

IR - MultiLing   
*Industrial relations in multilingual environments at work*

Multilingualism in UK  
Practices and Perspectives

Northern Ireland,  
Waste Recycling

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## **I - Brief introduction presenting the three case studies**

The three communities we have looked at are roughly similar in size in the regions in which they are living but different in context. Poles in Northern Ireland are the largest foreign-born population (excluding the Republic of Ireland) in Northern Ireland but overall there are very few foreign born people in Northern Ireland. In contrast nearly 40% of London's population are foreign born but Filipinos and Bulgarians are not among the larger communities there.

The three occupations we have looked at (Housekeepers in London hotels; nurses in the NHS and waste recycling operatives) are all in groups of occupations with a high density of migrants. They illustrate a range in the professional and language skills necessary to carry out the jobs. In the case of the Filipino nurses, English was essential for communicating with fellow professionals. In the waste recycling plant, it was possible to work without much English. The hotel workers were an 'in-between' group in which speaking English would be beneficial to both the workers and the employer.

The case studies reflect different employment statuses. In the case of the nurses, they were all employed by the NHS (check). The hotel workers were all employed by an agency which the hotel chain had outsourced housekeeping to. Most of the waste recycling workers were employees but the most recently recruited were (still) on agency contracts.

As long ago as 2007, McDowell and colleagues suggested that hotels had replaced the assembly line as the quintessential site of workplace studies.<sup>1</sup> In fact, the wealth of studies on the hotel industry proved very helpful in contextualising the case study.

The waste recycling (mainly men) and hotel workers (mainly women) are strongly contrasting in terms of the gender of most of the workers. They are similar in employing Eastern European workers (in contrast to the NHS Filipino workers) but it is important to recognise that Bulgarians have been subject to more restrictive immigration rules than the Poles and arrived in the in the UK much more recently. The NHS has a very long history of recruiting nurses from abroad (Predating the NHS) but the recruitment of Filipino nurses appears to have taken off in the late 1990s, partly in response to demand in the UK but, possibly also a response to a reduction in demand from the USA.<sup>2</sup>

The three case studies represent contrasts in industrial relations structures. The NHS has an elaborate system of recognition and negotiation between unions, employers (And the government). Unions were not formally recognised in either of the other two workplaces. However, the employers had negotiated with unions over substantive issues and in the case of the waste recycling, had, if not encouraged, facilitated some union organisation.

## II Northern Ireland, Waste Recycling

### 1. Overview of the company/sector

Northern Ireland has the smallest percentage of foreign born people of the four countries of the UK at 4.5% and only the Region of North East England has a lower percentage. However, Northern Ireland has experienced one of the highest rates of increase of foreign born people in the UK, from 53,000 in 1995 to 129,000 in 2014. Across the UK, the Polish-born community is the second largest one (After Indians). The estimated population in 2014 was 790, 000 of whom just over half were female. Between one-third and over half of migrants in Northern Ireland (Excluding ROI) are Polish, depending what source of data is used. Their numbers - estimated as 23,000 (the next biggest community is Lithuanians, estimated at 10,000).<sup>3</sup>

Although the overall percentage of migrants in Northern Ireland is low, they are not evenly distributed across the Province. Three of the (former) 26 Local Government Districts account for over half of international migrants. Their location primarily reflects job opportunities but also housing availability. The District in which the main interviews with workers took place has a below NI average of migrants. Of those migrants in the district, Polish people were easily the largest group and more migrants had gone to the area for work reasons (59%) than in NI generally (46%).<sup>4</sup>

A survey in 2010 illustrated ambivalent public attitudes to migrants in Northern Ireland: on the one hand, 42 per cent believed that migrants took jobs away from local people; on the other hand, 74 per cent thought that migrants took jobs that local people don't want.<sup>5</sup> However, expert opinion is that Northern Ireland needs more rather than less migrants and there is concern that government policy may cause migrants to leave and fewer migrants to come, causing skills shortages and loss of opportunities for local labour as well.<sup>6</sup>

According to the 2011 Census there about four times as many people who speak, read and write Irish in Northern Ireland as there are Polish speakers and there are slightly fewer people who speak, read and write Ulster Scots than there are Polish speakers. Though both Irish and Ulster Scots speakers, speak fluent English they have legal rights to their language but speakers of other languages do not.<sup>7</sup>

Elementary process plant occupations, includes food processing and waste recycling. 43.3% of workers in the UK in these occupations, are migrants. This is the highest density of any group of occupations.<sup>8</sup>

The company which was the focus of the case study is a waste recycling company. There are a number of companies in this sector in Northern Ireland. This particular company owns several businesses and has recently acquired another business. 70 workers work on this particular site of whom 75-80% are Polish according to the informants. Most of the remainder are from other Eastern European communities and about 10% are local. Most are employees but some are agency workers, particularly those who have recently started. About half the workforce are members of the union.

