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# ON THE EMPLOYMENT OF FOREIGN WORKERS AND THE POLICY TOWARDS THEM IN GERMANY AND THE FRG BETWEEN 1900 AND 1980

Some research results and problems<sup>1</sup>

According to Lenin, one of the characteristics of imperialism manifests itself in "decreasing emigration from imperialist countries and increasing immigration... to those countries from backward countries with lower wages."<sup>2</sup> This was the case, for example, in Germany at the turn of the last century when, during the emergence of imperialism, a large number of foreign labour was imported, while emigration decreased at the same time. The immigrants were mainly Poles and Italians, the former coming above all from Russia and the Austro-Hungarian Empire before World War I. In 1913/14, there were approximately 1.200.000 foreign workers in Germany, half of them being employed in industry and agriculture respectively.

As far as the causes of the growing demand for labour by the monopolies and big landowners in the 20th century are concerned, it may suffice to point out that Germany's change from an agrarian to an industrial country after 1870 as well as the boom in industry and the continuous economic activity in agriculture before World War I



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led to a shortage of labour both in industry and agriculture, thus forcing the ruling class to organize increasing immigration of foreign workers since the 90ies of the 19th century. The monopoly capitalists and big landowners were, however, not simply interested in labour as such, but for economic and political reasons tried to get cheap labour and people desperate for work. In 1917, Lenin pointed out that it was characteristic of imperialism to exploit low-paid workers from backward countries, that the parasitic nature of the rich imperialist countries was based on this policy, and that the exploiters of these countries took advantage of the fact that the foreign workers were generally deprived of their rights.<sup>3</sup> In stating this, Lenin follows Marx' and Engels' remarks on the role and function of the reserve army of labour and the effects it had on wage cuts and the division of the working class.<sup>4</sup>

German imperialism was particularly keen to make additional profit by exploiting foreign workers. This was in accordance with its nature and the aggressive policy it pursued

at home and abroad which was the result of the so-called 'historical delay' of German imperialism and of the class alliance into which the bourgeoisie and the reactionary Junkers had entered. Accordingly, their policy was aimed at realizing an ambitious expansionist programme under conditions characterized by relatively limited economic and military resources and an unfavourable geographic location. The discrepancy between the goal to be attained and the resources given, which, among other things, brought about the blitzkriegstrategy used in the first months of World War I, forced German aggressive imperialism to pursue a policy of forced labour under the conditions of the war. The exploitation of foreign workers and other nations was an integral part of the aims to be achieved during the war, at the same time, however, also being an essential prerequisite for the attainment of this expansionist purpose.

Whereas before 1914, German imperialism was able to justify its policy of recruiting and importing hundreds of thousands of foreign workers by making reference to the economic pressure that forced people to leave their countries because of unemployment, short-time work, over-population and underemployment, the ruling class immediately changed over to a system of forced labour at the beginning of the war. The foreign workers employed in Germany at that time were usually forced to stay their jobs. In addition to that, starting in 1915 and lasting until the end of the war, hundreds of thousands of workers were deported to Germany from areas occupied by German troops. During the war, more than 200.000 Belgians and approximately 250.000 Poles from occupied parts of Russia were forced to work in Germany. Additional labour came from the Ukraine, Italy, the Baltic countries and also from neutral states.

When German imperialism was defeated in World War I, the patterns and methods of recruiting workers necessarily changed. Employment of foreign workers decreased

under the specific economic and political conditions of the twenties. Up to 300.000 foreign workers were employed in German at the time of the Weimar Republic. Their number strongly decreased during the world economic crisis. The German fascist imperialists, who had demagogically opposed the employment of foreign workers before Hitler came to power, later started to employ more and more foreigners, especially since the middle of the thirties when the preparations for war were intensified. In 1939, just before World War II, about 500.000 foreign workers were employed in Germany. At the beginning of the war German imperialism began to develop a system of deportation and large-scale forced labour in a brutal form typical of the nature of fascism. Approximately 7 million foreigners were deported from areas occupied by German troops, not counting the millions of prisoners of war who had to do forced labour.

