

FRA Press Release  
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## **Severe labour exploitation of migrant workers: FRA report calls for 'zero tolerance' of severe labour exploitation**

**FRA research published today highlights the urgent need for European governments to do more to tackle severe labour exploitation in firms, factories and farms across the EU. First-hand interviews with hundreds of exploited workers reveal the illegal practices in sectors including agriculture, construction, domestic work, hospitality, manufacturing and transport.**

Many exploited workers are often invisible. But the workers' perspectives in FRA's report '[Protecting migrant workers from exploitation in the EU](#)' show how their exploitation contributes to the supply chains of the everyday goods and services we take for granted – from the food on our plates, to the shirts on our backs.

Powerful accounts\* from 237 workers reveal challenges in eight EU Member States, including Belgium, France, Italy and Germany. Researchers found victims in Germany who were paid in cash, with no contract, working 11-hour days, without holidays, weekends or even toilet breaks.

FRA heard how some German employers used intimidation, racist abuse and even round-the-clock video surveillance to exert control over their workers. Just half of court cases brought by these victims ruled in their favour – and NONE of those cases resulted in employers paying compensation.

The report reveals that over half of the workers found their jobs by word of mouth but ended up in 'concentration camp conditions' where 'they keep us like dogs, like slaves'.

FRA researchers found that some of the EU's exploited migrant workers are:

- paid as little as €5-a-day;
- forced to pay debts to traffickers before earning a cent;
- sleeping in shipping containers, with no water or electricity;
- monitored on CCTV 24/7 by bosses;
- subjected to beatings, verbal abuse and threats of further violence;
- given no protective clothing to work with hazardous chemicals;
- face sexual and gender-based violence or forced into moving drugs;
- threatened of dismissal and deportation when they ask for their wages.

The report outlines 13 actions for EU institutions and Member States to end exploitation:

1. End fraudulent or deceptive recruitment practices.
2. Work with Europol, internet service providers and social media to tackle recruitment websites used by traffickers and exploitative employers.
3. Enforce labour laws to protect migrant workers' rights on pay, conditions and hours.
4. All EU Member States, which have not yet done so, should ratify the International Labour Organization's decent work for domestic workers Convention and include domestic workers in national laws resulting from the EU's Working Time Directive.
5. Ensure all workers, including seasonal and posted workers, have adequate living standards and fair rental agreements and that the rent is not automatically deducted from the wage, when accommodation is provided by the employer.

6. Build labour exploitation into the EU's Occupational Safety and Health Strategic Framework by 2020.
7. Include domestic workers in the EU's Safety and Health at Work Directive.
8. Enable law, inspection and monitoring bodies to identify and tackle labour exploitation through training and sufficient resources.
9. Develop regulated and targeted labour migration programmes to fill labour market shortages.
10. Reduce workers' dependency on employers, by issuing residence permits or visas not tied to a single employer, for example.
11. Enable seasonal workers to freely change employers more than once, under the EU's Seasonal Workers Directive.
12. Inform workers of their rights in a language they understand.
13. Make specialised support services available to all victims of crime, including victims of severe labour exploitation. This includes ensuring organisations supporting trafficking victims also cover victims of labour exploitation.

FRA Director [Michael O'Flaherty](#) says: *"This report shows how exploitation often starts with false promises and fraud, describes the extreme conditions the exploited workers endure, and identifies what facilitate exploitation. But it also outlines what can be done to help exploited workers access justice.*

*"We hope that our focus on this issue encourages the responsible national authorities, as well as social partners, to recognise the reality of severe labour exploitation, and to take the steps necessary to create a climate of 'zero tolerance'."*

#### **Editor's notes**

The report draws on face-to-face and focus group interviews with 237 adult workers who have been victims of severe labour exploitation between 2013 and 2017. It focuses on Belgium, France, Germany, Italy, Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, and the UK.

\* Verbatim quotes from interviews carried out in Germany are attached, below.

