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‘I’ll do it step-by-step’: care, cover, and quiet campaigning

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Abstract

This article explores a frontline account of care work and trade union organising from the perspective of Maria Lozada, a care support-worker and Filipino trade union organiser. Her testimony offers insight into life as a worker and organiser in the UK and highlights how migrants from out with the EU reflect upon immigration restriction and what it means for the quality of their employment relations and abilities to organise. The political and economic policy context within which the narrative is set is a move away from a demand-led UK immigration regime to further restriction for low-skills work and immigration. Maria speaks about her role from a position of shelter, cover and anonymity, but is candid in her assessment of employers, policy changes and policymakers.

Key words

care, organising, migration, politics

Setting the policy scene, developing the frame

Under the New Labour government which was elected in 1997, immigration policy shifted towards a clearer commitment to economic immigration on one hand, and a stronger security and control framework on the other hand (Somerville et al, 2009, 1). Phase one of the government’s reforms liberalised and expanded the demand-led system for immigration as well as introducing new supply-side channels and opportunities for work, employment and entry to the UK (Flynn, 2005, 46). Phase two involved a major restructuring of previous policy into a points-based system (PBS) for immigration, while phase three adjusted entry criteria and restrictions for entry (Devitt, 2012, 3). A cornerstone of the government’s policy was the PBS, created in 2008 for selecting non-EU migrants. Phased in as a framework for immigration with five key tiers, the PBS granted potential immigrants work visas by meeting a points test that considered factors such as education, income and language skills (see Murray, 2011). This actively permitted the skilled, students and tourists and those with family links while filtering out people without the attributes deemed beneficial to the economy (Anderson, 2010, 307), leading some to suggest that its ultimate purpose was to limit non-European entry into the UK through classification (Brau, 2011).

In 2010, the coalition administration led by David Cameron’s Conservatives introduced a further policy known as the net cap on immigration. The net cap is a framework for managing immigration to the UK from out with the EU; its objective is to reduce net immigration to tens of thousands per annum. This is a significant aim for the government and policy for migrants working on the frontline. However, the government has faced difficulty in meeting this objective. In addition to important

arguments regarding the problems of setting an arbitrary immigration target, a persuasive view is that the policy is framed by a rhetoric focused on the pressures that immigration places on services and labour markets, as well as the tensions accompanying immigration in some communities (Tonkiss, 2013, 38).

To date however, there is little evidence of how non-EU migrants, working in the UK, reflect upon immigration restrictions like the net cap on immigration and scant understanding of what it means for the quality of employment relations and abilities to organise. The anxiety about joining and becoming active in unions is rooted in fears about job security and migration status and many migrant groups lack awareness of trade unions, falling victim to language and cultural barriers to engagement (Moore and Watson, 2009). It is becoming clearer that immigration controls produce worker status, influence employment relations, and subject workers to a high degree of regulation, giving employers' control that they do not have over citizens (Anderson, 2010 312/313). What is lacking, nevertheless, is a deeper understanding of *how*.

The narrative presented here is that of Maria Lozada, an activist with a major trade union who is employed by a council in the UK. It was developed through several interviews and is part of a larger research project on advocacy work and the state. Care work, motivation for becoming a shop steward, as well as the process and risks of being a shop steward are explored within an increasingly restrictive immigration context, as are her ideas about managing management and the political dimensions of migration and work. The first meeting took place in the outskirts of one of the UK's major cities. Questioning was guided by what was important to Maria: it focused on "what 'produces', 'generates', 'creates' or 'determines'" (Sayer, 1992, p.104) her view of work, organising, and policy. Normatively, the narrative is driven by the belief that knowledge of the world is available through descriptions like Maria's. Yet while a more restrictive immigration context provides the backdrop for explanation, the process of identifying active causal powers usually reveals several that are responsible for events (Sayer, 2004, 13).

