

Supporting Migrants' integration into the Labour Market

Venue: IG Metall, Alte Jakobstraße 149 10969 Berlin, Germany

Alwin-Brandes-Saal

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Seminar Report

The seminar aimed to exchange knowledge and experiences on migrant labour market integration, fair recruitment practices, and policy frameworks at both EU and national levels. Speakers presented research findings, policy developments, and practical initiatives aimed at improving the protection, integration, and working conditions of migrant workers.

EU-level policy context on migrants labour market integration: current situation and future directions

Ursula Hönich (EC) [presented the EU policy context on labour market integration of migrants](#) and started by highlighting the importance of the LABOUR-INT partnership between the European Commission and social and economic partners.

Labour market outcomes for migrants have improved in recent years but remain below those of EU citizens. The employment rate of TCNs increased from about 55% in 2014 to around 64% in 2024, compared to 76.7% for EU citizens. TCNs are often overrepresented in sectors facing labour shortages, demonstrating their importance for the EU economy. However, important challenges remain. Refugees generally face greater barriers to employment and may need up to ten years of residence to reach labour market outcomes comparable to nationals. Ukrainian refugees have integrated more rapidly into labour markets, although many remain overqualified for the jobs they perform. Across Member States, overqualification rates among non-EU citizens remain higher than for nationals.

At EU level, several policy frameworks support integration. The Action Plan on Integration and Inclusion 2021-2027 promotes equality and social cohesion across four priority areas: education, employment, health and housing. Employment priorities include stronger multi-stakeholder partnerships, faster recognition of qualifications, improved access to vocational education and training and increased labour market participation of migrant women. The EU Pact on Migration and Asylum, adopted in June, establishes a comprehensive framework for migration management. Integration aspects are reflected notably in the Reception Conditions Directive and the Qualification Regulation.

Discussion

The discussion focused on implementation of the EU Pact on Migration and Asylum and concerns that integration measures may remain weaker than border control and return components. Participants raised questions about national implementation gaps, funding cuts affecting language and integration support, and the role of stakeholders in shaping implementation. The exchange also addressed labour exploitation, especially in relation to seasonal work and irregular employment, as well as the relevance of EU instruments and funding for integration, quality jobs and cooperation with countries of origin. Need for stronger involvement of social partners in both national and international migration partnerships was emphasised.

Policy context of migrants' labour market integration in Germany: challenges and institutional responses

Paolo Santini (IAB) [provided an overview of the labour market integration of refugees in Germany](#), highlighting structural barriers and recent policy initiatives aimed at accelerating employment outcomes.

Refugees in Germany face structural disadvantages in labour market integration compared to other migrant groups. Forced displacement, psychological stress and long asylum procedures often delay labour market entry and reduce early employment prospects.

Evidence from Germany shows slow integration trajectories. Refugees who arrived during the 2015 migration wave reached employment rates of around 50% only six years after arrival. Ukrainian refugees have integrated more quickly due to the EU Temporary Protection Directive, which granted immediate residence and labour market access. However, significant gaps remain compared to native workers, including lower wages, higher part-time employment (especially among women), and frequent employment below qualification levels.

Policy responses aim to accelerate labour market entry. The “Job Turbo” programme, launched in October 2023, encourages job centres to prioritise rapid employment access through intensified counselling, stronger employer engagement and networking initiatives linking employers and refugees. Early evidence indicates improved employment transitions for Ukrainian refugees, while effects for other refugee groups remain more limited.

Labour market integration also depends on civil society organisations, NGOs and trade unions, which can support migrants and promote access to labour rights. However, union participation among migrants and refugees remains relatively low, potentially reinforcing labour market inequalities.

Discussion

The discussion focused on labour market integration of refugees and beneficiaries of temporary protection, particularly regarding access to employment, job quality, childcare, skills recognition and overqualification. Participants compared national experiences, especially concerning Ukrainian refugees, and highlighted differences in counselling systems, labour market support and transition pathways from temporary protection to longer-term residence statuses. The exchange also underlined the importance of early and personalised support, one-to-one counselling and more sustainable integration measures capable of moving beyond short-term protection frameworks.

Roundtable: How to strengthen Trade Union capacity – effectively inform and reach out to migrant workers

Tanja Krstova (ZSSS) presented the Slovenian trade union perspective on strengthening outreach and communication with migrant workers, focusing on practical strategies to improve access to labour rights information.