### 2. Fieldwork conducted

The initial contact was through the Migrant Worker (MW 1) for a trade union federation whose post is funded through the Northern Irish government. Through that person, a Full

Time Organiser (FTO 2) was contacted. One of his colleagues then introduced the researcher to Shop Stewards (SS 3 & 4) on training course, one of whom worked for the waste recycling company. He arranged for a focus group with eight workers at the Recycling plant. (RW 5-12). The focus group took place shortly after the end of a shift, in the home of some of the workers.

### Profiles

1. MWI Polish Female (F), Polish full time union official. Fluent English speaker, interview conducted in English
2. FT0 Irish Male (M) full time union official.
3. SS1 Polish M Shop Steward, Galvanising plant. In NI more than 10 years. Competent English, interview conducted in English
4. SS2 Polish M Shop Steward, Recycling plant. In NI more than 10 years. Fluent English interview conducted in English
5. M in NI 3-4 years
6. M in NI 6-7 years
7. M in NI for five years
8. F. In NI six years
9. F in NI for one year
10. M in NI one year
11. M in NI two years ago
12. M 2 -3 years in NI

Interviewees 5-11 worked in the recycling plant doing a variety of jobs: plant: operator driver; banksman; recycling operative; forklift operator; packing [conveyor belt] line (2 women); operator driver; team leader; telehandler [cherry picker] driver.

### 3. Professional and linguistic biography of interviewees

Before coming to NI, two interviewees had been bakers, and knew each other beforehand. Several others knew each other from working in Greece in a variety of jobs including construction and cleaning. One had worked in healthcare and another and another had started training for a healthcare profession but had withdrawn and did not wish to resume

None of the focus group members felt they spoke English fluently and the group was conducted in Polish with a professional interpreter. Several spoke other languages than Polish. The workers who had spent time in Greece, said that it had been essential to learn Greek there.

Some said that they had learned some English at school. One had been on an English course in NI. The rest said that they had tried to learn at home from family and friends, books and online resources. They said that long-working hours, shift work and cost were barriers to going on courses. They also said that having an increasingly Polish workforce was a disincentive to learn English ...*difficult to learn the language because 80% workforce Polish. No opportunity to speak English at home or work* but they were motivated to learn both for future jobs and for their present jobs:

*If you learned the language, you would get more money... We would be able to get different, better jobs.*

*If you don't speak English, you are stuck in one place*

#### 4. Languages, organisation of work and day to day work relationships

The main drawbacks in not being able to speak English were seen as poor communication between operatives and supervisors and relying on someone who speaks both fluent English and Polish to interpret:

*It is very difficult without the language. You have to ask somebody else..., there are matters that should be communicated to the supervisors, but I don't have the language.*

*I have to find someone to help me to understand supervisor*

*Sometimes I have to get someone else to do it for me and explain what I want and it's never exactly what I want.*

*With English] Because you can say directly to someone. You don't want to share your information with a third person.*

*There have been times when the manager is rude to me. Why was he rude? I think he is just an angry person. I can tell you he wouldn't speak to an English speaker in the same way.*

However, one of the interviewees who found her supervisor was very rude to her, thought it was because she mispronounced the word 'sheet' and he thought she had been swearing.

*There are many things you could do if you speak English. "please..." The managers never speak directly to me. All the time they are just referring to my manager*

A team leader said that when he starts his shifts he often finds that there are things that the supervisors should be informed about but his English is not good enough to explain.

The Full Time Official also recognised his dependence on interpreters to communicate with members:

*For some meetings we have hired interpreters, sometimes [migrant worker for trade union federation] has interpreted and some of workers have very good English. But the person who speaks best English isn't necessarily the best representative: they can be young and ambitious and can be quite hostile for the needs of employees. A Me Feiner [ Wordplay on Sinn Fein: Irish for Us for Ourselves...]. They may be brought in by employers. If they are elected shop steward then they may run their own agenda e.g. training, promotion, their own difficulties. I have to watch it very carefully. ...*

*Some general meetings are like the Eurovision Song Contest with seven languages. I am not sure if I am getting the message across and I can't tell jokes. It all has to be black and white. We have to divide the meeting into 2-3 groups and you lose the collective experience. It can also be expensive, running up a fairly big interpreters' bill. If employers supply an*