In the mid-fifties, foreign workers began to be employed in the FRG to a greater extent. In 1961 the number of workers recruited abroad amounted to 300.000. Before that time West German employers tried to entice GDR people away from their jobs in the GDR. It should be mentioned in passing that it was not economic pressure that made people from the GDR leave their country where the antagonism between capital and labour has been abolished, and where all people are guaranteed the right to work. This phenomenon can only be explained and understood within the framework of the specific political situation in post-war Germany and the class struggle between the bourgeoisie and the working class.

When the GDR government took measures to close the border to West Berlin on August 13, 1961, thus making it impossible to recruit labour from the GDR, employment of foreign workers increased immensely in the FRG and reached its peak of 2.6 million in 1973. At the present moment, about 2 million foreign workers are employed in

the FRG, approximately 10 per cent of the total number of employees of the country. The number of foreign residents amounts to 4.5 million. Hence the FRG belongs to those capitalist industrial countries where large numbers of foreign workers are exploited by the big monopolies and, in addition to that, are discriminated against by the state monopoly system.

Some remarks on the structure of the employment of foreign workers in Germany and the FRG in the 20th century: Until 1945, the workers recruited abroad were employed in industry as well as in agriculture, mainly on big estates. Before World War I, about 50 per cent of the foreigners were employed in industry and mining, the remaining 50 per cent in agriculture. The situation did not markedly change in the twenties. During the thirties, especially when armament and the preparation for war were intensified by German fascist imperialism, this proportion gradually changed, and foreigners were employed in industry rather than in agriculture. During World War II, the monopoly capitalists and big landowners often clashed over the allocation and employment of forced labourers.

The number of foreigners employed in agriculture was more or less insignificant in the post-war period. On the one hand this was due to the agricultural structure: until 1945 the big landowners who employed foreign workers mainly lived in the east of Germany (in the areas of present-day Poland and the GDR). They were expropriated in the course of the democratic land reform. On the other hand the social conditions under which, for example, Italian workers had to live on West German farms at the beginning of the fifties were so bad that the foreign workers preferred to work in industry. In addition to that, the use of farm machinery reduced the demand for seasonal work in agriculture. At present foreign workers in the FRG are almost exclusively employed in industry and in the services sector.

Some causes of migration and some

remarks on the policy towards foreign workers: The foreign workers employed in Germany were primarily forced by economic and social reasons to leave their countries and sell their labour power abroad. This, however, does not apply to those recruited by force in areas occupied by German troops in both world wars. They were simply deported to Germany and had to do forced labour. Pointing out the main reason for emigration is, however, only one side of the picture. The history of immigration to Germany and of the policy towards foreigners put into practice by German imperialism clearly shows that the monopolies and the state monopoly system of rule, and to a certain extent the big landowners, have always initiated and controlled the migration of workers across the borders and have greatly benefitted from their employment. They have always decided on the extent of immigration, the social conditions of the workers and the main principles of the treatment of foreigners, including the duration of their stay abroad. From the past to the present migration policy has been characterized by the fact that the ruling classes in Germany and the FRG have been keen to import large numbers of foreign workers in times of economic activity, when the reserve army of labour at home became smaller. At the same time, however, they have always tried to prevent foreigners from settling down, thus denying the fact that, for example, the FRG has actually become an immigration country. In 1981, 43 per cent of the foreign workers, including their families who had joined them, were staying in the country for more than ten years, and over 50 per cent of them for more than eight years. Judging by their policy towards foreigners, however, the ruling classes do not seem to be prepared to take this fact into account, thus continuing a policy that started long before World War I and that manifested itself in the discrimination of Polish workers, who were only allowed to stay in the country for seasonal work, in the most extreme way. It goes without

saying that decisions on an immigration policy which either promotes or restricts free international movement of labour do not solely depend on the monopolies' demand for labour; they also depend on the extent of the political and social struggle at home, and are affected by the general political situation, the relative strength of the classes, etc. Decisions on the duration of stay of foreigners as well as the efforts of the ruling class to prevent them from settling down and to replace them after they had been staying in the country for several years are based on a number of different motives:

1. The replacement of a certain number of foreign workers after several years of employment is aimed at bringing the employment of foreigners into line with the 'economic activity - crisis - cycle', thus making it possible to export a certain amount of unemployment in times of crisis. At the same time this encumbers the country of origin with the consequences of increasing unemployment in the form of growing political and social struggles.

