

Irish Building workers ripped off in Germany

Industrial Workers of the World

1995

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Thousands of Irish building workers have gone to work in Germany over the last few years. As European integration proceeds, German contractors are increasingly turning to foreign workers. They want foreign workers because they are cheaper, unorganised and easier to push around. Some are beginning to fight back.

Spanish building workers at the 'Bonum-Immobilien' near Berlin worked for several weeks without getting paid before striking on August 3rd of last year. These workers were employed by Levant, a Dutch temporary employment agency, which rented them to contractor Wolfgang Sturm. The workers signed contracts with Levant for DM26 per hour (skilled German building workers average DM65 per hour), which then sold their services for DM40 per hour and kept the difference. Agencies such as this do not pay social insurance or taxes, claiming that the workers are "self-employed".

Subbies skip out

The strike ended when the company paid a portion of the back wages. It refused to pay the balance on the grounds that the customer was dissatisfied with the work. The Spanish builders were left with just enough money to pay for their digs. Such disputes are becoming more common.

The Portuguese firm SOMEK got a contract for the Friedrichstadt-Passagen in Berlin's city centre. 200 Portuguese worked twelve hours a day, six days a week. SOMEK has 12,000 Portuguese workers on sites in Germany. They get DM2500 for a six day week which includes many hours overtime. A worker with a German passport would get up to DM6,000.

In September, twenty of these workers went on hunger strike in Leipzig because they had not been paid. They lived in miserable conditions, three to a container. They worked a six day week, fifteen hours a day, for DM20 per hour. Last July, Italian workers blocked a crane in Pankow to demand payment of their wages. Three months later, two more cranes were blocked by English workers demanding payment of their wages.

Cowboy agencies

There are more than 6,000 Irish and English building workers in Berlin at the moment. Many were hired through Dutch agencies. Workers often are not paid, as subcontractors disappear with their pay packets. The workers thought they would be earning good money but find they have to work 60 or 70 hours a week to get it.

The employment agencies charge both the employer who hires workers, and the workers who have to pay part of their hourly wage as commission. Many agencies are not registered and operate illegally or just refuse to pay wages, leaving workers to survive on their own without money.

Many workers end up living out of their cars or the so-called "cockroach" hotels. Every month between 100 and 200 Irish and British workers turn up at their consulates without money or a return ticket home. This is what the "free market" means, the bosses are free to do whatever they can get away with. The way to stop them is organisation, joining a trade union and creating building workers' committees to stop the unions backsliding and stop the job where bosses are ripping people off.

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