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A Short History of Migration to the UK: From Post-War to New Labour

Abstract: This very short chapter brings you quickly up to date with providing a short historical context of migration to the UK from the post-war period to the advent of the New Labour government, paying particular attention to Blair’s premiership and Britain’s role within the European Union. The main point will be to indicate in this chapter is the political importance foreign labour has been for the continued functioning of the UK economy but also to point out how an increasingly punitive politics has problematized the life circumstances of migrant workers.

Introduction

While on one hand, we should consider the political and economic circumstances which precipitate the motivation for significant population movement, on the other hand, we should also honour its respective historical context. For example, the fact that we find increasing numbers of migrant workers in the UK is not only related to something which is taking place now because the process of immigration has a historical genealogy. As we will see, time, space, and history have aligned in a specific way to firstly make the kind of low-grade positions available for a potential labour force (Chapter 4) – and the processes which keep people in these positions and maintain the negative attention towards them (Chapter 5) – as they have to put Romanians in the position to feel that moving abroad to provide their labour services is perhaps a better options than life at home (Chapter 6). Here we show that Romanians are certainly not the first group to have provided their services across various employment sectors of the UK economy.

Therefore the aim of this chapter is to provide the reader with a short historical context of migration to the UK from the post-war period to the advent of the New Labour government. In particular, attention is given to Blair’s premiership and Britain’s role within the European Union over the last 20 years or so. The idea is not to reinvent the current material on immigration history or to delve too much into the finer details of legislative acts as what we have to say here merely acts as the platform for placing these peoples’ lives in context. Our main argument is that the role of foreign labour has been historically pivotal for the buoyancy and growth of the UK economy (and for different reasons). First, because immigrant labour contributes directly to financial growth and prosperity but then, in times of austerity and/or political instability, the very same group often become the principle target in times of economic malady: much like the 19th-Chinese migrants who slaved over the US railroads, taking obscene risks with their lives for pittance only to become scapegoats and the butt of aggressive social policies and negative reporting on their ‘cultural heritage’ when national economic woe struck. As we will learn, the people in this book are not far off this experience ... so history does have something to say in this respect. Let us go back in time to the post-war period.