The narrative speaks to researchers concerned with employment conditions in the care sector where lone working, heavy workloads and even violence is commonplace (Baines and Cunningham, 2011). It deepens our understanding of key issues in low-paid care provided by migrant women in publically and privately funded care services (Anderson and Shutes, 2014) by taking account of the stories, narratives, and agency of non-EU care workers and placing them within a broader political economy. It also seeks to add weight to counter arguments portraying migrant workers in low wage segments of the labour, as workers inherently driven to demonstrate the 'right attitude' (MacKenzie and Forde, 2009). Her testimony is important because, while it may be true that migrants are often recruited for attitude, cases of migrant-led resistance exist but are rarely documented. Further, while research reveals a strong relationship between macro-economic factors (like the great recession), fears of job loss (Green, 2009) and a heightening of subjective job insecurities (Gash and Inanc, 2013), there is little understanding of how immigration policies interact with insecurity at work, in employment and through organising. In the case of this OtFL narrative, the risks associated with union involvement and being a shop steward, historically and currently, are set within the extreme political climate in the Philippines (Torres, 2015; TUC, 2006). In 2005, Holgate highlighted that migrant workers often form strong social networks in order to provide support and advice to others. The article suggested that social bonds and connections are important links in the development of organising strategies, but pointed towards little

existing research into how this related to worker mobilisation. Maria's narrative builds on this tradition.

Introducing Maria

Maria migrated to the UK on a worker's visa in 2005, is a mother to three children and is employed by a city council in the UK as a team leader working in home care support services. Those employed in this form of social care work directly with a range of clients who present across age, gender and illness. Having recently finished a Higher National Certificate (HNC) in social care Maria also plans to return to university and finish an Open University degree in health and social care, to build on several years' experience of care support-work. The narrative highlights tensions at the heart of her employment relationship with the council but Maria is also keen to point out that the council supported her participation at college, and as the discussion illustrates, the progression towards a more restrictive immigration regime at a UK level is at the heart of her concerns. She is a passionate advocate for workers' rights and the protection of migrant workers and her fellow Filipinos working in similar roles and industries in the UK. In her place of work however, few people know about Maria's identity as an employee *and* union representative. Maria is a vocal critic of recent changes to the Immigration Rules and reforms of immigration routes, for example, that now require people applying for tier 2 settlement visas to earn a minimum of £35,000 per year (UK Gov, 2013), which is a high salary in the social care arena.

Maria's story

Work

I work as a home care support team leader. I also used to work in a rehabilitation centre, sometimes in Community Integrated Care if my manager asks me. The council runs a service called Home Care, so clients come to us from the hospital after six or seven weeks. If we get a match through the agency then they are passed on to us. The people who come to us have complex needs. So they often have alcohol issues and drug problems but we deal with lots of older people as well and help with things like recovery after hip replacements. In my job everybody helps: social workers, doctors, health workers, and carers. The first thing that happens is your manager says to you, 'you've got a client,' where they explain the history of the person to you. Their illnesses, you know? Then you go out into the community and see how they're doing – to assess their capabilities and to see how we can support them in recovery. You are going into the community to assess their capability to do everything: their health, mobility, and ability. It depends on the package of care the social worker has put in place for the manager and the package developed at the hospital but a typical working day would start with a risk assessment, particularly for new clients, to see if they are feeling OK. We visit clients' homes, give them meals, administer the drugs they need, refer issues on and clean their houses. Sometimes we get their shopping as well if they're unable to go out. You're like a nurse, doctor, carer and cleaner all in thirty minutes. I suppose it is like being an expert all-rounder but we're not trained to the same level as doctors or specialists. You're in charge of phoning NHS 24 if something's wrong, communicating with GPs, social work, hospitals and even the police if something serious is happening. When we visit our clients we knock on doors not really knowing what the situation's going to be like. You can be faced with

anything, as people can be unwell. They give you training to deal with it but having experience as a support worker helps. Once inside the house anything can happen, and I do not always feel safe, but the judgement of going inside is up to you. Luckily, we have a mobile phone and an out-of-hour's safety service that you can ring if something's wrong. The pattern is four days on – four days off. You start at eight in the morning, take a break at one in the afternoon, and then start again at five o'clock. If it is a split shift it takes up your whole day, but you have a break between two and five. Roughly you are working forty hours over the four days – sometimes more. Every day I am expected to visit between eleven and thirteen clients. Getting round all those people is a challenge. You want to do the job properly even though the money is isn't great and we're really pushed for time.