Slovenia increasingly relies on foreign workers due to demographic trends and labour shortages, particularly in sectors such as manufacturing. With a population of around 2.1 million and an employment rate of approximately 73%, migrant labour has become an important part of the workforce. At the same time, migrant workers remain particularly vulnerable due to limited knowledge of labour rights, language barriers, insufficient workplace information and weak connections with trade unions.

Strengthening trade union capacity therefore requires adapting outreach strategies to the realities faced by migrant workers. Linguistic accessibility is essential. Trade union representatives should be able to communicate in the languages commonly spoken by migrant workers and provide translated, clearly explained information on employment contracts, working time, occupational health and safety and social rights. This helps build trust and encourages workers to seek assistance when facing workplace problems.

Krstova also highlighted the importance of proactive outreach. Rather than relying on workers to contact unions through email or phone, trade unions should engage directly through workplace visits, mobile outreach and communication adapted to shift-based working schedules. Cooperation with public institutions also supports these efforts. In Slovenia, unions work with the information point for foreign workers operated by the Slovenian Employment Service (ZRSZ), organising short information sessions on employment contracts, pay slips and procedures for reporting labour rights violations.

Sören Lieske (IG Metall) discussed trade union representation of migrant workers within IG Metall and how evolving migration patterns are influencing organising strategies in German industry.

IG Metall represents more than two million members and is the largest industrial trade union in Europe. Around 25% of its members have a migration background, defined as having at least one parent born outside Germany. According to an internal survey conducted in 2016, approximately 29% of these members are active in trade union functions or co-determination bodies such as works councils. Migrant representation is therefore embedded in the union's organisational structures at local, regional and national levels.

This presence reflects the historical development of labour migration to Germany. Workers who arrived during the “guest worker” migration waves of the 1950s and 1960s became an important part of the industrial workforce and played a role in shaping trade union participation. Their integration within unions required active organising and advocacy to ensure representation and inclusion in union structures.

Current migration patterns are more diverse and complex. Migrant workers often face barriers to qualified employment when foreign qualifications are not recognised, which frequently results in employment below their skill level. At the same time, companies increasingly recruit highly qualified international professionals, creating different groups of migrant workers with distinct needs.

IG Metall addresses these challenges through multilingual organising teams, peer-to-peer workplace organising and educational programmes on workers' and citizenship rights for newly arrived migrants.

Daniel Gutiérrez (ver.di) [presented a worker-to-worker organising model developed by ver.di](#) to strengthen outreach and leadership among migrant workers in Berlin's tech sector.

The model responds to recurring barriers faced by migrant workers, including limited knowledge of German labour law and trade union structures, weak workplace organising traditions and the limited relevance of union membership outside strategically organised workplaces. The approach therefore shifts organising from staff-led mobilisation towards rank-and-file leadership, aiming to build sustainable organising capacity among migrant workers.

Worker-to-worker organising is based on three principles: workers initiate unionisation themselves, campaign strategies are developed collectively, and trained members transfer organising skills to other workers. The objective is not only recruitment but the creation of long-term organising structures led by workers. A central element of the approach is a structured “membership funnel” combining accessible entry points with progressive engagement formats.

These include quarterly social gatherings, sign-up events following works assemblies and monthly meetings connecting migrant members from different workplaces. Such activities help build community, make union structures more accessible and provide training on power analysis, issue identification and one-to-one organising conversations.

The approach was illustrated through a campaign at TikTok in Berlin, where layoffs linked to artificial intelligence and outsourcing became a central organising issue. Worker leaders (“captains”) conducted most organising conversations themselves and coordinated actions ranging from structure tests and petitions to public mobilisation and strike preparation.

Michał Polakowski (OPZZ) outlined the Polish trade union experience in organising and supporting migrant workers, highlighting lessons from recent initiatives developed by OPZZ.

Migration to Poland has expanded significantly since the country’s accession to the European Union in 2004. While many Polish workers moved to other EU Member States, Poland simultaneously became an important destination for third-country workers, particularly from Ukraine. Migration patterns are gradually diversifying, with increasing arrivals from countries such as the Philippines and Nepal. Following Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Poland also received a large number of people benefiting from temporary protection, currently estimated at around one million.

Migrant workers in Poland are frequently employed in sectors that are traditionally difficult to unionise, including agriculture, construction and parts of retail. The widespread use of temporary work agencies employing migrant workers creates additional barriers to workplace access and makes organising activities more complex.