**For more contact:** [media@fra.europa.eu](mailto:media@fra.europa.eu) / Tel.: +43 1 580 30 642

## Germany interviewee quotes...

**“There was a problem with everything. With regard to payments as well as work hours, and breaks. We had agreed to work between three and four hours per day. In fact, we worked up to eleven hours per day. The conditions were terrible. Sometimes, we had to work at -4 or -5 degrees, with heavy rainfall or snow. We had to work outside, without breaks. Also during weekends.”**

(Germany, male interviewee from Eastern Europe, construction, EU national)

**“I had been unemployed for the entire winter, and I was looking for a job. (...) the construction site was very far but I accepted the job anyway because I needed work.”**

(Germany, male interviewee from Eastern Europe, construction, EU national)

**“One works here, one cannot receive his money. They keep us like dogs, like slaves, we sleep outside, we sleep in a park, we all sleep outside. If he gives us the money, then I can rent a flat for myself.”**

(Germany, female focus group participant from Eastern Europe, hospitality, EU national).

**“I had a work accident and he (the employer) called a taxi instead of an ambulance despite the fact that I could not move at all. When I asked, why not an ambulance, he asked me whether I was crazy and said he would go to prison as I was working there illegally. He then drafted up a work contract while we were in the taxi.”**

(Germany, male interviewee from Eastern Europe, construction, EU national)

**“Back then I was unable to speak German, I could not understand German or read German [...] So I got the contract, and I don't know whether what it said was okay, but I simply signed it [...]. It was completely in German. Okay. But I had to work, I wanted to work.”**

(Germany, male interviewee from Middle East, hospitality, beneficiary of international protection)

One care worker in Portugal mentioned having to sleep on the floor next to the old lady she took care of; a domestic worker in Poland and a worker Germany mentioned the employer set up a video camera to surveil the employee: **‘everything in this house was on CCTV cameras, even my bed, they were watching me all the time’**. At times, the domestic workers in Poland was receiving phone calls from the owners of the house asking where she was because they could not see her on the camera. This was when, for example, she was standing behind a door.

**“Threats in the sense of: “If you cannot deliver, then the next person is waiting, then someone else will do the job.”**

(Germany, male interviewee from Eastern Europe, logistics, EU national)

**“Most migrants who are being exploited don't know they are being exploited while they are in the situation. I myself thought that that is just how it is in Germany.”**

(Germany, male interviewee from Middle East, hospitality, beneficiary of international protection)

**“The lady [employee of support organisation] is even in close contact with my wife and she constantly writes to the employer and demands that he sends our time sheets. That’s what the support looks like. She stands up for us by claiming what we want.”**

(Germany, male interviewee from Eastern Europe, agriculture, EU national)

**“Unfortunately, that is not possible as I don’t speak the language. The police needs translators and translators cost money, and I cannot afford that. That is why I don’t go to the police.”**

(Germany, male interviewee from Eastern Europe, cleaning, EU national)

**“I wanted justice. I was not alone, we were six persons. It was humiliating. The company thought, as we don’t speak the language, they can do anything they like to us.”**

(Germany, male interviewee from Eastern Europe, logistics, EU national)

**“I was in a very difficult financial situation, during those seven months I got some money from the [employment office], but that wasn’t even enough to pay the rent. So, I couldn’t...it was very difficult to go to the support organisation to provide them with evidence and so on, because financially, I was really in a very difficult financial situation.”**

(Germany, male interviewee from Eastern Europe, manufacturing, EU national)

**“The lawyer wanted to go to the next level, but unfortunately there were no witnesses, the colleagues were not present and there were no witnesses who could prove it [...] The payslips said that I got 200€ for food, expenses, unfortunately I never got it.”**

(Germany, male interviewee from Eastern Europe, manufacturing, EU national)

**“I am desperate, I don’t see any justice despite the fact that all of this happened in Germany.”**

(Germany, male interviewee from Eastern Europe, warehouse, EU national)

**“That is how the boss does it [...] He works with a company for six, seven months, then he declares insolvency and then the company belongs to his wife or girlfriend or someone he knows... and insolvency again. [...] After I had sued, the company was moved from the premises and after two, three months it came back.”**

(Germany, male interviewee from Eastern Europe, manufacturing, EU national)

Two interviewees in Germany, who both won their cases in labour court, similarly still have not received the payment owed by their employers.

**“What kind of justice is that? I want the employer to be punished and we are six persons already, who went to court. There has to be justice. That is the question: Who can help those six persons that this court decision is enforced or that there is a result? How can the employer have disappeared if he is there every morning at seven?”**

(Germany, male interviewee from Eastern Europe, logistics, EU national)