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Working through a recession

Mary Gilmartin^a, Bettina Migge^b

^a Department of Geography, NUI Maynooth
email: mary.gilmartin@nuim.ie

^b School of Irish, Celtic Studies, Irish Folklore and Linguistics, UCD
email: bettinamigge@ucd.ie

Abstract: This paper focuses on the experiences of migrants at work in Ireland during the ongoing recession. It draws on a broader longitudinal qualitative study of two recent migrant cohorts, and challenges dominant understandings of recent migration to Ireland as economic and temporary, showing instead the complex ways in which migrants experience and understand work in their new homes. A general discussion of migrants at work in Ireland is followed by an examination of the impact of neoliberalism on working lives. The impacts of the recession are then discussed in detail, with particular reference to (under)employment and the new limits to migrant mobility that have emerged. The paper concludes with a brief discussion of the importance of this issue, both for understanding working lives and migrant lives.

Keywords: migrants, work, Ireland, recession

Introduction

‘It is going to be a difficult few years’ (2004IN01)

Rita, a nurse from India, summed up the mood of many of the recent migrants to Ireland we interviewed during 2009 and 2010. We first met Rita in July 2009, in Dublin, where she worked as a nurse in a public hospital. As a public sector employee, Rita had just experienced an effective pay cut in the form of a ‘pension levy’. Her salary was further reduced in January 2010, when the pay of public sector workers was cut again, by amounts ranging from 5% to 15%. A year later, both public service and private sector employees’ salaries were further reduced as a result of tax increases.

As the government was instituting significant changes in the pay and conditions of public sector workers, workers in the private sector were also experiencing changes. The first significant change is in the numbers employed, which dropped from 2.11 million in June 2007 to 1.85 million in June 2010. The biggest drops in employment were in construction, industry and agriculture – all in the private sector (CSO 2010a). By September 2010, the unemployment rate was 13.7%, an increase from 4.5% just 3 years earlier (CSO 2010b). In addition, many employers in the private sector moved their

employees onto shorter working weeks, cut wages, and changed employment terms. A survey of employers in 2010 found that 70% had pay freezes during 2010, and 13% had cut pay, by an average of 11% (IBEC 2010). The number of working days lost to industrial action in 2009 was the highest in almost 10 years, and the number of cases referred to the Rights Commissioners in that year was the highest ever recorded (LRC 2010: 14; 26).

In the face of rapid transformation of the working lives of people living in Ireland, the specific place of migrant workers deserves particular attention. During its ‘Celtic Tiger’ era of rapid growth and expansion, Ireland had actively encouraged labour migration to the country. In common with many other western countries, Irish public discourses tended to construct these migrants as temporary and economic, thus assuming that their stay in Ireland was dependent on the availability of the right kind of work at the right levels of pay. Now, in the post-Celtic Tiger era, there is a reduction in the number of new migrants coming to Ireland each year. Newspaper reports also regularly run stories about an exodus of recent migrants (see, for example, Black 2009). The overall impression given is that Ireland, again, is a place that people leave rather than move to. However, there is no clear evidence of an immigrant exodus from Ireland, and many of those who have moved to Ireland in recent years continue to live and work in the country, though under very different, and often difficult, conditions. To date, very little qualitative work has been carried out on the working and living circumstances of different categories of migrants in post-Celtic Tiger Ireland.

Over the past two years, we have worked with two migrant cohorts to explore their experiences of moving to and living in Ireland.¹ We aimed to pilot a longitudinal qualitative study of migrant experiences, and we targeted the two cohorts based on their year of first arrival in Ireland – either 2004 or 2007. We recruited 60 people to take part in the research, and interviewed each person at least twice in the next two years. Details of the participants are shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Research participants, by nationality, gender and year of arrival

	2004		2007		Total
	M	F	M	F	
Australia	0	0	0	1	1
Canada	0	0	1	1	2
China	0	1	0	0	1
Finland	0	1	0	0	1
France	0	0	1	1	2
Germany	0	1	0	2	3
India	1	1	0	0	2
Ireland	0	0	0	2	2
Italy	1	2	3	3	9

¹ This research project (entitled ‘Towards a dynamic approach to research on migration and integration’) was funded by the Irish Research Council for the Humanities and Social Sciences, and we gratefully acknowledge their support. Research participants are identified by an alphanumeric code that identifies year of arrival (2004 or 2007) and nationality. Where names are used, these are pseudonyms.