Based on OPZZ’s experience, several priorities were identified for strengthening trade union engagement. Services need to be tailored to migrant communities, including legal advice and training provided in languages widely spoken by migrant workers, particularly Ukrainian and Russian. Language courses in Polish and English are also offered and often serve as an entry point for workers who are not yet union members.

Long-term institutional support was highlighted as essential for sustaining these initiatives, together with continuous dialogue with migrant communities and advocacy for stronger legal protections for migrant workers.

Discussion

The discussion focused on practical strategies to reach and support migrant workers. Participants highlighted the importance of personal trust, peer-to-peer communication and social networks in

establishing first contact with migrant workers, as well as the need for multilingual information and legal training. The exchange also addressed the role of cross-border and transnational cooperation between trade unions, including the idea of building more stable European support networks beyond project-based funding. Further points raised included the practical implementation of legal provisions informing migrant workers about trade union rights, the scalability of organising models across different sectors and the relationship between works councils and trade unions. The discussion also touched on how to engage mobile and short-term migrant workers, including questions of membership continuity and the affordability of union membership.

Roundtable: Enforcement of Labour Rights as a Cornerstone of a Fair and Sustainable Labour Market Integration

Dominique John (European Support Network for Fair Mobility) addressed the enforcement of labour rights for mobile workers in the EU, emphasising the role of advisory services and the need for stronger European cooperation structures.

Labour mobility within the EU has expanded significantly due to the free movement of workers and the increasing use of posting and subcontracting arrangements across borders. Many workers involved are highly mobile rather than long-term migrants, moving temporarily between countries and sectors such as construction, seasonal agriculture and international road transport. This mobility creates structural challenges for trade unions, as workers who stay only briefly in a country are often difficult to reach through traditional organising approaches.

Advisory services can therefore play an important role in supporting mobile workers and enforcing labour rights. The German network Faire Mobilität provides nationwide counselling on labour law and employment rights for mobile workers and operates in close cooperation with trade union structures, particularly the DGB. While largely publicly funded, the network functions as a bridge between mobile workers and trade unions by offering practical support to workers facing exploitation, wage violations or irregular employment conditions.

Cross-border cooperation is also essential. Partnerships between advisory organisations and trade union-related structures in Germany and several Central and Eastern European countries have made it possible to address complex transnational cases, including situations where workers are recruited in one country, posted through another and employed in a third country within subcontracting chains.

These experiences underline the need for stable European cooperation structures and long-term funding to support a pan-European advisory network for mobile workers.

Atanaska Todorova (CITUB) [presented the work of UnionMigrantNet](#), an ETUC initiative supporting migrant and mobile workers through trade union services across the EU.

UnionMigrantNet, created by the ETUC in 2015, connects trade union advisory centres across EU Member States to assist migrant and mobile workers facing labour rights problems in cross-border contexts. The network operates through national contact points hosted by trade union organisations that provide direct counselling and practical support to workers.

The initiative addresses recurring barriers affecting migrant workers, including limited knowledge of labour rights, language barriers, undeclared work, labour exploitation and the complexity of cross-border social security systems. While legal protections exist at European and national levels, effective enforcement often depends on accessible advisory services and cooperation between organisations in different countries.

Through its advisory centres, the network provides free counselling services such as legal advice, information on labour law and social security rights, assistance in posting-of-workers situations and support in cross-border labour disputes. These services aim to help workers understand their rights and access appropriate remedies.

UnionMigrantNet also operates as a cross-border solidarity mechanism. Advisory centres exchange information and coordinate responses when workers encounter problems across borders. Todorova also referred to the “Cities Together for Integration” project in Bulgaria, which created a coalition of trade unions, municipalities and civil society organisations and established a one-stop advisory service for migrant workers.

Philipp Schwertmann (Arbeit und Leben) [presented the experience of the Advisory Network Decent Work coordinated by Arbeit und Leben](#), one of the main labour rights counselling networks supporting migrant workers in Germany.

The network operates mainly in northern Germany and forms part of a wider landscape of advisory services addressing labour mobility and labour exploitation. Together with initiatives such as Faire Mobilität and other regional counselling structures, it contributes to an extensive support system for migrant and mobile workers. At the same time, the German advisory landscape remains complex, with different networks operating under separate mandates, funding schemes and organisational structures.

Strengthening cooperation between existing counselling systems at European level therefore emerges as an important objective. Closer connections between national initiatives could facilitate the handling of cross-border labour rights cases while respecting institutional differences between

organisations. Developing shared principles and compatible procedures would improve coordination between advisory centres in different countries.

