

5.1: Introducing week five

Welcome back to week five of our course on forced and precarious labour in the global economy. This week I want to take up and extend some of the themes that Sam talked about last week, namely issues associated with the exploitation and vulnerability of migrant workers and their role within global economic systems.

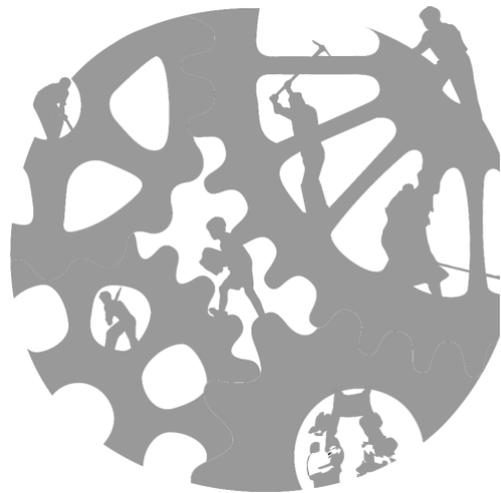
Last week you heard from Sam about the problems associated with migration and migrant work. This week I want to reflect upon some of the ways in which different solutions, strategies or ways of organising might be adopted in order to improve the legal rights and workplace protections that are afforded to migrant workers in various countries.

I want to do two things in this session. The first is to analyse some of the problems and complications associated with one of the most popular responses to migration and exploitation, and that is the impulse – stirred and supported by racism and xenophobia – to prevent all forms of migration and mobility at the border. This is a very popular strategy. It's not necessarily motivated by humanitarian impulses, but it's nonetheless something that governments and others turn to when faced with problems associated with migration and exploitation. They try to stop people moving.

In the first half we're going to think about some of the complications and limitations associated with this established policy and practice. In the second half, we're going to think about some of the alternative strategies which could offer a more effective response to the problems associated with migration and exploitation. That's our mandate for this week.

At this juncture I also want to briefly recap some of the key themes that Sam discussed with you last week. Recall that governments, corporations and others are often very invested in having people move for the purposes of work. Migrants fill jobs, they grow crops, they provide care in nursing and hospitals, they build stadiums, and so on and so forth. So this whole idea that governments are automatically opposed to migrants misses the fact that, in a lot of cases, governments and various economic interests are actually really invested in having people move for the purposes of work. The problem of course is, as Sam outlined, regards the terms under which they move. These terms leave them vulnerable to various forms of exploitation. Migrant workers are only valuable within this calculus, because the protections that are afforded to them are limited and their work is not paid for at the same rate as workers in the communities within which they reside.

This is the fundamental dilemma. In terms of possible responses to this issue, the first point we have to think about is this impulse to stop people at the border. I'm not going to pretend that the impulse to stop people at the border arises out of some noble humanitarian sentiment. As Sam outlined, the underlying sources of racism and xenophobia and a fear of outsiders and others are often the main animating impulse behind efforts of border protection.



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However, it's still important to grapple with the humanitarian argument because government officials throughout the globe give it as part of the reason why border protection is necessary. For example, when President Donald Trump proclaimed an executive order regarding his commitment to build a wall, one of the justifications he gave was to prevent human trafficking. This prevention of human trafficking rationale is not distinctive to Trump's wall – it's also something that European politicians have invoked repeatedly in relation to the recent crisis in the Mediterranean. When it comes to preventing people moving from Africa and the Middle East to Europe, there's been a recurring tendency to run together the terms people smuggling and people trafficking.

And by running together these terms of smuggling and trafficking, there's been a broader argument being made that says that highly aggressive and punitive measures to stop human traffickers are foundational to a humanitarian mission and not simply a punitive and protectionist one. A good example of this comes from the Italian Prime Minister Matteo Renzi, who declared that human traffickers are the slave traders of the 21st century and that they need to be brought to justice. In this formula, which the Italians, the Spanish, the French, the British and others use to conflate smuggling and trafficking, trafficking becomes a moral cause or problem which requires border protection.

As a consequence of this need for border protection, which is now cloaked in humanitarian language and rhetoric, all kinds of highly punitive measures have been adopted to prevent people from Africa and the Middle East from entering into Europe. This isn't something that begins at the Mediterranean. It also extends through the auspices of Frontex and other initiatives into places like Libya and Nazaire, where Europeans are heavily invested in preventing all forms of movement.

Now, it may well be that there's an argument for preventing movement – but it's not an argument that works in any kind of humanitarian terms. We know throughout history that movement is a natural human condition. We also know from extensive research that what happens in response to initiatives like Trump's wall or the European border fortress is that they raise the costs and challenges associated with migration without necessarily preventing it. What we find repeatedly is that border protection makes people vulnerable but doesn't prevent people from moving in the first place. This is in part because migration remains, as it always has been, one of the great strategies for escaping poverty, conformity, or other limitations and constraints that people find in their home communities.

Migration is, in a lot of cases, an avenue or a strategy. It's not something that can be easily controlled or tamed through an army of drones, or the building of additional walls, or the cracking down in various militarised ways on ships and movement. So when it comes to migration and exploitation, we cannot accept the idea that preventing movement is a humanitarian impulse. It instead arises out of xenophobic and racist impulses, and in a lot of cases and it's also unlikely to be effective when push comes to shove.

So if the dominant and conventional approach isn't going to work? What might we instead contemplate in terms of alternative strategies and approaches?

This transcript was prepared for the online course [Forced and Precarious Labour in the Global Economy](#) by [Beyond Trafficking and Slavery](#) (openDemocracy). It has been lightly edited for clarity. This course was originally released on the edX.org platform in 2018, where it has now been archived. As of 2021 it is available on [opendemocracy.net](#).