Netherlands	0	1	0	0	1
Poland	3	4	2	0	9
South Africa	0	0	0	1	1
Slovakia	0	0	1	0	1
Slovenia	0	0	0	1	1
Spain	0	0	1	0	1
Uganda	0	0	1	0	1
UK	3	3	3	2	11
US	0	0	3	8	11
Total					60

Though our original interview design did not include reference to the recession, it was impossible to escape as we discussed life in Ireland with these relatively recent migrants to the country. Through our follow-up interviews, we were also able to chart, in a sustained way, how the recession was affecting working conditions, and how migrants made sense of these changes for their own lives. In this paper, we reflect on the experiences of these migrants within a broader framework of labour migration, in three main sections. In the first, we discuss the experiences of migrants at work in Ireland, drawing on our own research, as well as on a significant body of academic and policy research on this topic. In the second, we discuss the working lives of migrants in Ireland in the broader context of neoliberalism. In the third, we discuss the impacts of the recession on migrants at work in Ireland, and we conclude with reflections on the broader significance of our research in the context of a global recession and changing patterns of global migration.

Migrants at work in Ireland

In general, EU and EEA citizens are free to work in Ireland. The right to work of those from outside the EU and EEA is governed by a range of different migration programmes that were developed in response to sustained economic growth from the 1990s onwards. Most attention is given to the labour migration programme, outlined in the 2003 Employment Permits Act. This distinguished between two types of labour migrants from outside the EEA: skilled labour migrants, entitled to privileged access to Ireland (the Working Visa/Work Authorisation programme); and less skilled labour migrants, with fewer rights and limited social protection (the Work Permit programme). Skilled labour migrants were recruited in three designated areas only – construction, IT and health (Ruhs 2005). This programme ran until 2007, when it was replaced by a revised system that privileged labour migrants earning over €60,000 per annum, regardless of their area of work (the Green Card system), and improved the rights of work permit holders while simultaneously making work permits more difficult to access. In relation to labour migration, there are three important points to consider. The first is the relatively small proportion of migrants who received work visas, in contrast to the much larger proportion who received the less advantageous work permits (Gilmartin 2008, DETI 2010). The second is the impact of EU enlargement, in 2004 on the nature of labour migration to Ireland. As Ireland offered EU-10 nationals unrestricted access to its labour market, citizens of Poland, Lithuania, Latvia and Slovakia, in particular, used this entry route into

Ireland from May 2004 onwards. The third is the shifting geographies of labour migration to Ireland under the work permit system: India, the Philippines and South Africa have remained consistently important as source countries for labour migration, but nationals of the US and China also make use of the work permit system to migrate to Ireland.

However, these numbers mask the extent to which other migrants to Ireland, both from within and outside the EEA, are an integral component of the landscape of work. When the work permit system was changed in 2007, it significantly restricted the types of work for which people could get permits. Among the types of jobs that are now ineligible for work permits are retail sales, catering, domestic work and manufacturing. The expectation is that vacancies in these areas will be filled from within the EU. As a consequence, EU nationals now represent a significant component of the workforce, with EU-10 nationals particularly concentrated in lower-paid service jobs. The second group of migrants that makes a significant contribution to the Irish labour force is students from outside the EEA. Student visa holders are entitled to work up to 20 hours a week. Given the limited financial support available to students from outside the EEA, international students in Ireland regularly work, often holding low-paid or minimum wage positions in service industries that are characterized by flexibility. In March 2009, just over 34,000 people held student visas in Ireland, around 30% of whom were enrolled in English language training courses. Other groups who contribute to the landscape of work in Ireland are non-EEA family members of EU citizens, who do not need employment permits to work in the country, and people whose immigration status is 'leave to remain'.

The 2006 Census provided insights into patterns of employment by sector and nationality. While Irish and UK nationals have relatively similar patterns of employment across all sectors, there is some evidence of sectoral clustering by broad nationality grouping. Table 2 provides a snapshot of employment, by sector and nationality, from the 2006 Census.