Training and knowledge exchange are also central elements of this cooperation. In Germany, advisory networks organise joint training sessions for counsellors, enabling organisations to share expertise and develop common approaches to labour rights cases. Extending similar capacity-building activities at European level could strengthen collaboration and improve the quality of support available to workers.

Counselling services also generate valuable qualitative information on labour mobility trends and workers' experiences, which can inform policy discussions on labour mobility and labour rights across Europe.

Discussion

The discussion confirmed broad agreement on the need for stronger and more stable European cooperation structures to support mobile and migrant workers. Participants stressed that current trade union models often struggle to address highly mobile forms of labour migration, especially in cross-border and subcontracted employment. The exchange highlighted the need to combine trade union organising with specialised advisory services, shared procedures, training and cross-border case handling. Several speakers also underlined the importance of avoiding fragmentation between existing networks, strengthening coordination, and securing sustainable resources for practical support, multilingual access and labour rights enforcement.

The labour approach against Forced Labour – The German National Action Plan Against Labour Exploitation

Bastian Jantz (German Ministry of Labour) [presented the German National Action Plan against Labour Exploitation and Forced Labour](#) adopted in February 2025 [[Link National Action Plan \(EN\)](#)]

Labour exploitation and forced labour represent a growing concern for both human rights and labour market regulation. While often viewed as global issues, such practices also occur in Germany. ILO estimates indicate that 27.6 million people were in forced labour worldwide in 2021, generating illegal profits of around USD 236 billion. In Germany, 576 investigations related to trafficking and labour exploitation were completed in 2024, although authorities assume that the real scale of the phenomenon is significantly higher.

Migrant workers are particularly vulnerable to exploitation. Limited knowledge of labour rights, insufficient awareness of support structures and fear of contact with authorities often prevent victims from reporting abuses. These conditions complicate detection, evidence gathering and

criminal prosecution, even though labour exploitation and forced labour constitute criminal offences. Recent cases in sectors such as meat processing, logistics and road transport have increased public attention to these practices.

The Action Plan adopts a labour market approach that addresses not only individual cases but also the structural conditions enabling exploitation. Measures focus on prevention, reducing vulnerability and improving labour market regulation, including actions before workers arrive in Germany through better information in countries of origin and stronger cooperation on fair recruitment.

The plan contains 83 federal measures and 125 complementary measures from the federal states, structured around four fields of action: fair recruitment, workers' rights and enforcement, working conditions and state controls, and corporate responsibility.

Inspiring the practice: Enabling practitioners to step up against forced labour and labour exploitation

Eliane Friess (Arbeit und Leben) [presented the work of the Service Centre against Labour Exploitation, Forced Labour and Human Trafficking.](#)

Established in 2017 and funded by the German Federal Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, the Service Centre supports cooperation between public authorities and specialised organisations addressing severe labour exploitation. Its mandate focuses on criminally relevant forms of exploitation under German law, including forced labour and human trafficking. Victims formally identified under criminal law are entitled to protection measures such as specialised counselling, accommodation and financial assistance. In practice, however, identification remains limited and official investigation figures capture only a small share of the phenomenon. Migrant workers from both EU and third countries are particularly affected.

The Centre strengthens institutional capacity through information resources, research, networking and training. Its online platform provides practical tools for authorities and organisations, including a database of specialised counselling centres, an overview of support structures across German federal states and multilingual information materials for potential victims.

Research and documentation form another pillar of the project. Sector analyses examine exploitation patterns across industries, while legal studies address issues such as the reflection and stabilisation period and the application of the non-punishment principle.

Training activities target counselling organisations, migration authorities, labour inspectors, police and employment agencies. Particular cooperation takes place with the customs authority's

Financial Control of Undeclared Work (FKS). An interactive e-learning course launched in 2024 helps practitioners recognise indicators of exploitation and respond appropriately to suspected cases.

Discussion

The discussion addressed key challenges in preventing and tackling labour exploitation. Participants highlighted risks linked to recruitment agencies, labour intermediaries, subcontracting chains and undeclared work, particularly in cross-border contexts. Barriers to reporting abuses, especially for migrant and undocumented workers, and the need for stronger victim protection and access to justice were emphasised. The exchange also underlined the importance of effective labour inspections, better coordination between authorities and targeted prevention measures. Participants stressed the role of trade unions in identifying exploitation and supporting workers, as well as the need to link national actions with EU-level frameworks on due diligence, forced labour and fair recruitment.