*interpreter, then you are not sure what happens. For example, an employer repeats something that they should not have known.*

The following table summarises how the Polish workers use language. Note that interaction with customers is not a significant part of the work:

<b>Communication with....</b>	<b>Superiors And Subordinates</b>	<b>Professional Colleagues (Fellow operatives)</b>	<b>Trade union</b>	<b>Fellow workers from Poland while working</b>	<b>Fellow workers from Poland outside work including workbreaks</b>	<b>Family and friends</b>
<b>Communication in...</b>						
1 Polish	Polish speaking supervisor and operatives	Yes	Informal discussions and with shop steward	Generally	Yes	Yes
2 English	Very limited English so largely neither	Most operatives polish so No	When Interpreter is available	Only help with speaking English	Only help with speaking English	Only help with speaking English

## 5. Language training

The full time organiser was keen to organise English language classes. *We are setting up a language school to provide language training with a TEFL trained teacher. the volunteers [Language teachers] are all Belfast-based. We are trying to get employers to give up an hour. We have set up a Community Interest Company, seeking funding. Have devised a 30-hour syllabus We have five volunteer TEFL teachers: union activists and friends. There won't be a huge difficulty in getting more. [But] for Workers outside Belfast [More difficult to provide classes] ...*

## 6. Other initiatives and policies to deal with Multilingualism at the workplace (from both Employers and Unions).

As noted above, the union mostly relies on bilingual workers to interpret but that this can create problems if the bilingual worker has a different agenda to the other workers or, as in this workplace, is a senior supervisor, shop steward and the interpreter:

*SS2 is Shop Steward because he speaks English but the most important thing is he supports us. With SS2, it depends on the day whether he is for us.*

*Conflict of interest with SS2 because he is with management. From a trade union perspective, he says 'why do you do this because they don't provide you with something else?' and then he come back the next day with 'Why didn't you do this?' There was no one else.*

Others said they would be willing to be shop stewards but they felt their English was not good enough.

## 7. Language command and access to labour rights

The Full Time Official said *the number one issue is dignity at work; pay holidays e.g. Christmas and summer holidays people want to go somewhere else*, for members generally. In this particular workplace, the focus group participants felt that issues were not being heard and dealt with because of their lack of English. The issues included

- One particular manager who workers felt was angry, hostile and rude but they did not feel this attitude was widely shared
- Polish workers being kept on minimum pay and as agency workers for longer than local workers
- A bonus scheme in which it was felt that Polish workers were penalised for being more productive: *they threatened me with being dismissed because I copied what local people did. But I was told they should be doing things the way I do them!* and given other jobs to do that were not part of the bonus scheme so that then they miss targets
- Being asked to do jobs outside their job description which 'local' workers were not asked to do: *My first disciplinary procedure was for something I wasn't even responsible for but it needed to be done*
- Health and Safety: a cleaner used to clean skin and clothes which was not always available but even when it was, it causes skin allergies for some workers (Which they have difficulty explaining to a doctor because of their limited English). Another Health and Safety issue was something that the worker was told to do which he



thought was unsafe. *I told them ... but the manager said I had to [do it] and I slipped. Some people were telling me not to do it but if I didn't I would get reprimanded.*

## 8. Language and integration within trade unions

The bilingual worker had only become a Shop Steward in January 2016 and his initial training started in May 2016. He felt he had learned a lot even in his first sessions. It was an initiative of the Full Time Officials to have a shop steward. There appears to have been little or no debate about who to choose because the workers agreed it should be the person who spoke the best English even though he was also the senior supervisor.

The union had not (yet) asked for formal recognition as the FTOs felt this might be premature and distract from making progress on working conditions.

The first problem was that they did not feel that the Shop Steward passed on all their issues to either management or the union:

*...one thing is missing because of SS2. He should be clarifying these issues, our position. They are tiny little things but I don't think FTO has whole picture*

They were keen to have general meetings (With the FTOs, Shop Steward and possibly an independent interpreter.

## 9. Further Additional Comments

A central feature of this case study is that union involvement in the workplace only came about because the trade union put an advert in a Polish newspaper and worked with the trade union federation Polish-speaking worker, funded by the government. Organisation was still at an early stage with a shop steward only recently elected, negotiations with the employer at an early stage, with limited achievements so far and formal recognition sometime in the future.

Language issues were a central issue because of the related issues of making union organisation difficult and addressing the issues which the workers had about pay and health and safety. There were both language specific forms of discrimination but compounded by and compounding issues of discrimination against 'foreigners', tantamount to racial discrimination. The women, speaking in a mixed group, said there was not gender discrimination.

