

Seminar



Migration Transition, Labour and Social Reproduction in Europe in the Time of a Polycrisis



International seminar: Migration Transition, Labour and Social Reproduction in Europe in the Time of a Polycrisis

Date: 6 November, Thursday,

Place: room 203, Institute of Sociology, University of Wrocław, ul. Koszarowa 3

Organizers:

The Department of Sociology of Work and Economic Sociology at the Institute of Sociology, University of Wrocław; the Sociology of Work Section of the Polish Sociological Association; and the Wrocław Branch of the Polish Sociological Association, with the support of Research Committee 44 of the International Sociological Association, are hosting this event.

About:

Migrant workers have become a defining feature of the European landscape, reshaping the meaning of European identity while often occupying the lowest tiers of national labour markets. The seminar's main objective is to explore how recent migration transitions in Europe, in which traditional countries of emigration are increasingly becoming destinations for immigrants, are transforming labour markets, industrial relations, care systems, and social reproduction. This reveals shifts in European identity amid the current polycrisis, which is understood in terms of the interaction and mutual reinforcement of a structural crisis in social reproduction and sudden, usually exogenous, shocks — such as armed conflicts, pandemics, or inflation — that deepen intersecting inequalities. Based on five presentations by scholars from Poland, Italy and Lithuania, three interconnected domains of work will be discussed: (1) social reproduction, including paid and unpaid activities that sustain society and the economy; (2) labour markets and the labour process; and (3) industrial relations, which are understood as the collective relations between trade unions, employer organisations, and the state — particularly with regard to the inclusion and exclusion of migrant workers.

Registration:

The event is free of charge. We plan to organize it in a hybrid format. People interested in joining online are encouraged to fill in the registration form:

<https://forms.office.com/e/Eqru83d72v>

Programme

10:00-10:15: Welcome (Adam Mrozowicki, Mateusz Karolak)

10:15-11:00: Devi Sacchetto (University of Padua, Department of Philosophy, Sociology, Education and Applied Psychology) “Frictions in the Labour Process: Racialization and Union in the Italian Meat Industry” (discussants: Irma Mačkinė, Mateusz Karolak)

11:00-11:45: Valeria Piro, Francesca Alice Vianello (University of Padua, Department of Philosophy, Sociology, Education and Applied Psychology) “It’s a Dirty Job, but...”. Employers’ Recruitment and Retention Strategies in the Long-Term Care Sector in Italy (discussants: Justyna Salamońska, Adam Mrozowicki)

11:45-12:00: Coffee break

12:00-12:45: Mateusz Karolak, Adam Mrozowicki (University of Wrocław, Institute of Sociology) “Migration Transition and Trade Unions in Poland: New Dilemmas and (Old Problems) of Worker Organising” (discussants: Valeria Piro, Devi Sacchetto / Katarzyna Rakowska)

12:45-13:30: Irma Mačkinė (Vilnius University, Institute of Sociology and Social Work) “Transnational Families and the Reconfiguration of Care: Migration, Institutional Gaps and Inequality in Post-Pandemic Europe (discussants: Justyna Salamońska, Valeria Piro)

13:30-14:15: Justyna Salamońska (Kozłmiński University, Department of Management in Networked and Digital Societies, Kozłmiński University) “Transferring skills but not progressing: Labour market trajectories of intra-European West-to-West movers” (discussants: Adam Mrozowicki, Irma Mačkinė)

14:30-15:30: Lunch

Abstracts:

Frictions in the Labour Process: Racialization and Union in the Italian Meat Industry

Devi Sacchetto (University of Padua, Department of Philosophy, Sociology, Education and Applied Psychology)

This paper analyses how labour processes characterized by outsourcing support racialization processes that also involve trade union organizations. While previous studies have largely focused on managerial motivations for outsourcing and its effects on labour conditions and industrial relations, this study seeks to expand the discussion by examining the role of racialization within labour processes—an often-overlooked but crucial dimension of workforce management.

Adopting a qualitative methodology, the research draws on fieldwork conducted in meat processing plants in Northern Italy to explore the complex dynamics of labour segmentation and the varied responses of trade unions. The analysis begins by mapping the fragmentation of the labour force along multiple axes: labour contract, nationality, race, and gender. These divisions are further deepened by the interplay between outsourcing practices and processes of racialization, which have facilitated subcontracting while worsening labour conditions.

The study shows how subcontracting has been legitimized through the change in the composition of workforce. The presence of on-site contractors reinforces racializing practices, intensifying divisions along racial lines and entrenching hierarchies within the workplace. While trade union strategies often aim to broaden membership and increase representativeness, the paper argues that they can paradoxically reinforce existing segmentations within the labour force. This contradiction reveals the friction at the heart of union organizing in subcontracted environments—where attempts at inclusion may (inadvertently) reproduce exclusionary structures.

By synthesizing these insights, the paper contributes to a more nuanced understanding of the interrelationship between racialization, labour processes, and union strategies. It underscores the need for trade unions to develop more inclusive approaches capable of addressing labour fragmentation, while building solidarities across lines of race, nationality, gender and contract. In doing so, the paper brings attention to the racialized dimensions of workplace organization—offering valuable reflections for both scholarly debate and practical union action in increasingly diverse and subcontracted labour markets.

