Strawberry fields forever?

Bulgarian and Romanian student workers in the UK

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Abstract: This article is based on fieldwork conducted among Romanian and Bulgarian students working under the Seasonal Agricultural Workers Scheme in the UK. It shows how a public discourse on the benefits of and for immigrant seasonal workers silences the voices of these workers. It also discusses how a hidden transcript of the student workers shows they are deeply frustrated about their exploitation in terms of wages, living conditions, and the fact that they have come to the UK on false promises of cultural exchange and learning. The confinement of Bulgarian and Romanian immigrants—such as these student workers—to the unskilled and underpaid labor sector in the UK, which continues despite Romania and Bulgaria's recent accession to the EU, not only reproduces the dual labor market in the UK itself but it also reduces Romania and Bulgaria to 'second-hand' EU members states.

Keywords: dual labor market, EU expansion, migrant labor, public and hidden transcripts, SAWS

On 26 September 2006, the monitoring report of the EU commission on the preparedness of Bulgaria and Romania was presented in Brussels. "As a result of the progress made," both countries were granted the position to "take on the rights and obligations of the European Union membership" effective 1 January 2007 (Commission of the European Communities 2006: 13). Less than a month later, the UK Home Secretary John Reid announced the decision of the government to restrict access of the citizens of both countries to the UK labor market (Barrett 2006). The only opening of the UK labor market that would accompany accession of the new member states would be a scheme allowing the

entry of 20,000 workers from Romania and Bulgaria for low-skilled jobs in the food processing and agricultural sectors.

This selective opening of the UK labor market to new member-states, allowing workers only into low-skilled jobs, should not come as a surprise. It is entirely in line with the existing Seasonal Agricultural Workers Scheme (SAWS). This scheme enables students from outside the European Economic Area to meet the seasonal agricultural labor needs of the UK under an annual quota (e.g., 25,000 for 2004, 16,250 for 2005 and 2006) and forms one of the ways in which Tony Blair's neo-liberal government institutionalizes a dual, bifurcated labor market

through the exploitation of a reserve army of foreign workers.

The exploitation of workers under the SAWS is all the more serious, however, because student workers are deceived into taking on seasonal agricultural labor in the UK through a discourse presenting the work as ‘youth mobility’, ‘inter-cultural exchange’, and even ‘holiday’, which stands in sharp contrast to the realities that student workers become trapped in on the farms. As this article shows, the provision of ‘reliable and legitimate’ workers in low-skilled jobs, for which UK employers praise the SAWS, relies on structural violence enforced on these workers.

Strawberry fieldwork

During the past decade, many students from the former Soviet bloc—among them a large number of Bulgarian and Romanian students—have taken part in so-called travel-and-work programs that give students an ‘opportunity’ to work in another country. The US is usually the most desired country for a summer job but application procedures for traveling and working there are relatively expensive and include an English-language test. Thus, students from poor families and those with limited knowledge of English tend to go for legal seasonal work in Western European countries instead. Therefore, despite common-sense knowledge that agriculture ‘work is harder and pays less’, the UK’s SAWS has become a frequently chosen ‘easy’ option.

In July 2005, I was hired as an assistant to an academic project on personnel management to administer a questionnaire among a group of foreign students, a so-called student brigade, working on a farm in the East of England.¹ Right away I was shocked by the students’ ‘accommodation’. A country-road led to a lawn, surrounded by fields and a forest. A quarter-of-an-hour drive from the closest little town, this lawn was covered with three circles of old, rust-eaten caravans: one circle formed around the shower shed with two parallel, concentric circles. Except for administration’s wooden house, there were no other buildings. The apparent lack of commu-

nal space was ironically compensated by the intimacy of the caravans’ interior—worn out and stifling space of two by five meters was to accommodate three to six students.

Despite some initial hostility and suspicion, most of the students gradually accepted my presence and started chatting with me. Many expressed their concerns about the conditions of life and work on the farm. Their daily routine followed clear and unquestionable imperatives and did not seem too different from that of political prisoners in a work camp: wake up at 5 a.m., start work at 6 a.m.; go to the greenhouse—on foot, if no transport is provided; pick strawberries in an exhausting, bent-over position for ten to fourteen hours; bear the heat of 70 degrees Celsius; do not take more than one break, for lunch, during the day; ask permission to use the bathroom; drink boiling-hot water from the sun-heated barrels. Once home, the only energy left is to queue for a shower and follow one more imperative—that of the body—sleep!

