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# Migrant Workers in Ireland

Pat McNamara CSSp

## IRELAND

In the late 1990s a meat packing plant closed down in Anapolis, Brazil. Nearly a thousand people were left without work or income in a neighbourhood of twenty thousand — a huge blow to the area.

An Irishman married to a Brazilian woman was in Ireland on holidays and he met some friends in the meat packing business at a party. They said they could use some good experienced butchers if he could send them to Ireland. This he did.

They were an immediate success. They began to send money back home and naturally their families were thrilled with this new source of income from far away. The word began to spread. Others came and were employed by the same meat packing chain.

Then some of the Brazilians in Ireland went to work for other meat groups. In a short time there were hundreds of Brazilians working — all legally documented and getting on very well. Some of their neighbours back in Brazil were keen to come to Ireland to see how the system worked. They came as tourists to see their relatives and/or neighbours. They too found work, sometimes in a meat plant, sometimes as builders, cleaners, farmers or horse trainers.

In addition to the Brazilian migrant workers there are many here as “students of English”. In fact they are here to work — they learn English in the workplace. Many others also work here — officially they are “tourists”.

### They discovered I was a priest

When I first went to visit them I was just another Irish person, but when they discovered I was a priest who had spent nearly twenty years in Brazil they asked me about

saying Mass in Portuguese. I have been doing that for many years now, each Sunday in a different town or neighbourhood.

The next development occurred when some of the workers were discriminated against and treated very badly. In Christmas week 1999 four workers contacted me to say they had just been fired from their job, evicted from their house and were facing deportation — all by the decision of their

*Wherever there is  
someone vulnerable  
someone will exploit  
this vulnerability*

boss. I lost no time getting a contact who works in a TV station to come with me and film the eviction and deportation. The workers were trembling and upset, but above all surprised that I could get a TV presenter to come and interview them. I translated their very striking interviews. Naturally, with the media present, no eviction actually took place. I then took their case to the Equality Authority and six years later in November 2006 we finally got a verdict in favour of the workers and sentencing the firm to pay them compensation.

### An avalanche of cases

This incident was the start of an avalanche of cases involving discrimination against Brazilian migrants in different parts of the country. Daily I found myself in police stations, prison, court and immigration offices dealing with Brazilians in trouble with the justice system. As a result of

this work I took a course to become a volunteer in the Citizens Information Centres. These are government funded to help people deal with bureaucracy and to act as a support system for those who need orientation and guidance.

I have taken on a number of cases of discrimination, which have rewritten the jurisprudence in regards to workers' rights. Legally registered or not, workers now enjoy the protection of the law, including the right to overtime and holiday pay, compensation in case of personal injury, the right to have protective clothes or equipment, and to get the same time off for lunch breaks as any Irish worker.

### Getting organized

In the beginning some of the local shop stewards were not at all keen to defend the rights of foreign workers who were doing the work Irish workers used to do and doing it for a fraction of the Irish rates. Now I am in regular contact with trade union officials at the national level and with a little nudge of the elbows on my part

### Claude Druil (France)

I realized that coming to the aid of those people required more than just goodwill. I needed a minimum knowledge of the laws in force if I was to render more worthwhile assistance. A badly prepared document could lead to a person being sent back to their country of origin, even though s/he fulfilled the necessary conditions and all possible means of recourse had not been exhausted.

they are happy to welcome new members and take up their causes. I am an organizer with the largest trade union in the country and I have found this is the best route to enable the Brazilians to get industry-wide levels of pay, conditions, and benefits.

I have not hesitated to use the media to interview Brazilian workers. When I run up against a difficulty with officials and small firms I say they can talk to me, or if they prefer I can get them on the night's TV news or the next day's papers. All of a sudden things seem to move along where before there was no sign of any flexibility. Nobody wants to be the talk of the town, accused of treating migrants as if they had no rights.

### **Qualifications not recognized**

Many foreigners with third level training and experience are not able to use these qualifications in Ireland. They end up working at a level far below what they are capable of doing. A dentist I know is washing dishes, a doctor is only able to work as a hospital porter, and a management consultant was offered a job as a cleaner.

Lack of English is crucial at times. One man who was injured in a factory was taken to hospital the week before Christmas. When I went looking for his file they had no one listed with his name. All they had was "Rudolph Reindeer" — so his boss could not be sued for the accident at work.

When we get to the bottom of this it will be worse for that factory owner.

I certainly never expected to meet so much injustice and blatant exploitation in Ireland. I thought decency and generosity and honesty were part of the Irish character, but sadly I have been disillusioned and made to face up to the reality that wherever there is someone vulnerable someone will exploit this vulnerability.

### **Liberation spirituality**

The church I met when I arrived in Brazil in the 1970s was very strong on liberation theology: the bible in one hand and the daily paper in the other — helping people to reflect on their situation and searching out what would Jesus do in this context.

At a recent Mass I asked the workers when they last got a pay rise. They answered that they didn't think there was such a thing in Ireland.

When I celebrate Mass or do baptisms or weddings I usually connect with their lives back in Brazil: they are making a dif-

ference here in that they are improving production, and the pay they send home has improved the lives of their families enormously. I then point out to them that this abundance is only a pale shadow of how abundantly God wants to shower his love upon us.

### **Future developments**

There will be a presence of Brazilian migrant workers in Ireland for the foreseeable

future. They are only a small part of possibly 400,000 migrants currently in the country (nearly 10% of the total population). Some Brazilians are here long enough to have earned the right to stay permanently, whether by virtue of having a child born here or having spent enough time working here. The majority of them are hardworking. They see a golden opportunity and do not want to lose it by being careless. ■

