

Peter Raben, 15.11.00

MIGRANT WORKERS IN DENMARK

Pelle the Conqueror, the well known novel by Martin Andersen Nexøe, is the story about the young boy Pelle coming to Denmark (the island of Bornholm) from Sweden together with his father who is looking for a job. Like them thousands of other workers went to Denmark to work. Most of them from Sweden or Poland and some from Central or Eastern Europe as well.

In the city of Copenhagen 100 years ago the proportional number of foreigners living there was the same as it is today! The high number of foreigners caused some minor problems, but not any really serious trouble the way you see it today. They were accepted as fellow citizens and colleagues. One reason for this might be the fact that Denmark back in history had been a multiethnic state. Not only Danes but Norwegians, Icelanders and Germans as well had been inhabitants in the kingdom of Denmark. Thus Danes in Copenhagen and other major towns were used to hear foreign languages.

Another and perhaps more important reason probably was that some of the workers themselves travelled to other countries in order to work or to get an education. Many craftsmen went abroad for several years – were "fahrende gesellen". And not to forget: the workers movement was established and developed as an international organization – workers of the world unite. That way of thinking probably made it easier to be integrated as a migrant worker of which many joined the trade unions being established in Denmark at that time and some of them later on caught higher positions within the workers movement like Pelle the Conqueror did.

All this is history, but important to remember and learn from facing todays problems with xenophobia and racism.

If we take a look at the present situation things are more complicated. There are different kinds of immigrants including refugees looking for a job, but not always being very successful in getting one.

One group is the migrant workers who arrived in the 1960ties and 70ties mostly from Yugoslavia, Turkey and Pakistan to take the dirty and low paid work that no Danes would have anymore. They were called guest workers, but most of the guests stayed and brought their families to Denmark. That did not cause any problems – until the economic crisis in the mid 70ties. The first ones to get fired were the guest workers and since then quite a huge number of them have been unemployed for a shorter or longer time. The unemployment rate is much higher than for the Danes though things have improved recently. The latest unemployment figures show that more people of other ethnic origins are getting jobs now.

Another group is the refugees arriving from many parts of the world during the last 10 or 20 years. It has been very uncertain whether they were supposed to go back to where they came from or to stay and become Danish citizens. Some have applied for citizenship and others have not, but most of them have had the intention of getting a job. However, only few have succeeded in getting one

and many have more or less given up. Like some of the previous mentioned immigrants they feel like outcasts without any relations to the labourmarket, to the trade unions and perhaps even society as such.

Facing the fact that it is more or less impossible to get a job some of them have established their own business running a small shop or a trading company - and today most of the greengrocers in Denmark are immigrants or refugees! But running a business is not easy and many go bankrupt. In despite of this and left with no other choice many of their children, the socalled second generation immigrants, do the same. Having the intention of running their own company they go to business school. In Copenhagen 30 up to 40% af the business school students toady are af another ethnic origin than Danish. A lot of them never become shopkeepers. In stead they get a job in a supermarket or another shop as an employee, but not being familiar with the trade unions many don't get organized unless their colleagues or the trade union ask them.

In order to organize these young people the Copenhagen branch of the Union of Commercial and Clerical Employees (in Danish known asHK) have made special campaigns visiting the business schools and having an open debate about why to get organized. It has been quite a succes mostly due to the simple fact that the youth officer of the trade union is a second generation immigrant himself – he speaks the same language so to speak! That has been very useful and convincing.

4% of the members of HK are of other ethnic origins – 25% of them young people. Taken into concideration that 5% of the total labour force of Denmark are of other ethnic origins it is obvious that the number of ethnic minority members of HK should be higher. In order to do something about this different kinds of steps are being taken and an Ethnic Equality Programme has been adopted.

According to this programme efforts shall be made internally and externally to let the HK members of other ethnic origins become more visible and to make them feel welcome. Barriers shall be broken down within the trade union and among shop stewards who discourage ethnic equality. Through the personnel policy HK shall ensure that ethnic minorities are hired in the trade union offices. To the public HK shall make it quite clear that the trade union supports positive integration and opposes racism and xenophobia of any kind.

