

STRANGERS INTO CITIZENS

A campaign by the Citizens Organising Foundation for a pathway into citizenship for thousands of undocumented workers who have made new lives in the UK.

In the lower reaches of our informal economy, some immigrants are being used in what are little better than conditions of slavery. Yes, it is now unlawful for an employer to give work to an illegal immigrant, but much of the informal economy is unlawful. Illegal immigrants are vulnerable and so can be exploited for a pittance. One day, light will be turned on this near-slavery and disgrace us.

Bill Deedes, the *Daily Telegraph* (8 September 2006)

There is no way that a society like Britain or a city like London needs to build its wealth on the back of that kind of exploitation Much of the greatness of London has been fed by the energy and dynamism of foreigners. And I take the view that as soon as you arrive in London, you're a Londoner. Let's turn them from strangers into citizens.

Ken Livingstone, Mayor of London, message to TELCO Assembly,

(16 November 2006)

Hardly a week goes by when I do not have letters and correspondence from people in distress who may be held in custody, or who are without financial support, or at risk in employment, because we have not given them a proper place in our community ... Let us support this campaign. Let us drive to the margins the racism and discrimination that lie in the background of so much public attitudes, stirred up by the media, with regard to this issue. East London must set an example to the rest of the country, that we are a place of welcome to the stranger. This is the place where we seek to build the lives of those who are some of the most vulnerable in our midst.

Bishop of Chelmsford, John Gladwin, message to TELCO Assembly,
(16 November 2006)

While our nation benefits economically from the presence of undocumented workers, too often we turn a blind eye when they are exploited by employers ... Is it not time to consider, as other countries have done, ways of regularising their situation – those who are working in the country and do not have a criminal record - to the benefit of our economy and to enable them to play a fuller part in society?

The Archbishop of Westminster, Cardinal Cormac Murphy-O'Connor, homily at Mass for Migrant Workers, Westminster Cathedral (1 May 2006)

The call for regularisation or amnesty makes perfect sense and it must now be hoped that others follow the lead offered by the Cardinal and The East London Communities Organisation with its Strangers into Citizens campaign. Regularisation will provide a real security for thousands of workers who can then come out of the twilight zone and contribute fully to society - a right that should not be denied to any human being.

The Universe, editorial (26 November 2006)

Strangers into Citizens is a year-long campaign aimed at placing the destitution and exploitation of irregular (“illegal”) migrants onto the political map by means of a public call for a new government policy that would introduce a one-off limited regularisation for many thousands of people who have made new lives in the UK. These may be asylum overstayers, who for a host of reasons cannot or do not want to return to their countries; but they also include a large number of “economic migrants” who have made new lives in the UK yet are forced to live and work in a state of illegality, deprived of rights and vulnerable to exploitation.

Strangers into Citizens seeks to persuade government and other parties of the need for regularisation, by awakening consciences in UK media and society; lobbying of government and opposition parties; building a coalition from business, agriculture, and the health sector; the mobilisation of religious groups; a “citizen’s report” into the reality of irregular migrants; popular assemblies and meetings; as well as through campaign literature, websites, and so on.

The campaign will be successful if (a) regularisation enters public debate; (b) one or more political parties agrees to it; or if not, (c) politicians find policy alternatives that would meet popular disquiet over the plight of irregular migrants; (d) the question of the human rights of irregular migrants becomes a key moral issue in the national political conversation.

A ‘Citizens’ Campaign’

Strangers into Citizens has arisen from concerned citizens from faith communities who have befriended irregular migrants and are indignant at the precariousness of their condition, as well as irregular migrants involved in or connected with those communities.

All of those who care about this issue ask why it is permissible for a wealthy society which has benefited hugely from the influx of migrants in the past 10-15 years should condemn more than half a million people to insecurity, exploitation and a legal condition in many ways worse than that of prisoners. They question the moral legitimacy of allowing such conditions as part of a strategy of “looking tough” on immigration. They say the dignity of human beings should not be sacrificed for political ends. They say it is wrong to condemn to a precarious state of illegality those who, for very human reasons, have chosen to remain in the UK and make a new life here, and who in many cases have children in schools and make a vital contribution to the nation’s economy and society.

