

Community cohesion

With many Polish migrant workers being treated unfairly in their new UK workplaces, Community has launched a national campaign to spread the word on how our union can support them and how they can help our membership grow.



'I believe there are at least a million Polish people in the UK,' says Bas Morris, the union's Assistant General Secretary with special responsibility for migrant workers, 'and Community recognises that many are being exploited at work because of language difficulties and lack of awareness of their employment rights. In response to this, at the end of 2006, we set up a national campaign to help them fight for those rights and integrate into their new communities.'

The campaign is making good progress. Bas explains: 'There have already been some major developments in Region 5. Senior organiser Terry Meakin (pictured), supported by TUC Project Worker Bev Allen, has been instrumental in setting up a Polish workers' support network in partnership with local jobs agency Smart Group, the Workers' Education Association (WEA) and Polish community groups, and in securing funding for a multilingual Community liaison worker in Yeovil.'

'The Yeovil project is a great example of what can be achieved when we work together. But we needed to spread the word to other areas with significant numbers of migrant workers that Community can help with employment issues, educational opportunities and life outside work, too.'

To achieve this Bas has been giving presentations around the country to groups of mainly Polish immigrants, who make up 75% of the UK's migrant workforce. He has developed a good working

relationship with the Polish Federation in London 'whose links with Polish associations around the UK enable us to reach out to their community,' he adds.

So far there have been meetings in London (Hammersmith and Putney), Coventry and Hartlepool. 'We explain the benefits of becoming a member, our community focus and answer any questions. Union solicitors Morrish & Co are there as well to advise on any legal issues.' Meetings have been well publicised and attended – around 100 people turned up at Hammersmith – and more events are planned.

'To deal with the language issue, we are also looking at providing more Polish-speaking project staff to help us make contact with migrant workers and gain their trust, as well as investigating an online resource to enable our regional offices to produce union materials in our new members' first languages. The union's training arm *communitas* is also involved in our campaign providing language courses. It will have an increasing role to play as the campaign develops as will other partners such the TUC, the WEA, the General Federation of Trade Unions and other bodies with an interest in supporting migrant workers.'

'We aim to provide the same excellent services for our new members - wherever they are from – as we do for our existing ones,' Bas says. 'By joining us they add strength and diversify our membership, and we welcome them.'



Ewa Mahey holding her English lesson with migrant students

'They're very motivated to learn English because they want to improve themselves - that's why they came to the UK,' explains Ewa Mahey (pictured above) of the Polish, Lithuanian, Latvian and Russian migrant workers she is supporting.

Since January this year Ewa, a former English language teacher, has worked as Community's Liaison Worker for its Migrant Workers' Project in Yeovil. The post's funding was secured from the South West TUC's Learning Works for All by Region 5's Terry Meakin. Community is also providing support and resources for learners and tutors, advice on union matters and training its Union Learning Reps (ULRs).

Ewa works closely with the project's partners to recruit and support migrant workers to learn English, as well as promoting Community. 'We recruit learners through ULRs, local employers and local jobs agency the Smart Group, one of our first points of contact with foreign workers,' adds Warsaw-born Ewa who speaks Polish, English, French and Russian. 'I meet workers to assess their level of English and help them find appropriate classes with the Workers' Education Association. I then liaise between learners and tutors, offer support and provide information on the employment and educational opportunities Community can offer.'

A trade unionist since her university days, including Polish Solidarity, Ewa knows the value of being a member. 'I've given talks in the

workplace and at a number of conferences with Terry, who has also talked to workers about Community at Polish Association meetings. I can also put migrant workers with workplace problems in contact with Community officials, and help out with translation,' she adds.

'So far I've helped around 100 migrant workers either into learning English or referred them to services and support they need. The Polish community is really reluctant to lean on the UK benefits system but the government is making it harder for immigrants to access language courses, by restricting free English classes to those on benefits. Lack of English is the barrier that holds back most migrant workers from finding jobs, standing up for their working rights and becoming part of their new communities. That's why projects like this are so important.'

The project would like to thank Beverly Allen (Unionlearn), Vanessa Glasgow and Mick Atkinson (WEA), Terry Meakin and Janice Turvey (Community) and Nick Graff (Smart Group) for their support and commitment to its work.