Table 2: Employment by sector and nationality, 2006

	Overall	Irish	UK	Other EU-15	EU-10	Rest of World
Unemployed: looking for first regular job	1.3	1.0	1.0	1.7	4.6	5.3
Unemployed: having lost or given up previous job	7.1	6.9	9.6	5.1	4.9	13.2
Total at work	91.5	92.1	89.5	93.2	90.5	81.5
<i>Manufacturing industries</i>	<i>11.5</i>	<i>11.4</i>	<i>11.5</i>	<i>12.8</i>	<i>17.7</i>	<i>8.4</i>
<i>Construction</i>	<i>10.2</i>	<i>10.2</i>	<i>9.7</i>	<i>3.8</i>	<i>17.1</i>	<i>6.0</i>
<i>Wholesale and retail trade</i>	<i>12.3</i>	<i>12.5</i>	<i>12.8</i>	<i>8.3</i>	<i>14.1</i>	<i>8.4</i>
<i>Hotels and restaurants</i>	<i>4.7</i>	<i>3.7</i>	<i>5.2</i>	<i>12.1</i>	<i>13.6</i>	<i>12.3</i>
<i>Banking and financial services</i>	<i>4.1</i>	<i>4.4</i>	<i>3.9</i>	<i>5.5</i>	<i>0.7</i>	<i>2.1</i>
<i>Real estate, renting and business activities</i>	<i>8.5</i>	<i>8.3</i>	<i>10.7</i>	<i>20.8</i>	<i>7.5</i>	<i>9.3</i>
<i>Education</i>	<i>6.1</i>	<i>6.7</i>	<i>5.6</i>	<i>5.2</i>	<i>0.5</i>	<i>2.2</i>

<i>Health and social work</i>	9.1	9.4	9.9	4.9	2.0	15.0
<i>Other community, social and personal service activities</i>	3.8	3.9	5.1	3.2	2.5	3.1
<i>Industry not stated</i>	6.1	5.3	5.8	7.5	7.9	9.3

Source: CSO 2007

From Table 2, we can see the similar employment patterns of Irish and UK nationals, in contrast to other EU nationals and people from outside the EU. In particular, we see a concentration of EU and other nationals in hotels and restaurants, with EU-10 nationals additionally concentrated in manufacturing, construction and wholesale/retail. There is a concentration of nationals from outside the EU in health and social work, which may well be connected to the recruitment of medical personnel, such as doctors and nurses, from countries such as India, the Philippines and Pakistan. However, it is also important to note the employment sectors where migrants are underrepresented, such as health (Other EU-15 and EU-10); banking and financial services, and education (EU-10 and ROW); as well as unemployed (ROW). These figures mask some important differences by gender. For example, 25.9% of men from the EU-10, in contrast to 1.4% of women, were employed in construction, while 23.6% of women from the EU-10 were employed in hotels and restaurants, in contrast to 8.1% of men. This provides some evidence of labour market segmentation, though this is also affected by gender, levels of education and language proficiency, in addition to nationality. Further evidence of labour market segmentation appears in recent unemployment figures. In November 2010, 17.6% of those on the live register had nationalities other than Irish, and of those 54.5% were from the EU-10 (CSO 2010b).

Working lives in a neoliberal age

Recent economic development in Ireland, particularly during the Celtic Tiger era, has been described as neoliberal (Allen 2007b). Harvey (2005) defines neoliberalism as a political ideology that liberates individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills ‘within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade’ (2005: 2). It thus involves deregulation, privatisation, and state withdrawal from the provision of social services. For workers, neoliberalism has led to flexible labour markets and changing work conditions, such as increased flexibility in terms of working hours and locations, the push for greater efficiency, and increased workloads and responsibilities coupled with lower wage entitlements. Neoliberal ideology also facilitates the development of ‘personal responsibility’ systems, where protection is eroded and workers are increasingly responsible for their own security, for example through private pensions (Harvey 2005: 168). Like most European countries, Ireland still provides some social services², and still provides for regulation of employment, for example in the form of wage agreements and labour inspectors, in the statutory recognition of trade unions, and through its industrial relations mechanisms. In short, Ireland exemplifies the complex ways in which neoliberal policy is put into place.