The religious communities – churches, mosques and temples – who make up the Citizens Organising Foundation alliance are concerned, too, at the effect on the common good of allowing so many people to live beyond the law. Here are a large number of people in Britain who contribute to the flourishing of the British economy and society but who are neither accountable to the law (through the payment of taxes); nor do they enjoy the protection of the law (through employment legislation). Unable to be law-abiding through no fault of their own, they are condemned to live as outlaws. No stable, decent society can allow such a large number of people to exist beyond the reach of the law, without the law and the common good of that society suffering as a result.

Strangers into Citizens is a new campaign driven by a very old concern, which has become pressing in the context of globalisation and the unprecedented movement of peoples across the world to which it has given rise.

Like the campaign to abolish the slave trade, which finally succeeded 200 years ago, *Strangers into Citizens* is driven by a religious and humanist consciousness of the innate human dignity of all human beings and an indignation at the denial of that dignity.

The Christian Churches, along with the major faiths present in the UK, have long advocated the rights of irregular migrants. The call for “rights” is very specific: a right is a claim that should

receive the backing of the law. The call is not therefore for compassion and charity to be shown to the migrant – although these are vital – but for the political recognition of rights which British citizens take for granted. In 1992, the Vatican spelled this out clearly when it noted that the migrant and refugee “is not an object of assistance, but rather a subject of rights and duties. Each country has the responsibility to respect the rights of refugees and ensure they are respected as much as the rights of its own citizens.”

Faith groups work closely with asylum seekers and other migrants. As Nicholas Sagovsky, canon theologian at Westminster Abbey, noted recently at the launch of the Independent Asylum Commission in Parliament, whether it was helping people cope with refusals, searching for a good lawyer or supporting people in detention who were suicidal, “at all these pressure points members of the faith groups are involved.”

This is evident from countless newspaper stories in which local churches or mosques plead on behalf of families facing deportation. The common thread in these stories is that members of these faith groups have befriended migrants, can vouch for them, believe that they deserve to remain, and are strongly opposed to their removal. They are seldom heeded, in spite of heartbreaking testimonies to the good character, skills, and worthiness of the migrants concerned. *Strangers into Citizens* seeks to give political voice to the common-sense compassion of these faith groups, who in our proposals are given a major role in being able to advocate for individual migrants and their families.

A wake-up call

Specifically, the campaign has arisen from the concerns of CITIZENS member communities in the Midlands and Greater London, which have experienced, at first hand the iniquities of the current system. The LONDON CITIZENS WORKERS ASSOCIATION is especially close to thousands of undocumented workers in the cleaning and catering industries, and has a store of first-hand authentic testimonies on which to draw. The CITIZENS’ Living Wage campaign has been attempting to secure human payment for cleaners – the Living Wage is higher than the minimum wage, which in London equals poverty wages. But it has become clear to the campaigners that a very large number of low-paid workers are often being denied *even the minimum wage* and are subject to other forms of exploitation and abuse *because they are illegal*. Unscrupulous employers make use of the illegal status of such workers as a lever to force them into conditions which should rightly be regarded as scandalous in modern Britain.

Strangers into Citizens is a wake-up call to contemporary Britain, to alert all people of goodwill to the Dickensian conditions suffered by a very large number of people in modern Britain who forced to live in the dark: contributors to the national wealth but deprived of its benefits; unable to pay taxes or report crimes; unable, in many cases, to seek basic healthcare; stigmatised in the media, scapegoated by communities, exploited by employers; and deprived of the citizenship in the society to which they are committed.

A key component of the *Strangers into Citizens* campaign is therefore to tell the stories of migrant workers, to “re-humanise” them in the face of media hostility. The campaign aims to sensitise British society to the irregular migrant, to awaken empathy and compassion. Where society is blind, the campaign aims to open its eyes: the campaign aims to show the irregular migrants as they mostly are: young, educated men and women with families and very human aspirations to security and a better life.

It is clear that many people in UK are hostile to irregular migrants in principle but not in person. Much of the hostility derives from myths about undocumented workers. By telling the truth and showing the reality, *Strangers into Citizens* seeks to close that gap.