Why Filipino people do this work

Lots of Filipino people do this type of care work in the UK and I have ended up doing it because of my heritage and economic status, but I also want to do it in the future. Other groups of care workers have the colonial links with the UK, but we have been targeted for recruitment for services like the NHS since the early 1970s. Now there are a lot more Filipino workers in comparison to the early 70s, and as you know it has continued since then: it is nursing; it is care work; public service work – that type of work. I think next to Indian workers the second biggest work permit holders in public service work are people like me. Apart from the relationship they have with former colonies, the Philippines is one of the countries in Asia that speak the language well, so the state here finds that quite useful. The state and many businesses in the private sector are targeting workers to come over. For me, the reason for this is the fact the NHS and the private sector needs people to fill the vacancies they have, particularly in nursing, auxiliary nursing and in support and cleaning jobs. It might be a generalisation, but others and myself, we do not believe that immigration policy in the UK takes account of the skills, training and work experience people have in the Philippines. The problem is that employment outcomes are not at the same level in comparison to UK workers. Ultimately it is complex to change to working in the UK when the system is different out with Europe. Migrants need to realise there will be training and re-training needing done, but I cannot see any objective reason for the way things are working out for Filipino migrant workers in the UK. My problem is that migrants often have the qualifications but are not afforded the same wage levels or opportunities as British workers because of the state's and business's interests: they want a cheaper cost to nursing and care, they want workers who will not resist and they generally get that from migrant workers from the Philippines, with good skills. This isn't just a one-way thing - it's a two-way thing. There's been an aggressive promotion by the Philippine state to sell workers overseas because of exchange income. They believe it has potential to be a continuous source of income, which is right of course. This is about who controls policy and what they want. For me, it's also about how entry into UK labour markets is tougher, and what this now means for workers day-to-day. It's really important that we tell people before they come to the UK that this is the situation. Communication is vital, so are social networks; people speak to me because I'm Filipino... It's a cultural thing, you see? Without that trust it would be difficult to warn people.

The process and risks of being a shop steward

I have been interested in helping Filipino workers since I came to the UK. I have been here for a while, but in that time I have been very careful. At the city council they do

not know I am shop steward because I have tried to make myself low key. Most people in my work do not know that I am organising because the council and the employment agency, they hate each other. They have a difficult relationship because they work together and have very different priorities. They really do. And my boss hates the trade union. That is why I need to be so careful, but I'll get there, I'll do it step-by-step, one thing at a time. The plan is to try and contact the right people in work who are interested in being part of the movement.

Nobody apart from a couple realise I am a steward, and I did not put it on my application for the job because I know the council, they hate bigmouths. Another thing is that if you are a shop steward and management does not like you then you might not get a promotion, and I am starting my honours degree at university to do that. There is a tension here. I am just really trying to keep it under control. I am trying to ground my feet and once I have done that I will get even more active. But I'm being very careful.

I help Filipinos but my council doesn't know that, as I do not want them to know I am active. I have introduced people to my trade union many times because of rights' violations. When they are in trouble they phone us but when they are not members we cannot help them. We can help if they join but if they do not, well... We have got a lot of people phoning who are not members, but I have had to put my foot down. We have to say 'no' even though there are so many labour issues for Filipinos in the UK, there's so much discrimination happening, undermining...