Almost everyone I spoke with expressed dissatisfaction with the conditions at the farm. Initially most students talked of abstract feelings of tiredness, nostalgia, or having been shammed. But soon more concrete issues came to light. Severe exploitation was obvious from the discrepancy between the students’ workload and their payment. The pay-slips of a group of Romanian students showed they were paid far less than the promised national minimum wage (NMW). The UK NMW in July 2005 was GBP 4.8 an hour for people over twenty-two years of age, and GBP 4.1 for younger workers. The students received about GBP 1 to GBP 3 an hour. Many said this wage was enslaving rather than liberating. The payment hardly covered the costs of the loan many had taken out to pay for their stay in the UK.

The SAWS hires through subcontracting agencies that process the students’ documents. The extra costs of application through the operator Concordia—the agency that arranged the students’ stay at the farm—was to more than GBP 170. Together with the cost of travel, which students had to pay for themselves, the sum totaled about GBP 400, that is, more than twice

the average monthly income of a Bulgarian or Romanian household. Furthermore, unless the students worked overtime, 'room and board' at the farm was also at their expense. The cost of a single plank-bed in a caravan was GBP 6 a night and this sum had to be paid every day, regardless of whether the student had worked that day. Thus, students had to pay without earning anything on holidays and days of excursion, bad weather, or sick days, including frequent work-related traumas.

I asked the students what was the wage they agreed to when they signed their contracts. Most explained that they were promised the NMW by the subcontracting agency in Bulgaria. Some of them had interrogated the farmers or the contact persons of these agencies on that matter, but both had merely given vague answers. As my further investigation showed, the sum of the minimum wage to be paid to seasonal workers was not stated in any of the Agriculture Wage Orders of the last three years. The SAWS workers were not mentioned in these orders. Because of the shorter period of their employment and the specifics of their contract and work, they fall outside of the classification of cadres with a similar profile (such as manual harvest workers, short-time flexible workers, and trainees; see DEFRA 2006: 7f). My search for exact numbers became even more frustrating when I turned to the discussion of the temporary workers wages presented in the extensive thematic research recently administered by the Department of Environment Food and Rural Affairs (Frances et Al. 2005). Frances and colleagues draw on a variety of statistics as well as interviews with employers and workers to trace the average wage in temporary work. Yet, they never differentiate the SAWS workers from other workers with a similar profile (*ibid.*: 108–11). Thus, the wage that a student participating in the SAWS should make remains a mystery.

Many Web sites (e.g., DEFRA 2006) provided telephone numbers for 'inquiries or complaints'. The SAWS Web page, for example, gives you the Helpline of the Agricultural Wages Board in England and Wales. However, this turned out to be an expensive dial number only available during

limited hours, when most students are in the field, and its services are only available in English, which most students do not feel confident to use. Moreover, despite the mandatory pastoral tax paid by the students to provide them with Internet access, on this particular farm students had to use Internet and telephone at their own expense in the nearest little town. Thus, the students had almost no possibility of inquiring about their wage.

The practices of exploitation described above could have been less blatant if the other promises of the program's statement of purpose were kept; if students indeed would have experienced some of the benefits that were advertised to them, that is, "return home with additional knowledge, experience and a maturity that will be of benefit to them and their universities," "gain new skills," "undertake a certificated training course that will further their careers," "make lasting friendships with the grower, their family and other students," "improve their English," "see the UK," go on a "working holiday from which to return with extra money," and get "companionship of students from other countries, and an opportunity to work alongside them, gaining real insight into their country, culture and traditions" (Concordia 2006). Despite these promises, the living conditions on the farm were no better than those of work.

