong here. This has made them powerless before the contradictory facts which underpin the proposition. It needs to be called a proposition, even although it is accepted by both indigenous and migrant workers, because the word belong, is, in the context, a mystification.

Some of the contradictory facts are as follows:

The migrant knows he is here on sufferance so all his spontaneous interests are short-term ones.	The migrant takes the jobs nobody else will.
	The migrant cannot get promotion.
	The migrant is the first to be made redundant.

The migrant wants to earn as quickly as possible. So he is inclined to work overtime, exceed production norms on piece work, take, if possible, a second part-time job.

Many migrants, have illegally resort to private deals with their employers.

Migrants tend to mistrust all officials and all organizations.

The migrant is always liable victimization.

The migrant is divided from other migrants and from indigenous workers by a language barrier.

The migrant performs many of the most dangerous jobs and has fewer insurance benefits.

The migrant has no proper life, only work: no proper living conditions, only working conditions.

This may threaten the bargaining power of the indigenous working class.

This means that migrant workers are the most exploited of all.

The only possible way beyond these contradictions, would be for trade unions to contest the migrant's inferior status by demanding right of promotion, right of political activity, right of residence for as long as he wishes, right of entry for his family. Yet to make these demands would be to alienate the majority of union members who have accepted their natural superiority over the migrant. It would also involve the unions in a head-on confrontation with government and management, who argue that the national economic interest – which includes the interest of the national working class – depends upon immigrant labour being used exactly as it is.

In practice the trade union leadership does not make these demands. Its wager is otherwise. That the trade unions can keep the exploitation of the migrants within such limits that the living standard of the national working class is not affected, and that, should extremist elements arise among the foreigners, the union apparatus will be able to isolate them.