² For example, education to third level is nominally free, there are social welfare payments to unemployed people, and there is a universal child benefit. However, Ireland has a two-tier health system, with close to 50% of the population covered by private health insurance.

Neoliberal policies have also had an impact on migration and migrants' lives. For instance Allen (2007a) discusses the restrictive and hierarchical nature of Irish migration policies while Barrett (2009), Barrett and Bergin (2007), O'Connell and Ginnity (2008) and Samers (2010) show how this has led to the emergence of labour market segmentation. Various authors (e.g. Allen 2007b, 98; Humphries et al 2009; MRCI 2006, 2008) also point to the lack of protection for migrant workers in Ireland and the resulting low levels of unionization among migrant workers (Dundon et al 2007) and how this has brought about flexible labour markets and consequent deskilling (see Rodgers 2006 for an overview; in Ireland, see O'Connell and Ginnity 2008, Barrett et al 2006, MRCI 2008). Research to date paints an incomplete picture on the effects of neoliberalisation on migration in general and in Ireland in particular because it either deals with legislative issues or tends to focus on particular groups of workers, most often from particular regions from outside the EU and working in low-paid jobs. Migrants are discussed as representatives of specific national or regional groups rather than as individuals, and experiences resulting from neoliberal policies tend to be generalised and simplified in order to imply cross-migrant similarities.

Our research supplements existing work, in that it involves qualitative research with recent migrants to Ireland. As it focuses on year of arrival rather than nationality or mode of entry, it provides a broader picture of the experiences of migrants in Ireland. The 60 people who participated in the research came from 18 different countries (see **Table 1**). However, in line with general migration trends to Ireland, around two thirds of these migrants are EU citizens, and do not require a visa or permit to work in Ireland. Just 5 had moved to Ireland on the basis of their own employment permit. The others from outside the EU used a variety of means of entry, including student visas, EU passports (where people had dual nationality), as dependents, or through the asylum process. Of the 60 people we interviewed, only 6, or 10%, had not had paid employment at some stage in Ireland. The other 54 varied in terms of their experience of work in Ireland. Some had remained in the same full-time employment since their arrival in Ireland, while others had moved between different jobs and between full-time and part-time employment, depending on their specific circumstances. Contrary to received opinion, the majority of the people we talked to had neither moved to, nor remained in, Ireland for work or economic reasons. In fact, only 10 out of 60 interviewees stated that they had come to Ireland solely or mainly to take up a job. The others arrived in Ireland for a variety of reasons including adventure, to change their life, to learn English, to follow a partner, or to live with an Irish or non-Irish partner. Interviewees also held a range of occupations, as detailed in Table 3.

Table 3: Occupation of interviewees at time of interview

Occupation category	Number	Type of position
<i>Construction</i>	5	Architect, engineer, technician, administrator
<i>Wholesale and retail trade</i>	3	Sales
<i>Hotels and restaurants</i>	6	Porter, waiter, receptionist, bar staff
<i>Banking and financial services</i>	4	Bank, insurance, administrator

<i>Real estate, renting and business activities</i>	11	Administrator, call-centre operative, IT project manager
<i>Education</i>	6	Lecturer, teacher, administrator
<i>Health and social work</i>	4	Doctor, nurse, therapist
<i>Other community, social and personal service activities</i>	4	Childcare, trade union, charity
<i>Students</i>	7	Part-time work in childcare, retail
<i>Other</i>	3	Consultant, business owner, artist
<i>Not employed</i>	7	Homemaker, retired, asylum seeker

The experiences of the people who participated in our research project do not necessarily fit within accepted understandings of labour migration – migration ‘specifically for work purposes’ (Samers 2010: 123) – yet we argue that, as migrants who work in Ireland, they provide important insights into the more complex reality of working lives at a time of crisis and social change. In particular, we noted that while structural issues certainly impinge on our research participants, they rarely came to the forefront during interviews. Instead, we noted the ways in which people often narrated themselves as neoliberal subjects: as entrepreneurs, risk takers and ‘responsibilized’ (Ferguson 2009: 172-177). In this section, our discussion focuses on the ways in which migrants internalised these tenets of neoliberalism, and made a virtue out of the imposed ‘flexibility’ of the Irish labour market. We thus highlight the ways in which working subjects are (re)formed under neoliberalism and in times of economic crisis (Brenner et al 2009).