Clearly, a problem at the stage at which the research was undertaken, is that the shop steward was appointed because he spoke the best English but there was conflict between his roles as supervisor, shop steward and interpreter and he had little training or experience as a trade union representative. There are solutions to this, for instance, improved English skills of other potential shop stewards and less ad hoc arrangements of interpreting but also as his knowledge and skills as shop steward increase, it may get easier.

## **III - Some general conclusions (1 page).**

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<sup>1</sup> McDowell, L.; Batnitzky, A. & Dyer, S. (2007) 'Division, Segmentation, and Interpellation: The Embodied Labors of Migrant Workers in a Greater London Hotel' *Economic Geography* Volume 83, Issue 1, 2007 pages 1-25

<sup>2</sup> Buchan, J. (2006) Filipino Nurses in the UK: A Case Study in Active International Recruitment Harvard Health Policy Review Vol. 7, No. 1, Spring <http://hhpronline.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/Buchan.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> Rienzo, C. & Vargas-Silva, C. (2016) *Migrants in the UK: An Overview* Migration Observatory [http://www.migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/sites/files/migobs/Migrants%20in%20the%20UK-Overview\\_0.pdf](http://www.migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/sites/files/migobs/Migrants%20in%20the%20UK-Overview_0.pdf)

Office for National Statistics (2015a) Population by Country of Birth and Nationality Estimates Frequently Asked Questions [www.ons.gov.uk/.../population-by-country-of-birth-and-nationality--frequently-asked-questions](http://www.ons.gov.uk/.../population-by-country-of-birth-and-nationality--frequently-asked-questions);

ONS (2015b) *Migration Statistics Quarterly Report, August 2015*

[www.ons.gov.uk/.../migration1/migration-statistics-quarterly-report/august-2015/index](http://www.ons.gov.uk/.../migration1/migration-statistics-quarterly-report/august-2015/index);

ONS (2015c) Table 1.3: Overseas-born population in the United Kingdom, excluding some residents in communal establishments, by sex, by country of birth January 2014 to December 2014

<http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/rel/migration1/population-by-country-of-birth-and-nationality/2014/rft-table-5-pop-by-cob-jan-14-to-dec-14.xls>

ONS (2015d) Table E: Population resident in the United Kingdom, excluding some residents in communal establishments, by nationality United Kingdom by countries, and within England, regions January 2014 to December 2014

[http://www.ons.gov.uk/file?uri=/peoplepopulationandcommunity/populationandmigration/internationalmigration/datasets/populationoftheunitedkingdombycountryofbirthandnationalityunderlyingdatasheets/2014/underlyingdatasheetsforpopulationbycountryofbirthandnationalityjan14todec14\\_tcm77-414809.xls](http://www.ons.gov.uk/file?uri=/peoplepopulationandcommunity/populationandmigration/internationalmigration/datasets/populationoftheunitedkingdombycountryofbirthandnationalityunderlyingdatasheets/2014/underlyingdatasheetsforpopulationbycountryofbirthandnationalityjan14todec14_tcm77-414809.xls)

<sup>4</sup> Kerr, M. (2015) *Community profiles for Local Government Districts Northern Ireland Strategic Migration Partnership* <http://www.migrationni.org/DataEditorUploads/NorthernIreland.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> Russell, R. (2012) *Migration in Northern Ireland: an update* Northern Ireland Assembly

<http://www.niassembly.gov.uk/globalassets/documents/raise/publications/2012/general/3112.pdf>

Krausova, A. & Vargas-Silva, C. (2014) *Census Briefing Northern Ireland* Migration Observatory [www.migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/.../Briefing%20-%20Northern%20Ireland%20ce..](http://www.migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/.../Briefing%20-%20Northern%20Ireland%20ce..)

<sup>6</sup> Lynn, S. (2013) *Mapping the Deployment of Migrant Labour in Northern Ireland* Northern Ireland Strategic Migration Partnership <http://www.nilga.org/getattachment/31a591ff-f936-4518-a50a-a1df20a0d3ee/NISMP---Mapping-the-Deployment-of-Migrant-Labour-i.aspx>

<sup>7</sup> NISRA (2012) *Census 2011 Key Statistics for Northern Ireland*

[http://www.nisra.gov.uk/Census/key\\_report\\_2011.pdf](http://www.nisra.gov.uk/Census/key_report_2011.pdf)

<sup>8</sup> Rienzo, C. (2015b) *Migrants in the UK Labour Market: An Overview* Migration Observatory

<http://www.migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/sites/files/migobs/Briefing%20-%20Migrants%20in%20the%20UK%20Labour%20Market.pdf>