Furthermore the trade union will include the question of ethnic equality when negotiatong central or local agreements. An agreement has been made with the government that government offices shall employ a bigger number of ethnic minorities due to the fact that only 2% of the civil servants are of other ethnic origins. This agreement was made almost 4 years ago, but until now only very little has been done to fulfil the intentions of the agreement. Not only the local managers, but also a great number of the employees are ignorant to this. Even many shop stewards do not feel committed to this task. Only quite few have attended meetings and seminars on this issue.

The conclusion must be clear: good intententions and common agreements at a top level is far from enough. Further steps must be taken. Enhanced information and more debat combined with examples of good practice are means to get more people involved at a local level - the work places and the branches of the trade union. The Copenhagen branch is preparing a seminar for shop stewards, members of the branch board and trade union staff in order to give them information and inspiration. Other branches together with other local trade unions are making similar activities and one branch is finishing a survey of the barriers that keep ethnic minorites away form getting a job.

HK will keep focusing on the question of ethnic equality for the next five years. Two conferences will be held during this period one for shop stewards and one for general board members and local branch board members. Ethnic equality will be included in the shop steward training programme as well as the introductory courses for the trade union employees and officials. A complaints council will be established to take cases that are based on deliberate or unconscious discrimination of members of other ethnic origins. Local branches are expected to participate in establishing local integration boards and contribute to getting these boards to function in cooperation with other local trade unions.

Of course other trade unions than HK have taken up the question of ethnic equality and some have been very active for several years. The Restaurant Workers Union (RBF) is one of them. Like in many other European countries a lot of migrants and people of other ethnic origins work at hotels, restaurants and bars. Many of them speak only little or no Danish at all. To get in touch with these people the trade union has translated information leaflets into many languages and introductory meetings have been performed multilingual. Besides wages health and safety has been one of the questions taken up because work conditions often are very poor. Now it is not unusual that the health and safety representative is a migrant worker being supported by the union giving information and advice. Some of the migrant workers such as women from the Philippines have become very involved in trade union activities and this way makes it easier to organize and to develop solidarity between workers of different ethnic origins.

Solidarity is the answer to xenophobia and racism and is the keyword too for the workers movement if we want to conquer the world.

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Appendix:

FACT & FIGURES

HK (Handels- og Kontorfunktionærernes Forbund i Danmark) established in 1900 with approximately 375.000 members is the largest trade union in Denmark. About 75% of the members are women. HK members work as

- office employees in private companies, municipal authorities and government offices
- trade and commercial employees, shop and warehouse staff
- laboratory technicians in private industry as well as public and research institutions
- computer operators in the private and public sector
- typographers and compositors at news papers and printing houses
- bilingual and trilingual secretaries in the private and public sector
- medical secretaries and dentist assistants in the private and the public health sector
- apprentices and vocational trainees in commerce and offices
- students at business colleges, computer schools, technical colleges and business schools.

HK consists of 43 local branches and is at national and local level divided into 5 sectors:

- HK/Retail and Wholesale trade (HK/Handel)
- HK/Industry (HK/Industri)
- HK/Service (HK/Service)
- HK/Government Institutions (HK/Stat)
- HK/Municipal authorities (HK/Kommunal)

Unemployment 1999

Total labourforce Denmark	6%
HK average	7%
HK members of other ethnic origins:	13%

Unemployed members of HK of other ethnic origin than Danish by country of origin, 1999

	Number of persons	%
EU/EEA	3.180	9.0
Former Yougoslavia	726	12.8
Poland	526	13,1
Turkey	831	16.2
Morocco	167	15.6
USA/Canada	210	8.6
Iraq	100	19.0
Iran	287	23.7
Lebanon	142	23.9
India	155	16.1
Pakistan	568	18.0
Sri Lanka	101	19.8
Vietnam	188	15.4
Others	1.351	13.3
Total	8.532	13.0

Unemployment by country of origin, 1999

	Number of persons	% of labour force
Total	150.190	5.7
Denmark	137.072	5.2
Rest of the world, total	21.040	14.6
EU countries	2.976	7.5
Other Europe, total	8.468	16.1
Africa	2.030	21.4

North America	253	7.2
South &Central America	396	13.5
Asia	6.774	19.3
Stateless	103	28.0