The extent to which the people we interviewed struggled to find work in their areas of expertise, worked in sectors that they had not worked in previously, and moved between jobs was striking. Many migrants from the EU (excluding the UK) reported difficulties in finding work in appropriate areas. These included a trained archivist and an engineer from Italy, a primary school teacher from Spain, a pharmacist from Finland and an architect from Slovakia. They often explained their difficulties in terms of their language proficiency. For example, the Italian archivist said she had tried to get work ‘but it is very difficult, maybe because of my language’ (2007IT02). She had not been able to find paid employment in Ireland, so she worked on a voluntary basis in a charity shop. The Spanish teacher had not worked as a teacher in Ireland, in part because he did not feel his level of English was sufficient. Instead, he worked in a crèche attached to a private gym and focused on attaining formal qualifications in English so he could get work as an English teacher outside of Ireland at a later stage. The Italian engineer has been working for several years as a technician on consecutive short term contracts. He said he had ‘downgraded [his] career moving [to Ireland]’ (2007IT04), but rationalised this by saying that it had given him the opportunity to improve his English. Others in similar situations include a teacher from Poland who first worked in a hotel and now works as an administrator and as a waitress (2004POL07) and a marine biologist from Poland who worked in a hotel (2004POL05). As the marine biologist told us, ‘I think my English is not enough to get a job in marine biology because it is special vocabulary’. In these ways, migrants personalised their difficulties in getting appropriate work, and rationalised their experiences as an opportunity to further develop language skills.

For women with children, regardless of nationality or language proficiency, the lack of availability of affordable childcare created significant structural obstacles to their participation in the workforce in Ireland. Recent studies illustrate the extent to which relatives, particularly grandparents, are centrally involved in childcare in Ireland (Williams et al 2010: 21). For many migrants in Ireland, limited or no access to family support structures place restrictions on work and other activities. As a consequence, many women were unable to work in paid employment, and were either stay at home mothers or involved in part-time, flexible work, often as individual entrepreneurs. The experience of Lucy, a woman from the UK who had moved to Ireland because of her husband's work, illustrates this well. Lucy had found part-time employment with a relocation company, but found it difficult to manage the job and her childcare commitments. She told us that 'the work was so ad hoc it was impossible to get a child minder because some weeks you would work four days, the next week you'd work one so no one wants that sort of ad hoc work' (2007UK02). Instead, she and her friend set up a cookery school, which they ran at weekends and during school hours. Similarly, Shannon from the US, living in rural Ireland, started her own business (2007US05). Sarah, a trained graphic designer from South Africa, had not been able to find work in Ireland that she could fit in around caring for her children (2007SA01). Mothers of young children thus narrated their experiences in a variety of ways. These included the rationalisation of their lack of opportunity to work as better for their children, even though these were women who had tried, unsuccessfully, to get work and who often spoke about how much they missed work. The absence of work and work contacts increased these women's sense of dependency and isolation. One coping strategy involved mothers becoming entrepreneurial, attempting to create their own employment opportunities to fit in with their childcare duties. This was the response of Lucy, Morgan and Shannon, among others, and very often this entrepreneurial work was gendered, for example through cooking and baking, or through selling products for children. Mothers also sought to develop new skills or undertake new training: for Shannon, this involved business training; Morgan had just started an evening course in gardening instead of finishing her business degree; and Sarah, using her graphic design skills, had started to develop educational tools for children that she hoped to sell on the web. In each of these instances, the women showed evidence of 'responsibilised' behaviour in order to address structural inadequacies in the provision of childcare and the facilitation of mothers at work.