2. By maintaining a certain mobility of the foreign labour potential the monopolies want to ensure that the professional and age structure of the foreign workers should be more effectively brought into accord with the needs of capital. This makes it possible, for example, to replace long-time residents by fresh blood.

3. If the foreign workers are permitted to stay in the country for a longer time, the additional profit made by exploiting them will become smaller: the cost of labour power begins to equal that of native-born workers, the demands of the foreign workers (who usually come from backward countries) for higher living standards are rising, their readiness to fight for their rights is growing, and they are no longer prepared to accept social discrimination. Hence the replacement of foreign workers is intended to prevent the coming into existence of what bourgeois ideologists call a "subproletarian class ready to fight", and to counteract the growing unity of foreign and native-born workers.

4. Restrictive migration policy and replacement of foreign workers make it possible to oppose the demands of the democratic forces who claim that the big companies, as they mainly profit from the employment of foreigners, should also bear the costs arising from the employment of foreigners in areas outside their actual work, e.g. measures pertaining to the infrastructure, etc.

Replacement of workers and attempts to prevent their families from joining them keep the costs for measures outside their actual work low and encumber the countries of origin with a certain amount of the costs needed for education and training. For this reason the German ruling class has so far never realized free movement of labour at an international level. Assertions made by bourgeois historians according to which free movement was given, for example, before World War I, are not in accordance with the facts. With reference to Germany Dohse points out that there was no freedom of immigration at that time; there was only freedom for the employers to recruit workers abroad.<sup>5</sup> Even at that time immigration, duration of stay, etc. were decided upon by state authorities. The "mandatory identification" (Legitimationszwang) which, in addition to the contract of employment, bound foreigners to a particular enterprise, thus making it possible to keep them under control and surveillance. We also mention the fact that Polish workers, for example, were obliged to return home during the winter after their contract of seasonal employment, which was valid for nine months only, had expired. In both world wars the German ruling class deprived the foreign workers of their rights even to a greater extent and left them at the mercy of the employers and landowners. The system of deportation and forced labour was not introduced because of so-called necessities the war; it rather reflected the general ambition of the German ruling class who, as J. Nichtweiss points out with reference to the Polish seasonal workers, long before the war "had discovered that kind of the employ-

ment of foreigners which was in agreement with the economic efforts of the landowners as well as the political interests of the entire reactionary forces."<sup>6</sup>

It is worthy of note that the German imperialists made all efforts to import as many foreign workers as possible during World War I, at the same time trying to force treaties on other countries (e.g. Belgium, Austria-Hungary, Poland, the Ukraine, Romania and others) in order to be able to recruit workers from those countries more easily after the war and exploit them in Germany. The trade and shipping agreement between Germany and Finland, which was concluded simultaneously with the German-Finnish peace treaty on March 7, 1918, was regarded as a model for such agreements by the German ruling class. In exchange for the support the Finnish bourgeoisie received from German imperialism in fighting the revolutionary forces at home, the Finnish ruling class was, among other things, ready to make concessions with regard to the employment of foreign workers. As early as in January 1918, the Prussian War Office declared: "At present Finland can meet German interests most effectively by supplying labour. The readiness we showed in recognizing Finland should make it easier to induce the Finnish government to make such concessions."<sup>7</sup> Article 16 of the trade agreement concluded on March 7, 1918 met the German demands; similar demands were made on Russia, Poland and other states. It says here: "Each party to the treaty will permit temporary migration of their members to the territory of the other party for employment in agricultural, commercial and industrial enterprises, and will in no way prevent them from doing this, especially not by causing difficulties with regard to passports. Representatives of agencies, which are to be founded on the territory of one party in order to arrange the supply of labour, and which will be named by the government of one party to that of the other, shall be permitted to work on the territory of the latter without any bother and be allowed to exer-

cise their duties without hindrances."<sup>8</sup>

Since Finland did not attach any importance to the immigration of foreign workers it became obvious that, in spite of the diplomatic language used, the German ruling class had imposed its demands with regard to migrant workers on the Finnish government.