The students emphasized the humiliating treatment they received from the farm administration, the agency contact persons, and their supervisors. I myself witnessed such an instance when during one of my visits to a group of Bulgarians in their caravan, a supervisor entered and started shouting at one of the girls about a minor issue. Upon noticing my presence, however, her voice softened and she ended the conversation with a smile and a promise of an excursion. Communicating with the farm administration and the agency was very difficult for the students. When not reproaching them for their uncomfortable questions, the farm owner simply referred them to the subcontracting agency, whose employees would usually provide no more than a word-for-word repetition of the 'law-and-order' of the information pack.

Just before my arrival, the students from this farm had managed to call the Home Office for an inspection of the working conditions. Yet, before their visit the state officials followed the formal procedure to warn the owner of the farm one week before their visit. After a few days of stir, the picture looked quite different. The working hours were reduced, the barrels at the greenhouse were filled with cold water, and the evening of the supervision, the first and only garden party was organized for the students.

Along with their scornful treatment by the farm administration and their isolation, students regretted the lack of communal space and social activities in the camp. The lack of opportunity to interact with local people of their age further increased the feeling of isolation many of the students suffered from. As a Bulgarian boy grumbled, his knowledge of the country was limited to his travel from the airport. Some students went on one or two excursions to bigger cities organized by the farm. Yet, given their financial concerns, the motivation to join these self-financed trips was rather low. Language barriers between students from different countries made them stick mostly with the community of their own compatriots, making the segregation on national basis noticeable. The only ones who did not follow this pattern and lived in one of the few mixed caravans usually belonged to a group of returning students from previous years. They were regarded and commented on with suspicion, also because of their higher positions as sub-supervisors in the camp hierarchy.

The communication breakdown was reinforced by the particular payment conditions in this farm, which were directly linked to the project I was working on. The students were used as 'guinea pigs' for a human resource management experiment: instead of being paid per hour or per accomplished job they were paid for teamwork. According to their physical and personal qualities, students were to establish, join, be invited to, or be expelled from the teams competing against each other. Team members were paid a gross sum of money based on a secret formula that took into account both the results of the competition and the team's fulfillment of a daily

norm. The system thereby led to friction and envy among the students and made their working conditions even less tolerable.

Public transcripts and grievances inscribed in the margins

Despite their dismal living and working conditions, there was a striking lack of contention and organized resistance among the students. The reasons for this seem to lie primarily in the set-up of the SAWS as an annually recurrent, performative rehearsal of a particular scenario of domination.² Any potential form of resistance is smothered in the SAWS through forms of structural violence that hide behind a legalized hegemonic consensus. Ideological silencing of any critique of the SAWS makes for a strong public transcript celebrating the SAWS alongside a fragmented and hidden transcript of resistance (Scott 1990). At various levels, from government publications to academic reports, media representations and even students' own stories, a counter-hegemonic critique of the exploitation of student workers under the SAWS is systematically suppressed.

The public transcript is predictably most forceful among Britain's political class that recurrently emphasizes the need for workers' schemes like the SAWS. The workers' exploitation is seen as a great opportunity for people used to hardship to now earn some money and hence the stigmatization of these workers is almost inevitable. As Colin Yeo, Immigration Advisory Service official, declared, "Employers are crying out for immigrants from eastern Europe ... You don't find British people queuing up for jobs as meat bone breakers, fish filleters, in agriculture" (Tempest in the *Guardian*, 22 August 2006).

UK government departments, such as the Home Office, share this discourse by introducing the SAWS as "being an important source of seasonal labour to UK farmers and growers" but also having "many overseas workers benefit from the opportunity to earn money and experience living and working in the UK" (Home Office 2007). Though the Home Office Web site (*ibid.*)

states that the workers “should be paid at least the national minimum wage for the work” and says that “appropriate work” should be provided, as well as “clean and sanitary accommodation,” important information on the wages and definitions of the working status of the students is hard to find.

This is, however, not only the case in government documents but also in academic documents. As I mentioned before, in the report of a study conducted on behalf of the Department of Environment Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) by a consortium of academic researchers, the simplest issue of providing definitions of workers’ status and giving exact numbers on wages was avoided. Moreover, the description of the entire SAWS program is given in abstract and value-free phrases such as ‘labor user’, ‘labor providers’, ‘basic logic’ ‘accommodation’, and ‘workers’ perspectives and aspirations’ (see Frances et al. 2005: 60–65). The problems of student workers, including their lack of socialization and isolation, are not given any emphasis in the DEFRA research.