Not all migrants attributed their difficulties in the Irish labour market to their own limitations. Migrants from the US, who experienced no difficulties with language proficiency, were much more likely to highlight structural issues that obstructed their efforts to work in Ireland. Maria, a highly experienced teacher from the US, moved to Ireland with her Irish husband. She spoke of her frustration in trying to get accreditation for her training:

It has been 2 years and I finally got a letter recognising my qualifications, but I was given a pass recognition where I wanted an honours recognition because I went to an Ivy League school ... so there again I am thinking there

is this 2 year process because they are actually evaluating but in fact it is a bureaucracy without a brain. (2007US07)

Maria described her job-search experience as ‘frustrating, demoralising, demeaning, alienating, it was horrible and I am still suffering from the interview process’ (2007US07). After three years working in Ireland, she has only been able to secure part-time work with no security, and so has started looking for work in other European countries and in the US. Similarly, a woman from the US with graduate training in health research had resorted to volunteer work to make contacts in the field, while supporting herself through a job in finance. She said that her US degrees were seen as an obstacle: she was regularly told ‘you don’t have Irish context experience’ (2007US08). A young woman who worked as a nanny to support her postgraduate studies in Ireland was blocked when she applied for a part-time teaching job in a school. As she described it, ‘I was straight out told that because I am American I can’t do it’ (2007US01). However, other migrants from the US, who had moved to Ireland specifically for work, were less likely to encounter structural obstacles. Similarly, migrants from the UK often felt that their qualifications and experience were recognized in Ireland. Our interviewees from the UK included a doctor, an architect, an architectural technician, a nurse, an academic and an administrator, all of whom had been able to find work in their area of expertise. The nurse, who was working in a rural hospital, said that her ‘British qualification is every bit as good as the Irish’, though she had experienced some difficulties in getting recognition for her advanced training, saying that she had been ‘seriously de-skilled’ since moving to Ireland (2004UK04).

The experiences of our research participants thus add to a growing literature on migrant experiences in an age of neoliberalism. Some of these migrants – particularly younger migrants with limited English language skills on arrival in Ireland – contribute to a flexible labour force, willing to work at a variety of jobs in the hope of developing language proficiency. However, their willingness to be flexible is not indefinite, as the next section will show. Others, particularly mothers, are flexible in their engagement with the labour market, and construct their experiences as of benefit to their children. However, the limits to flexibility are shown by the experiences of some migrants, for example from the US and UK, who confront the structural obstacles that serve to maintain a labour market hierarchy that favours indigenous workers. These observations are supported by a recent report on integration, which suggests that people born outside of Ireland, particularly those born in the EU-12, have ‘a more challenging labour market experience’ than those born in Ireland (McGinnity et al, 2011: 50). These structural constraints take on a new significance in the light of the Irish recession.

The impacts of the recession

Our interviews began in early 2009, and continued until late 2010. Over that time, we began to notice the ways in which the recession was affecting the lives of our interviewees, both directly and indirectly. In this paper, we highlight two of these effects. The first is the growing evidence of unemployment and underemployment among the research participants; and the second is the way in which the recession changed people’s perception of their own mobility. We discuss each of these in turn.

Un(der)employment

Shorter working hours, deteriorating pay and conditions and, in some cases, redundancy marked the work lives of many of our interviewees over the length of the research project. Those who experienced the greatest deterioration in working conditions were people working in construction and closely related industries. Andy, a UK national, told us that well over half the staff in the architectural office where he worked had been made redundant. Those who remained were working three and four day weeks, and had also endured pay cuts of up to 60% of their previous salary. He described the atmosphere in the office in this way: 'there is just a general black cloud over everybody and there are [a] lot of people there who would have been very effervescent in the past and they just, they are beaten down' (2004UK02B). While Andy still had his job, he was expecting to be told about more redundancies the day after we interviewed him, and did not feel at all confident about his position. 'There are so few people left there now everybody is at risk, it is not just designers, it is not just administration, it's everybody', he told us. His colleague even went so far as to suggest that rather than being jealous of each other, "a lot of people now think if they are let go it is more of a relief" (2007UK01b).

Anna, a trained teacher from Poland who moved to Ireland in 2004 to live and work in an English-speaking country told a similar story. After working a year in a hotel, she found work as an administrator for an engineering company. When we first met in 2009, her company had already made around three quarters of its employees redundant. 'It wouldn't be a big corporation, it was like a small home so the first redundancies made it feel uncomfortable', she said, and she talked too about the shock when longer-term employees lost their jobs. Anna recognized the particular conditions that had affected her employer, commenting that 'it is unfortunate that I am in this sector because this sector was absolutely devastated by the recession'. At the end of the first interview, she was hopeful that her employer would survive the recession, but when we met her a second time in the middle of 2010, conditions had deteriorated further. Her salary had been cut by 25%, and she was working a three day week. As a result, she had found a second job working as a waitress in a hotel. 'I work Wednesday to Friday in my proper job, I call it, and then my shitty job Saturday and Sunday', she told us (2004POL07/b).