“It’s a Dirty Job, but...”. Employers’ Recruitment and Retention Strategies in the Long-Term Care Sector in Italy

Valeria Piro and Francesca Alice Vianello (University of Padua, Department of Philosophy, Sociology, Education and Applied Psychology)

In recent years, particularly following the economic recovery after COVID-19, several sectors of the European labour market—including long-term care—have experienced severe worker shortages (Zapata et al. 2023; McPake et al. 2024). As a result, migrant labour has become essential in addressing this scarcity. While much of

the existing literature has examined labour migration from the perspective of migrant workers—focusing on mobility decisions, precarious living and working conditions, and coping strategies—the perspective of employers remains largely underexplored (with some relevant exceptions: Cangiano & Walsh 2014; Fellini et al. 2007; MacKenzie & Forde 2009; Rodriguez 2004).

This presentation aims to explore the role of employers in shaping and managing labour migration, with a focus on the long-term care sector. Specifically, it investigates the strategies employers develop to address labour shortages, and to recruit, select, and retain their workforce.

The analysis is based on data collected through empirical research carried out in Northern Italy (Veneto and Piedmont regions) between 2023 and 2025. The research was conducted as part of the project InMigrHealth – Investigating Migrants' Occupational Health. A total of 78 semi-structured interviews were conducted, primarily with healthcare assistants and other personnel working in long-term care facilities, as well as with employers and trade unionists. In addition, the research team administered 285 questionnaires to healthcare assistants. This presentation focuses specifically on twenty interviews conducted with managers of long-term care facilities in the two regions.

The results show that the long-term care sector in Italy suffers from a severe labour shortage, forcing facilities to operate understaffed and frequently resort to “emergency plans”, with significant implications for both service quality and working conditions. In addition to outsourcing—which remains a common practice—employers adopt a variety of direct recruitment strategies, with notable differences between high-skilled and low-skilled roles (cf. Cangiano & Walsh 2014). While nurses are increasingly being recruited from abroad—often facing challenges related to communication with patients and colleagues—healthcare assistants are mainly recruited domestically, particularly from Southern Italy. Finally, offering temporary accommodation, funding additional training, and enhancing welfare benefits are among the most common strategies employers use to retain staff. In conclusion, we observed that, due to a difficulty in recruiting abroad and an exhaustion of the internal pool of migrant labour, there has been a return to domestic recruitment fostering internal migration.

Migration Transition and Trade Unions in Poland: New Dilemmas (and Old Problems) of Worker Organising

Mateusz Karolak, Adam Mrozowicki (University of Wrocław, Institute of Sociology)

Our paper examines trade union strategies towards migrant workers in Poland, a country undergoing a migration transition from emigration to significant immigration. Drawing on two research projects (COV-WORK and ENDURE), we analyse the varieties approaches unions take in response to increasing migrant employment, particularly in logistics and care. Using interviews with TU officials as well as unionized and non-unionized migrants, we identify four main strategies: ignoring migration, universalistic “mainstreaming,” separate servicing models, and hybrid organising involving grassroots initiatives and NGOs. Structural constraints such as weak unions, hyper-precarity, legal dependency, and workforce fragmentation combine with migrants' own short-term perspectives for

stay in Poland and pose challenge to unionisation. Yet, there are notable exceptions of migrants organizing. The opportunities arise both from the very scale of migration and new legal regulations enhancing migrant rights, as well as shared experiences of Polish workers abroad and migrants in Poland who had already been exposed to trade union ideas in other special contexts. Our findings highlight the coexistence of universalistic and hybrid approaches, with the latter offering greater inclusion for smaller, more marginalised groups. Migrant organising thus emerges as vital to the survival and renewal of Polish trade unionism.

Transnational Families and the Reconfiguration of Care: Migration, Institutional Gaps and Inequality in Post-Pandemic Europe

Irma Mačkinė (Vilnius University, Institute of Sociology and Social Work)

The presentation explores how transnational families have been reshaped by overlapping crises - Brexit, the COVID-19 pandemic, the war in Ukraine, and wider socio-economic turbulence - paying particular attention to the reconfiguration of care across borders in Europe. Drawing on recent empirical studies and systematic literature reviews, it situates everyday family practices within the broader context of welfare restructuring, institutional shortcomings, and persistent inequalities. The discussion traces how care circulates between generations and across geographical scales, sustained through digital technologies but constrained by legal and policy frameworks. It also highlights dimensions of transnational family life that remain underexplored, including the roles of siblings and extended kin. Engaging with the concepts of unsettlement, relationality and embeddedness, and intergenerational ambivalence, the presentation demonstrates both the resilience and the vulnerability of families negotiating distance under conditions of uncertainty. It argues for understanding transnational families not only as intimate units managing separation, but also as subjects of governance, whose capacities to provide and receive care are deeply shaped by institutional regimes and global inequalities.

Transferring skills but not progressing: Labour market trajectories of intra-European West-to-West movers

Justyna Salamońska (Kozłowski University, Department of Management in Networked and Digital Societies, Kozłowski University)

The literature on economic assimilation describes the labour market trajectories of migrants to traditional destinations as having the shape of the letter 'U', describing an initial occupational drop in destinations followed by occupational upgrading. However, analyses of the European Internal Movers Social Survey show that this U-shaped trajectory does not fit the reality of intra-European labour market mobility between Britain, France, Germany, Italy and Spain. Western Europeans' skills seem to be relatively well transferable to other West European contexts, resulting in rather smooth career transitions, in particular when compared to third-country migration to the EU. The analyses show that for Western Europeans moving to another Western EU member state is not related—on average—to occupational downgrading, as it is in the case of

traditional migration destinations described in the existing literature. On the negative side, Western European movers do not get ahead substantially in their careers over time in their destination.