The reactionary lines of the treatment of foreign workers, which were put into action before World War I, have been continued in the FRG to the present day. In contrast to bourgeois historians, who try to deny this fact, I should like to point out that the continuity of the treatment of foreign workers, a policy which we call "Fremdarbeiterpolitik" because of its reactionary character, is ultimately due to the unchanged class relations in the FRG today. It goes without saying that this policy was modified in various historical periods depending on the historical conditions given. Such modifications may be observed if one compares the period of the Weimar Republic with that of the German Empire, or the policy pursued in the FRG with the fascist system of forced labour. Improvements made have been considerably pushed forward by the fact that the working class in capitalist countries and all other democratic forces are now fighting against the discrimination of foreign workers which forces the ruling class to make certain concessions. But this does not mean that there has been no continuity of imperialist policy towards foreign workers. One part of this policy manifests itself in the legal conditions for work and residence permits which are aimed at preventing foreigners from settling down abroad. Until 1945 the state-monopoly system was able to ensure that no foreigner stayed in Germany for ever if the ruling class did not want it. When the FRG started to employ foreign workers the situation seemed to change at first: between the mid-fifties and the beginning of the seventies, apart from periods of economic crises, the ruling class tried to import as many workers as possible, making use of slogans such as "free international movement" and "liberalization of the labour

market". Although the monopolies orientated their policy towards replacement of foreign workers they were not able to stop a development which gradually improved the legal conditions for work and residence permits within the framework of the Common Market. Since it is now even in capitalist industrial countries no longer possible to ignore basic human rights in general - elementary human rights such as the right to live in peace, the right to work, etc. are, unfortunately, being threatened by reactionary right-wing forces or, as mass unemployment in these countries shows, are not guaranteed - the ruling class of the FRG was forced to improve the right of residence for foreign workers after they had been staying in the country for several years and to allow parts of their families to join them abroad. In recent years, however, it has again become more difficult for families to find residence in the FRG.

#### Notes

1. The following statements are part of a paper was read at the Institute of Migration, Turku, Finland, in February 1983. I am especially grateful to the Head of the Institute, Dr. Olavi Koivukangas, for having made my visit to the Institute possible. I would also like to thank all colleagues for their comments and the discussion we had.

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2. Lenin, V.I.: Der Imperialismus als höchstes Stadium des Kapitalismus. In: Collected Works, Vol. 21, Berlin 1960, p. 287 (translated from the German).
3. Cf. Lenin, V.I. : Zur Revision des Parteiprogramms. In: Collected Works, Vol. 26, Berlin 1974, p. 155
4. Cf. Marx, Engels und Lenin Über grenzüberschreitende Migrationen im Kapitalismus, deren Ursachen und Wirkungen (Collection of quotations). Rostock 1983 (Schriftenreihe "Fremdarbeiterpolitik des Imperialismus", H. 14)
5. Dohse, K.: Ausländische Arbeiter und bürgerlicher Staat. Genese und Funktion von staatlicher Ausländerpolitik und Ausländerrecht. Vom Kaiserreich bis zur Bundesrepublik Deutschland. Königstein/Ts. 1981, p. 82
6. Nichtweiss, J.: Die ausländischen Saisonarbeiter in der Landwirtschaft der östlichen und mittleren Gebiete des Deutschen Reiches. Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte der preussisch-deutschen Politik von 1890-1914, Berlin 1959, p. 54 (translated from the German).
7. Zentrales Staatsarchiv (ZSTA) Potsdam, Auswärtiges Amt, Nr. 30 006, Kriegsministerium/Kriegsamt am 22.1.1918 an Auswärtiges Amt (translated from the German).
8. Verhandlungen des Reichstages, Vol. 323, Drucksache Nr. 1396, p. 21/22 (translated from the German).