

Foreword

Labour laws and policies commonly exist to protect workers, who are recognized as being on an unequal footing when negotiating with employers. In particular, workers with little or no resources to fall back on – and thus more desperate for work – lack bargaining power. Migrant workers, unfamiliar with local customs and perhaps the local language, are even more powerless. Not extending the same protections to migrant workers would mean exposing them to unfair treatment and possibly to create situations of social dumping. It is for this reason that equality principles are the basis for their protection.

Migrant workers' rights to freedom of association and inclusion in collective bargaining are vital for avoiding inequalities. Indeed, the relevant International Labour Organization (ILO) standards do cover migrant workers, including those in irregular situations. The ILO's Committee on Freedom of Association has been very clear on this matter.

Yet, it is not always easy for migrant workers to exercise these rights. Some migration takes place to destinations where there are no strong trade union institutions to protect them. In other contexts, migrants are dependent on employers who may not allow trade unionists on to their premises. In addition, trade unions have not always and everywhere been able to include migrant workers among their ranks, and some might have seen their role as primarily protecting local workers.

Against this backdrop, a book that compares how trade unions in Europe look at labour immigration, at migrant workers and their families and at what actions trade unions undertake to include them in their rank and file, is extremely relevant. This book is particularly welcome as it focuses on trade unions' new approaches under changed conditions.

The labour migration landscape does change and challenges in governing labour migration are bound to grow due to technological advances, evolutions of the employment relationship and the erosion of the social contract between the state and other actors. Current political debates around migration are often toxic and based on misperceptions. This book highlights these changes and challenges. It shows how increased competition due to globalization has led to more labour market segmentation and that 'trade unions that are traditionally most active in the regulation

of standard employment now have to define and represent the interests of a more flexible and less homogeneous labour force, and they have to do so without straining relationships with their traditional rank and file membership’.

Importantly, the book takes into account two trends: the surge of nationalism as an ideological basis for the general exclusion of (foreign) others; and the rise of Islamophobia as a specific form of exclusion. Trade union action does not take place in a vacuum, and as the authors state, today trade unions in Europe may be ‘called upon to address issues well beyond labour claims and labour equality, increasingly involving the social and legal status of migrants’. The book therefore defines the current power position of trade unions not just in direct tripartite co-decision-making, but in a more comprehensive way, including their institutional power resources and ability to form coalitions.

We cannot help but agree with the authors that an important question today is ‘whether trade unions, as social and political actors, try to influence regulations on immigration and migrant workers’ access to labour markets by opposing or supporting supranational provisions and government policies on immigration and mobility’.

We trust that the discussions on the Future of Work as they are now taking place under the ILO’s Centenary Initiatives will be enriched by the findings of this book.

Moussa Oumarou
Director
Governance and Tripartism Department
International Labour Office

Manuela Tomei
Director
Conditions of Work and Equality Department
International Labour Office