A reality-check

The campaign starts from the single, irrefutable fact that the 570,000 irregular migrants currently in Britain (according to Home Office figures) cannot realistically be deported. As a former immigration minister noted last year, at the current rate of 20,000 deportations it will take 25 years to remove more than half a million undocumented workers. One study notes that to deport the entire undocumented population – even were it feasible, which is not – would cost £4.7bn, and blow a hole in the economy. The reality is twofold: hundreds of thousands of undocumented workers are here, and here to stay; to ignore this fact is disastrous for Britain.

In purely financial terms, the status quo makes no sense. A report by the National Crime Intelligence Service published on 2nd October this year summarises the total loss to the Exchequer from unpaid tax and NI contributions to be as much as £3.3 billion – enough to build 132 schools or 13 hospitals. The extra fiscal revenue from taxes would result in a net gain to the Exchequer of between £500m to £1bn, according to IPPR estimates.

A study by experts at the Joint Council for the Welfare of Immigrants spells out the consequences of not regularising:

“While it should be recognised that both irregular and regular new migrants are prone to some exploitation, migrant workers who have irregular immigration status do not have any way of practically enforcing their employment rights and thus are at particular risk of exploitation, injury and worse. In turn this is not good for regular migrant and UK workers. For if exploitative employers can always turn to a workforce that is overly flexible and compliant out of fear of being removed from the UK, how will this help uphold equality in the workplace for anyone?”

Regularisation and enforcement

Immigration is one of the great issues of contemporary British politics. All political parties are sensitive to charges that they are “soft” on immigration. A common view is that the country is “full up” and that new restrictions must be placed on immigration.

We do not argue with this. Every country has the right to regulate migration flows. It is one of the essential tasks of a state.

But just as important is the need to attend to the less-than-human conditions in which hundreds of thousands of irregular migrants now exist in modern Britain. It will be impossible to “tighten our borders” while failing to regularise a large number of them.

One of the advantages of regularisation is that it makes criminals with no papers easier to find and deport. People-traffickers, drug traffickers, international criminals and terrorists are hard to track down because of the large numbers in the “illegal” or black economy. Regularisation will shrink the black economy and help to expose these undesirables, enabling the IND to concentrate resources on deporting them.

Regularisation is not, therefore, an “opening” of Britain’s borders, but a way of dealing with the consequences of more than a decade of immigration. We are asking for a realistic, humanitarian policy for giving legal rights to the people who did not return home when their visa is expired or when their application for asylum was refused. Many of them have made new lives in Britain, and don’t want to go back. Many have lived here for several years. We believe that those who have made new lives in Britain and have become part of the communities should be offered a one-off fast-track route to legality.

The example set by other countries

Granting legal status to ‘irregular workers’ is neither new nor specific to the UK. It has already happened in Spain, Italy, France, Germany, Belgium and the US. Since the 1970s, the EU states have regularised a total of 3.5 million people, mostly between 1995 and 2000. In 1986, the US

gave residence permits (“green cards”) to 2.7 million people. Spain has had six regularisation schemes since 1985, legalising approximately 1.3 million irregular immigrants.

On 14 November 2006 Germany announced legislation that would allow some 190,000 asylum-seekers whose cases have been unresolved for years to legally remain in the country. Depending on their family status and how long they have already been in Germany, the migrants will be granted a two-year visa allowing them to live and work in the country legally. If they are able to find work and support themselves in this time, the visa can be renewed. After five years of legal residence, Germany grants foreigners an unlimited right to remain in the country. To qualify, foreigners must have been in Germany at least eight years, or six years if they have families.

In the recent past Britain has carried out very small-scale regularisations: to end backlogs of outstanding asylum applications (1998), to benefit some domestic workers (1998/99), and so on. These initiatives have conceded the principle of regularisation, but were deliberately low-key and deliberately below the radar.

One of the objections to a larger-scale regularisation is that it will act as a green light to poor people around the world to come to Britain. There is no evidence of this, and the German government after considering this possibility decided it was not an convincing objection.

Between regularisation schemes in Spain there has been no noticeable upward trend in the number of applicants per regularisation. The fact that Spain has had a number of such “amnesties” simply reflects its dire need of labour: a shockingly low birth-rate in Spain combined with a growing economy means that Spain needs at least 200,000 migrants a year to meet demand. That is not the case in Britain, which has a higher birth rate and less disparity between supply and demand.

