

The German 'guest-worker system'

The former West-German Government started recruiting foreign workers in the mid-1950s. The Federal Labour Office (Bundesanstalt für Arbeit, or BfA) set up recruitment offices in the Mediterranean countries. Employers requiring foreign labour paid a fee to the BfA, which selected workers, testing occupational skills, providing medical examinations and screening police records. The workers were brought in groups to Germany, where employers had to provide initial accommodation. Recruitment, working conditions and social security were regulated by bilateral agreements between the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) and the sending countries: first Italy, then Spain, Greece, Turkey, Morocco, Portugal, Tunisia and Yugoslavia.

The number of foreign workers in the FRG rose from 95,000 in 1956 to 1.3 million in 1966 and 2.6 million in 1973. This massive migration was the result of rapid industrial expansion and the shift to new methods of mass production, which required large numbers of low-skilled workers. Foreign women workers played a major part, especially in the later years: their labour was in high demand in textiles and clothing, electrical goods and other manufacturing sectors.

German policies conceived migrant workers as temporary labour units, which could be recruited, utilized and sent away again as employers required. To enter and remain in the FRG, a migrant needed a residence permit and a labour permit. These were granted for restricted periods, and were often valid only for specific jobs and areas. Entry of dependants was discouraged. A worker could be deprived of his or her permit for a variety of reasons, leading to deportation.

However, it was impossible to prevent family reunion and settlement. Often officially recruited migrants were able to get employers to request their wives or husbands as workers. Competition with other labour-importing countries for labour led to relaxation of restrictions on entry of dependants in the 1960s. Families became established and children were born. Foreign labour was beginning to lose its mobility, and social costs (for housing, education and healthcare) could no longer be avoided. When the Federal Government stopped labour recruitment in November 1973, the motivation was not only the looming Oil Crisis, but also the belated realization that permanent immigration was taking place.

In the FRG we see, in the most developed form, all the principles – but also the contradictions – of temporary foreign labour recruitment systems. These include the belief in temporary sojourn, the restriction of labour market and civil rights, the recruitment of single workers (men at first, but with increasing numbers of women as time went on), the inability to prevent family reunion completely, the gradual move towards longer stay, and the inexorable pressures for settlement and community formation. The FRG took the system furthest, but its central element – the legal distinction between the status of citizen and of foreigner as a criterion for determining political and social rights – was to be found throughout Europe (see Hammar, 1985).

Sources: Castles and Kosack 1973; Castles et al. 1984.