

# The immigrants the rich love

Hysteria over legal migrants allows lucrative exploitation of illegal workers to go on unchecked

**T**hose perfidious foreigners have let us down again. There we were, ready to repel the biggest invasion of one-legged roofers the world has seen, and hardly anyone turns up. It goes to show how unreliable those east European types can be. We should bill their governments for the pitchforks.

I regard their refusal to invade this country as a deliberate act of economic sabotage. A key strategic industry – the tabloid press – has been made to look ridiculous. The readers of the Daily Express, still waiting for the 1.6 million Roma who were due to arrive on May 1 “to leech on us”, must be wondering whether they can ever again believe a word it says. But the coverage of the flood that never came raises an interesting question. Why do our rightwing papers campaign against the arrival of economic migrants? The question may have been answered last week.

A newspaper, of course, needs to campaign against something. When you are owned by a multimillionaire and dependent on advertising, the choice of targets is limited: you can’t attack the people who attack the interests of your readers. If the powerful are out of bounds, you must turn on the powerless: welfare recipients, single mothers, asylum seekers.

But it also needs to campaign in favour of something, namely the interests of its owner and the propertied class to which he belongs. Max Hastings, formerly the editor of the Daily Telegraph, later wrote of his proprietor Lord Black: “Like most tycoons, Conrad was seldom unconscious of his responsibilities as a member of the rich men’s trade union. Those who have built large fortunes ... feel an instinctive sympathy for

fellow multimillionaires, however their fortunes have been achieved ... Not infrequently, adverse comment in our newspaper about some fellow mogul provoked Conrad's wrath."

The interests of the moguls are plainly served by immigration. The arrival of large numbers of migrant workers is likely to depress wages, undermine campaigns for higher labour standards and weaken the position of the poor men's trade unions. This puts the rightwing papers in a difficult position, torn between xenophobia and greed. History suggests that such a conflict is unlikely to last for long; it must soon be resolved in favour of greed. Why then does greed appear to have lost?

Well maybe it hasn't. While capital is served by an influx of migrant labour, it is even better served if that labour is unregulated. The new European citizens who might choose to work here will enjoy the same protections and impose the same costs as domestic workers. Illegal immigrants, by contrast, have no minimum wage, no restrictions on working time, no health and safety protection, no union representation and no national insurance. They constitute, in other words, an unregulated workforce of the kind for which the Confederation of British Industry campaigns. By thundering about the legal immigration of eastern European workers, the tabloids threatened to delay changes that would permit some tens or hundreds of thousands of illegal labourers to become official.

The Sun, of course, has devoted page after page to the menace of illegal immigration. But when you read past the headlines, you see that the "illegal immigrants" it foams about are not undocumented workers but asylum seekers whose claims are rejected. As asylum seekers are forbidden to work, they are of no use to the rich men's trade union. Instead they incur costs (a lavish £37.77 a week) that should properly be met by taxing the rich.

Now I am not suggesting that the editors of the tabloids sit down with their bosses and plot the best means of undermining organised labour and the rights of workers. What I am suggesting is that when they start playing to the prejudices of their readers by campaigning against legal migration, no one taps them on the shoulder and discreetly asks them to desist.

It is hard to test this hypothesis, but we can perhaps begin to circle it by observing how the same interests affect the policies of the government. There is only one way to stop the import of illegal labour, and that is to curtail demand. As Germany has found (it has pretty well wiped the problem out), this is not hard to do. The big companies employing illegal workers are vulnerable to enforcement, partly because their products must re-enter the legal economy and partly because their workers must congregate in large numbers at the same place and the same time. If the government

wanted to prevent the large-scale use of illegal workers in Britain, it could do so.

Last week, a report by the Commons committee on the environment, food and rural affairs showed that it appears to have done precisely nothing. The committee first reported in September last year, when it found that the agencies supposed to deal with the problem of illegal gangmasters (the people who control the unregulated workers) were “insufficiently resourced and lack the political backing to make a significant impact on illegal activity”. It demanded that the government commission a detailed study, appoint a single minister to oversee the enforcement of the law and dredge up some serious resources. But, despite the drowning of 20 unregulated Chinese cockle pickers in Morecambe Bay in February, none of this has happened. “The government is no nearer obtaining a comprehensive picture of the scale and nature of the problem of illegal gangmaster activity than it was when we published our original report eight months ago.” There has been “no strengthening of enforcement action against disreputable gangmasters” and “no evidence of any change in the government approach since last September. Indeed, in some respects enforcement activity has diminished because of lack of resources”.

Given that illegal labour is unpopular with voters, undermines the tax base and is linked to other forms of organised crime, you’d have thought a government would do all it could to wipe it out. But, as a Home Office adviser told the Times this year, if our illegal labourers “disappeared overnight, London and the south-east would break down before breakfast”. The corporate economy depends on them, and it intends to remain dependent on them. The legalisation of illegal east European workers on May 1 is likely to have been a disaster for some of our most respectable businesses. They will be seeking to replace them with illegal workers from other countries as swiftly as possible.

A government that has the corporate interest at heart will pretend, but only pretend, to try to stop them. As Stephen Castle, the director of Oxford University’s Refugee Studies Centre, observes, “policies that claim to exclude undocumented workers may often really be about allowing them in through side doors and back doors, so that they can be more readily exploited”.

If the government is doing what business tells it to, you can bet your life the same policy guides the rightwing press. It might never be stated; it might never need to be stated. But it isn’t hard to see how a campaign against mass legalisation of labour would coincide with the interests of the rich men’s trade union. #