But to avoid any “pull” factor, it is important that the scheme limit applicants to those whose residency falls within specific datelines while excluding recent arrivals.

We believe the measure should be a one-off initiative by Government to complement the “Points-based” system of managed migration which will come into force by 2008, and before the planned introduction of national ID cards. It would support the current rationalisation and improvement of the migration system which all parties want to see.

We will seek to answer the major objection to the scheme, and the reason why political parties – even when they accept the logic and the necessity of regularisation - are reluctant publicly to endorse the idea: namely, that it would “send the wrong message” to foreigners about Britain being a “soft touch”.

This objection is a myth. Britain would retain its strict border controls and is already making changes to make the rules even tighter for the future. This would be a one-off regularisation, back-dated and unlikely to be repeated. It will not open Britain’s borders, but make them more secure.

Our proposal

Regularisation schemes need eligibility criteria. Different European countries have applied different criteria at different times. Some ask for proof of a number of years of continuous, law-abiding presence in the country; others for a track record of employment, or proficiency in the language. In June this year, for example, the French government announced a one-off regularisation procedure solely for families with children in French schools.

We propose that those who are eligible be admitted to a two-year “sponsored pathway” into full citizenship. This idea of “sponsored regularisation” reflects the way in which this idea has flowed upwards from faith and other communities which have befriended irregulars and can vouch for them.

Those who would be eligible would have: four years of continuous residence in Britain; no serious criminal record (ie excluding administrative offences of false identity papers); character references from community leaders or employers; and a degree of proficiency in English language.

During their two-year “pathway” the migrants would be allowed to work. At the end of that period, they would present positive character and employer references, and be admitted to full citizenship.

Creating political space for government action

Government ministers have more than once raised the possibility of regularisation – as Liam Byrne did in January 2006, and David Blunkett in 2003 - but have been quickly forced to back down faced with hostile tabloid reactions.

Strangers into Citizens will provide evidence of strong and broad civic support for regularisation, affording political leeway for Government to act.

In the first quarter of 2007 member organisations of the Citizens Organising Foundation in London and Birmingham will gather and compile stories of irregular migrants – their histories and their lives. In March an assembly will be held in Birmingham to which journalists and MPs will be invited to hear testimonies from migrants, as well as the case for regularisation being put by businessmen, trade unionists, policemen, health workers, etc.

Testimonies will also be gathered from representatives of religious communities - vicars, priests, imams etc. – who befriend and support irregulars, and have insights into the conditions in which they live.

A number of schools have also agreed to take part in the campaign, engaging schoolchildren with the issue.

There will be a strong media dimension to the campaign, with journalists encouraged to write features about migrants, and theologians and others to contribute to ‘Thought for the Day’ and articles in the religious press. TV documentary makers and TV soap writers also invited to include irregular characters.

The public demonstration of support will be manifest next May, when the Catholic and other churches will hold services for migrants. Demonstrations in Britain’s major cities are being planned. Between May and July, an attempt will be made to convert the popular mobilisation into government policy.

Regularisation:

- Recognises the dignity of human beings who have made new lives in Britain;
- Extends and reinforces the rule of law;
- Makes it easier to police undesirable elements in British society;
- Helps to enforce a stricter immigration policy;
- Levels the playing-field for low-paid workers;
- Enables businesses to employ legally the skilled labour it needs;
- Brings irregular migrants out into the light, allowing them to play a full part in society;
- Ensures that tens of thousands of British workers receive the protection of the law
- Shrinks the black economy;

- Frees up billions of pounds in taxes for the Exchequer;
- Enables local authorities to plan better for the needs of its populations;
- Builds a more cohesive British society, at peace with itself;
- Turns outlaws into neighbours, and strangers into citizens – in the best traditions of British pragmatism and humanitarianism.

Support *Strangers into Citizens*

Can you and/or your community support the campaign, either through actively participating or through funding? ***Please contact:***

Austen Ivereigh

Campaign Co-ordinator, 'Strangers into Citizens'

Citizens Organising Foundation, 112 Cavell St., London E1 2JA

Tel. 020 7375 1658 Mob. 07905 224860 Email Austen.ivereigh@cof.org.uk

More about the Citizens Organising Foundation at www.cof.org.uk