The section of the report dedicated on ‘the workers’ point of view’ (Frances et al. 2005: 65–79) mimics the previous section of the research on the concerns of the employers. Whereas most of the employers are given direct voice within the text, the ‘workers’ are represented through four ‘case studies’. Thus, the general issues at stake for both employers and employees appear to be the same. And where the employers are seen to express their general satisfaction with the ‘ideal type’ seasonal workers, the workers interviewed seem to have little or nothing to say. There is a rather simple explanation for this: The researchers admit that a member of the farm administration was present during all the interviews with their employees (Frances et al. 2005: 65).

The ideological ‘mask’ called SAWS thus manages to conceal the rampant exploitation of students even to most political journalists, economists, and quantitative sociologists. Armchair researchers will not be able to reveal the structural violence meted against the students and will fail to unmask the delusive language and logic of the official papers. Relying on the public tran-

script of the SAWS—a legal and legitimate self-affirmative public discourse—they will simply conclude that no labor market regulations are violated.

Some more critical voices in the media, emerging around the time of the debate on the migration waves to the UK after the 2004 expansion of the European Union and on Bulgarian and Romanian accession in 2007, are slowly exposing some of the exploitation involved in the SAWS. SKY news journalists, for example, revealed the scandalous conditions under which SAWS students work alongside legal and illegal immigrants (Devlin in *Sky News*, 7 July 2006) and an article in the *Guardian* reported of an old lady who broke down the strawberry beds in a farm nearby her house in Herefordshire in solidarity with the students (see Vidal in the *Guardian*, 5 June 2006). The topic of the student workers in the strawberry fields even inspired a theater play (see Jones 2005).³

Yet, even the most critical materials on exploitation of SAWS workers usually comply with the official transcript in the important sense that they do not leave the students to speak for themselves.⁴ Instead, they engage in interpretations on their behalf. This practice has a backlash effect as the public image of migrants being silent, numb, or even speechless becomes internalized by the students themselves.

Nevertheless, as was the case with the students asking the Home Office to investigate the farm, students sometimes do try to engage in negotiations with the farm and break the official consensus that hides their blatant exploitation and keeps them numb. But the half-hearted inspection of the Home Office that followed the student’s call demonstrates that the possibility of their protest was a foreseen part of the official scenario and what started as an act of subversion eventually amounted to a reaffirmation, a ‘self-dramatization’ of the system of domination (Scott 1990: 69). By requesting an inspection because of their maltreatment by the farm administration, the students became dependent on the Home Office, which soon enough revealed itself to them as simply another agent of the same system. The Home Office rather than protecting

them against exploitation by the farm authorities merely reminded them more forcefully of the risks of protesting.

The contract the students sign does not allow them to seek any other employment in the UK and to reinforce this rule students' passports are even kept by the farm administration. The students thus have to submit to the almost unbearable working and living conditions on the farm, which amount to bonded labor, as not doing so would mean breaking the contract and entail the possibility of deportation by none other than the Home Office itself. The Home Office visit therefore merely reminded students considering a critique of the public transcript that this could well come at the cost of inviting the most dramatic form of structural violence inherent in the SAWS: the possibility of deportation.

Given the lack of communication and coordination opportunities combined with the thickness of the public transcript, it was thus not surprising, that even students themselves had no effective way of pinpointing and confronting the structural violence against them and engaged merely in rudimentary, disguised forms of resistance such as bitter chuckling and grumbling (see Scott 1990: 152ff). Inscribed into the margins of the questionnaires I had to administer—whose questions otherwise gave little room for real critique—thus appeared words and phrases such as “injustice,” “unfair,” and “no team work!”, as well as calculations of working time and proper wages. Caught in a situation of relative powerlessness, the students used the margins of the questionnaire to give expression to their hidden transcript of resistance. What appeared in the margins was a grumbling that had not been able to develop into a clear counter-hegemonic critique, which attests to the thickness of the ideological domination of the SAWS (Scott 1990: 27f.).