Fair Recruitment: The Key to sustainable integration of migrant workers

Alix Nasri (ILO) [presented the ILO Fair Recruitment Initiative](#), highlighting recruitment practices as a critical entry point for preventing labour exploitation and forced labour.

She explained that many abusive situations affecting migrant workers originate during recruitment, making this stage essential for ensuring decent work and sustainable labour migration. The ILO has developed General Principles and Operational Guidelines for Fair Recruitment, adopted through a tripartite process involving governments, employers and workers' organisations, which define standards for fair and transparent recruitment across the entire migration cycle. Key principles include the prohibition of recruitment fees charged to workers and the requirement for clear and enforceable employment contracts, addressing widespread practices such as debt-inducing recruitment fees and contract substitution. Through the Fair Recruitment Initiative, the ILO promotes reforms in legal frameworks, responsible recruitment practices by employers, worker protection and improved data on recruitment processes. Research shows that recruitment fees generate billions in illegal profits globally, and in some migration corridors workers must repay recruitment costs equivalent to more than a year of wages. Nasri concluded that strengthening regulation, enforcement and worker empowerment during recruitment is essential to prevent exploitation and ensure fair labour migration systems.

Documents shared by Alix Nasri during the presentation:

- [Fair recruitment and access to justice for migrant workers](#)

- [Guide to private employment agencies](#)

Ira Rachmawati (ITUC) [presented the Recruitment Advisor platform](#), a digital tool developed by the ITUC to improve transparency in labour recruitment and provide migrant workers with accessible information before migration [[Link to the platform](#)].

Launched in 2018, the platform addresses persistent information gaps that expose migrant workers to abusive recruitment practices. Recruitment Advisor provides country-specific information on recruitment regulations, migration procedures and workers' rights across more than 25 countries and is available in multiple languages. A key feature is the worker review system, which allows migrant workers to anonymously share their recruitment experiences and assess recruitment agencies. More than 11,000 worker reviews have already been collected, generating valuable evidence on recruitment practices across migration corridors. The platform also integrates AI-supported chatbot functions to facilitate user access to information.

The data gathered through the platform are analysed by trade unions and used to support policy advocacy on recruitment regulation, particularly regarding recruitment fees and misleading job offers. The platform therefore functions both as an information service for migrant workers and as a monitoring tool for trade unions.

Complementary trade union strategies support the platform's impact, including social media outreach, cooperation with pre-departure orientation services and cross-border collaboration between trade unions in origin and destination countries. These activities help expand access to reliable information and strengthen worker protection along recruitment chains.

Shakil Akhter Chowdhury (BLF Bangladesh) [presented the perspective of trade unions in Bangladesh as a major labour-sending country, highlighting challenges related to fair recruitment and migrant worker protection](#).

Bangladesh has around 13 million citizens working abroad, sending home approximately €30 billion in remittances each year, representing about 6% of national GDP. Labour migration therefore plays a central role in the country's economy. The recruitment system, however, remains largely market-driven and dominated by private agencies, brokers and intermediaries, creating significant risks of abuse for migrant workers.

During the recruitment process many workers face high recruitment costs, debt bondage, contract substitution and fraudulent job offers. These vulnerabilities often continue in destination countries, where workers may experience non-payment of wages, excessive working hours, unsafe working conditions and limited access to social protection or legal remedies. Additional obstacles include irregular migration status, language barriers and restricted access to trade union support.

Trade unions in Bangladesh have developed several initiatives to address these challenges. Activities include pre-departure awareness programmes, rights education for migrant workers, anti-fraud campaigns and legal referral services. Trade unions also advocate for stronger recruitment regulation, promote ethical recruitment models and support migrant worker organisations and cross-border union cooperation.

Strengthening migration governance, improving bilateral labour agreements and establishing effective cross-border complaint mechanisms were identified as key priorities for improving migrant worker protection.

Discussion

The discussion addressed cross-border cooperation to tackle unfair recruitment. Key points included the role of trade unions in origin and destination countries, the need for better worker information before departure, and stronger transnational mechanisms for complaints and redress. Participants also highlighted challenges linked to private recruitment agencies, high recruitment fees and irregular migration pathways, and stressed the importance of involving trade unions in bilateral labour migration agreements and policy initiatives at European level.