My colleagues are Filipino and there are employment issues in the nursing home that they raised with me and then when I said to them that they needed to raise their issues with management, they did, but management pretended to listen. Issues about pay, hours, about exploitation are common. These issues are worst in the private sector, where migrant workers do not receive the recognition they deserve, and that is what we need to challenge. This is about the power of employers, the attitude of managers, and government. People are being treated unfairly because of profit. It is very unfair! We can still point the finger at the Labour government as well, you know? The private sector does not have a William Wallace, but I tell you, it needs one to protect workers!

I fight corners when it comes to my clients because I have a duty of care. I know the council want to do the best for them, but when it comes to rationalising measures, I'm not accepting it. I'm not accepting what the government is doing with Tier two visas either. £35,000 is a lot of money to expect somebody to earn!

I became interested in being a shop steward when I read newspapers in the UK; the inequality suffered in the workplace is immense, I thought! My friend in London who is highly active also persuaded me to get involved. This is my own free will however, and I became a steward when I worked at a previous health board. In my current workplace, I really enjoy working with Filipino people and others like Roma people too- I target anybody for recruitment that has been or are currently at risk of discrimination. This is a practical approach to trade union work, where you listen and highlight what the union can offer. I put pamphlets on the bulletin boards, get tables at events and open days... give away pens... bags... keyrings...you're giving people information and telling them that the aim of what we're doing is to promote equal rights; people are interested in talking about equal rights, but encouraging equality is more difficult with the changes in immigration policy at a UK level. Right now I am campaigning on behalf of healthcare assistants. We're working with an immigration and welfare charity that are very helpful indeed. Any member of our trade union, if they've got an immigration problem, can phone the charity for free.

They're emotionally helpful, but to be quite honest they generally just say 'appeal it' when Filipinos are faced with immigration difficulties. Healthcare assistants have a 50/50 chance with settlement applications...

It's politics

What I explained to you about immigration and working visas is that they make people vulnerable to abuse because of reliance on employers because of the powers employers have. This has definitely become worse as restrictive measures have become more prominent; it's tougher to get visas for care work now. Across the board, migrants face difficulty in politicising their problems because of this. We have heard of cases where contractual obligations are not held up on the part of employers. The thing is Filipinos like many other migrant groups do not know about their rights in the UK labour market. This is worst in places with a hidden workforce, through agencies. These are workers who are employed in outsourced, privatised jobs. This makes it hard to see what is actually going on, to really get a grip; it drives poor pay and conditions. The quality of management and training they often get in agency work through private companies is awful; there are really bad management support systems too. In these sorts of jobs many workers, not only migrants, feel they cannot say much about it as they do not understand what to say, or how to stand up to employers. They navigate a new system with new rules and regulations without knowing what fair treatment is and these issues are worst in the private sector, where migrant workers do not receive the recognition they deserve, and that is why we need to challenge it.

There's Filipinos that are members of the trade union and they experienced problems with their employers. They are part of the key in showing others. We said to them, 'we can help you, this isn't normal, things need to change'. And we helped improve their situation but only with them taking the first step. Before they come here the Filipino government has a responsibility to educate them, to tell them the real facts. If they did it would be understood that policy is changing in a way that doesn't suit people like me, but it's politics, you know?

Getting out of difficulty and managing management

The reason I am wary of management in the outsourced parts of the private sector that I mentioned is because they change their name at any time and don't take your concerns seriously, they think you are disposable as a Filipino, as a migrant. I'll give you an example: the company I worked for closed very suddenly, and I was left out of pocket. A company can change its name very quickly and this makes tracking them to make them accountable tough. I worked there for nearly five years and things changed a lot. My care home was closed because there were so many issues with the care commission. We didn't get paid all the time and I had to find a lawyer to deal with my tribunal. These organisations do it all the time, it's common - do you know what I mean? So when they closed the company we never had our pay for a month; the company is Bangladeshi owned, it wasn't based in the UK. However, what happens to people that don't speak good English or don't understand? Honestly, I'm one of the lucky few that know how to access employment tribunals; that know how to access the Citizens Advice and challenge them. When the Bangladeshi owners closed the nursing home I went to Citizens Advice and they helped me. This was on the advice of my husband, but many people don't know it exists, they don't know how they can challenge employers. They don't have that support and they don't know what is acceptable or how to access advice. The issue is that the Filipino migrants do