Another brick in the wall

The utility of the SAWS program to the British Government is easily understandable through the dual labor market theory (Piore 1979). This

theory sees the migration process as initiated by advanced capitalist societies whose “permanent demand for immigration labor ... is inherent to the[ir] economic structure” (Massey et al. 1994: 441). Immigrant workers are necessary as a ‘reserve army’ of laborers (Cohen 1987, cited in Castles 2000) who not only refresh the labor force of the aging populations of advanced capitalist states, but also fill in the gap positions in their labor market. Indeed this market has become bifurcated into two sectors: a capital-intensive sector of high-skilled experts and a labor-intensive sector of low-skilled workers. The difference between these categories lies not only in the salary, but also in the social prestige of certain occupations. The gradual loss of prestige of particular jobs has made low-skilled citizens of advanced capitalist societies reluctant to accept them and after the continuous employment of migrants on such positions they have come to be known as ‘immigrants’ jobs’ (Piore 1979, cited in Massey et al. 1994: 453).

The UK government ideologically embraces this kind of reading of reality as a virtue rather than a critique and has a long history of ensuring the supply of foreign laborers while at the same time making sure they keep a legal status that makes them easily exploitable. In the past, the UK has tried to use the citizens of the so-called Commonwealth to serve as a labor force. After opening its borders to 400–500 million potential citizens from the ex-colonies with the British Nationality Act of 1948, the UK gradually established a subtle difference between citizens and immigrants through rigid application procedures for citizenship and work permits (Geddes 2006: 585).

The most recent closure of the UK to workers from Bulgaria and Romania seeking higher-skilled jobs follows this old and familiar trend. It seems that decades after the declared end of the former Empire, British labor policy is extending its post-imperial classification to the new EU members. The decision to restrict the opportunities of Bulgarian and Romanian employees to low-skilled and seasonal work does not express a fear of a new immigration avalanche but an attempt to ensure that workers from new

Eastern European member states receive only a very vulnerable legal position in the UK and can thus be overexploited.

This is what SAWS students from Bulgaria and Romania are now experiencing in the UK. Deprived from the possibility to compete for positions in the general UK labor market, they become a legitimized and invisible reserve army of 'strawberry slaves' (Devlin in *Sky News*, 7 July 2006). The UK hereby not only reinforces its dual labor market but also creates a 'second-hand' EU citizenship. Regardless of their training and education, the options of these highly educated workers are confined to working in insecure, underpaid, and 'immigrant' occupations.

Coda

The Beatles's song "Strawberry fields forever" was named after a Salvation Army orphanage. Against the background of the present study, we may well ask: Is the new regulation of the UK labor market an expression of charity toward the 'second-hand' citizens of the EU, or is it simply an attempt to make the Strawberry Fields scenario persist forever?

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Notes

1. I defer from mentioning any concrete names: the project was protected under the Reciprocal Confidentiality Agreement signed between the Universities and the company of the strawberry farm. My role in the project was to translate a questionnaire into Bulgarian language, and then to administer it among students working on a strawberry farm in the West Midlands. Finally, I

was to translate back into English the bits of text written by the Bulgarian, Russian, and Ukrainian students in their respective languages.

2. Written and enacted by a Shropshire theater, *Strawberry Fields* deals with the frictions between the management of a farm, its exploited student-workers, and the local population. While the main concern of the piece is the protest of the locals against the endless greenhouse tunnels cutting across their beloved scenery, the ending scene has an Eastern European student impress a local old woman with his knowledge of economics (see Jones 2005).
3. To counter this, research has recently been undertaken on the potentials for Eastern European EU members to get access to trade unions in the UK (see Anderson, Ruhs, Spencer, and Rogaly 2006a, 2006b).
4. A year ago, a weekly newspaper representative of the Bulgarian diaspora in London had an interview with one of the only girl 'escapees' from a farm in England. Claiming that she was a 'heroine', this interview is still the only publication I found on the topic that gives voice to one of the exploited students. Despite the good intentions, however, it falls short of articulating any broader claim, or any strategy for opposition (see Georgiev 2005).

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