A number of the people we met were made redundant, or had family members made redundant, in the course of our research. Elke, a woman from the Netherlands who had moved to Ireland with her Irish husband, had accepted a redundancy offer from her multinational employer shortly after the birth of their second child. She did so, fully expecting to be able to find another position at a later stage, but her search for work proved fruitless. 'I looked fanatically for work but nothing came.... And recently I applied again, but I have given up for a while to really focus my attention to it because it was really too depressing' (2004NL01b). Her husband had also accepted a redundancy offer at the same time, and was now working as a contractor in the Netherlands: 'so that means that I am here with the kids on my own, Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday' (2004NL01b). Jarek, an architect from Slovakia, had also been made redundant in early 2009. When he first moved to Ireland, he had three interviews in one day, and was offered all three jobs. 'Yes it was the good times but not anymore, I am now unemployed', he told us (2007SLK01). By the time he moved to Slovakia in early 2010,

he had not been able to find any work, other than a short contract to develop a website for his former employers. He described his efforts to find work in this way:

I sent applications to every single architect in Dublin and with this mention of this course that I had done and I hoped there might be something. But from 300 applications I got 70 replies but all were... there was one position which was very interesting earlier this year and I applied but I got the answer that there were 70 applicants for one job' (2007SLK01b)

Jarek tried to diversify his skills in order to increase his prospects of employment, taking courses in web design and in energy assessment, but as he told us, 'I didn't find anything...I didn't get any interviews' (2007SLK01b).

Research participants also alluded to the use of redundancy as a short-term cost-saving measure by employers. Clare, an administrator from the UK, described how she was made redundant by her employer, went on a two month holiday, and then was re-employed in her old job by the same employer. Rainhild, a German engineer, worked for a company that offered its employees voluntary redundancies or unpaid leave, or partial salary for taking a year off work (2007GER01b). In addition, research participants across a range of industries reported pay cuts or pay freezes. Those working in the public sector reported pay cuts and increased workloads, while many in the private sector reported pay freezes, pay cuts, or even a failure by their employer to pay them. A young American woman working as an administrator in a financial company told us of months without pay (2007US08b). Others had their hours cut, such as the young Italian man who had been working just three days a week in a pub during 2010, having previously worked full-time (2007IT01b). Others still had seen attempts by their employers to change their conditions of employment, such as the young Spanish man whose manager tried to cut bonus payments for additional work, decreased or increased weekly work hours and changed work schedules at very short notice to save on staff costs. This made it nearly impossible to schedule time off for trips home, for instance, and caused financial difficulties. The same employer also tried to force him to take holiday leave instead of sick leave when he got injured (2007SPN01b). Changes in weekly or monthly hours and work schedules at short notice were also mentioned by other interviewees (2004FIN01b).

A small number of research participants reported no obvious effects of the recession on their employment. Three had received promotions or small pay increases – two in customer support services, one in private education – while one had found a new, permanent job at a higher level of pay and another person had been able to find additional project work through contacts in his home country. In general, though, most people were directly or indirectly affected by the recession, in a range of occupations and at a range of salary levels. Lucy, who was at pains to tell us that 'we are very lucky to have this life' (2007UK02b), and who spoke about her family's difficulties as 'relative', also described her husband's sleepless nights when, as a senior executive in a large multinational company, he had to make people redundant. The failure to make sufficient profits had also affected Lucy's household income:

I have been with him 18 years and he has been with the company 21 and this is the first time he hasn't got a bonus so we have always relied on his bonus. I mean it can double his salary so we have always counted that as his salary.