a lot of these jobs and don't have the support. Therefore they are the victims. That's what makes it a challenge: finding like-minded people to put their foot down isn't easy. It boils down to the safety net that politics doesn't allow.

It is a shame because lots of migrants do not care if the work is heavy or demanding because they are used to working hard, they are trained to do that in the Philippines. The thing is, though, they really need to speak the language and know their rights; they *need* to know to protect themselves like those in power protect their interests.

Investing in the future, remembering the past

At the end of the day Filipinos have probably invested upwards of four or five thousand pounds to come here. It's a *lot* of money and they have probably sold a lot of things in their lives to raise the money or get into debt. The important point is that immigration status plays a role in protecting workers' jobs because once a job is lost then that worker might lose their right to stay here. If they are abused they do not really complain because they are scared of losing their jobs. The new immigration rules have made this worse. They think that management will know they're a member of the union. Filipino people do not want to become members because they are scared of losing money and having their visas removed, and that's an issue.

This is also about the fact that there's a different culture in the Philippines. If you need help you usually turn to your family, but here they do not, and they are scared. People are frightened of unionising, you know? Union membership is completely out of the question. When they run into trouble, that is the first time they think about unions and even then it is testing for them, because once you're involved with the movement they call you a communist and they might kill you. What UK people do not seem to understand is that the government and police have a history abusing union leaders and activists in the Philippines; it is risky to get involved, to get your name tarred as an activist.

It is a mentality thing, you see? I am Filipino and I'm even struggling to tell my co-Filipinos what I do, because the mentality is 'I'm here to earn money and I do not want to cause any trouble'. For them it is a risk to fight management. They're here to earn money. That is the mentality. In the UK you really need to make sure you know the rules, you know your rights. People that come are migrating for prosperity, but they need to understand how everything works: the policies, the economy, and what's right and wrong in employment.

Part of the issue is that people believe the UK is a land of leisure, a land of money. Before they come migrant workers think the UK is a wonderful place to stay, but when they get here the reality is often very different. You can make more money than you can in the Philippines, even though the economy is bad here, it is worse there. The inflation rate is through the roof. It is really, really, awful. So people's money does not go very far and the thinking is - when you go to the UK - you send a couple of pounds, a hundred pounds back, even, and people rely on this to live. In the end there are as many good reasons why Filipino's come to the UK as there are factors that drive inequality. The economy in both countries and poverty in the Philippines drives this. The private sector drives this. The state drives this. Society drives this. So does the easy availability of agency work, of care work in the UK. There are so many factors why Filipino's migrate here: because of financial instability, their future, building careers. The mix of migration and availability of work is a good thing, but there are a lot of bad things about the jobs that people from my country do here that we are trying to change.

At the heart of the issue is that some don't want migrants to be allowed entry to the UK, while others do; whatever you think, the net cap on immigration has made resistance in the labour market harder. It has undermined workers because it has created a more hostile environment at work. It's very difficult when you are in that position because the only thing you have to survive is work. This policy highlights a difference between openness and closure. It's bad for care workers, for the UK economy, for business, for people's rights, but they've done it anyway. There's tension between different political interests and my fellow Filipino's are at the heart of it. I am ready to fight it.

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Notes

Maria Lozanda is a pseudonym. It should be noted that she also has care responsibilities for family but details have been changed to protect the anonymity of the co-author and her children.

Author Biographies

Maria Lozanda is a trade union organiser and care worker with a long history of organising migrant workers.

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