And when we came here and the sort of house we rented and the lifestyle we had was based on the salary we had been used to and then all of a sudden a big proportion of his salary has disappeared and yet we still have this overhead. (2007UK02b)

The uncertainty and insecurity expressed by Lucy was a common refrain across the different contexts we encountered during this research project. Though uncertainty and insecurity is context-specific – ranging from bonuses not being paid to contracts not being renewed; from pay cuts to redundancies – it framed the employment experiences of most of our research participants, and led to new understandings of personal mobility, or its absence.

The limits to mobility

A recurring theme in the interviews, particularly later on in the research project, was the extent to which workers felt the recession had restricted their sense of personal and professional mobility. Many contrasted the ongoing contraction of the labour market to their experiences when they first arrived in Ireland, when it seemed that jobs were limitless. When Clare, from the UK, moved to Ireland with her Irish partner in 2004, finding a job was easy: ‘I went and registered with every agency and applied for every job and I got offered a lot in the first week’ (2004UK05). A young French woman described how ‘in a year I had three jobs and I never spend more than four or five or six days between jobs’ (2007FR01), while a young French man told us ‘so I found a job, I didn’t even look for a job but I got it’ (2007FR02). These narratives point to a time of abundance in job opportunities. Though these were often service-oriented and ‘precarious’ (McDowell et al 2009), this was compensated for by the possibility of moving jobs at will.

As the recession took hold, the possibility of changing jobs became more distant, and the ways in which people spoke about work began to change. A young German woman told us at our second meeting that keeping her job was now more important. ‘It is risky to stay out of a job and you never know how long it will take’ she commented (2007GER02b). In second interviews, others told us they were lucky to have a job, but at the same time detailed their poor employment conditions – details they either did not share with us when we first met for interview, or that had just arisen during the recession. Many felt powerless in the face of deteriorating work conditions since, given rising unemployment levels, holding on to paid employment became a priority. For example, in our second interview the Italian engineer who works as a technician told us that although he has always been employed on temporary three month contracts that were routinely renewed, he and his colleagues had to now contend with longer gaps between contracts determined at short notice or, in some cases, even face unemployment (2007IT04b). Similarly, a Finnish woman told us about the precarious nature of her employment, where she is only paid for the hours she works, and might be called at midnight and told to work the following day at 8am (2004FIN01b), while a French woman working in the hotel industry was given weekly working hours a day in advance, with no regularity in the shifts she was asked to work (2007FR01b). Yet many felt resigned to stay in these difficult and exploitative jobs. The Italian engineer said ‘I tried to apply, I even apply for other jobs in the same company, like permanent, but I was not lucky. There are probably

not a lot of jobs, there is more competition' (2007IT04b), while a young Spanish man said 'I have looked but in these last few months, as you were saying, I am a bit pessimistic of these things' (2007SPN01b). In some interviews, people told us of the ways in which Irish nationals were now being favoured in their workplace. The Spanish man mentioned this, as did Anna, who commented on all the new Irish employees in the hotel where she worked:

But it is just I have noticed it is just about connections because he wants to, this general manager, he had three friends and he got them jobs in the bar which means that the long term staff who are there longer than the new people, they get less and less hours (2004POL07b)

On some level, migrants are probably always concerned with the issue of staying or moving on. During first interviews, many people expressed an interest in returning 'home' and a few were thinking about moving to a third country, but very few had clear plans and most saw it as something that they might do in the more distant future. In the second interviews, however, reactions were much more mixed. Some research participants felt that, despite the deterioration in their work conditions and in the Irish economy, they would remain in Ireland. However, others were much more ambivalent, and talked to us about the possibility of leaving Ireland. Of the sixty people who participated in the project, six had already left Ireland by the end of 2010. Some left to study elsewhere – in France and in Australia, for example – while others left for personal reasons, such as marriage or illness or because they were offered a better job elsewhere. Just one expressly left because of the lack of work. Jarek, the Slovakian architect, said that '[work] was really big part of being here and then sort of after losing the job it was gradually falling apart so...' (2007SLK01b). Harvey, in his discussion of neoliberalism, commented that capital dominates 'a global labour force whose own geographical mobility is constrained' (Harvey 2005: 168-9). He saw constraints in the form of immigration restrictions, yet most of the people who participated in the research were free to move and work in Europe and further afield. Instead, they were reluctant to move for personal reasons – because of relationships, or because they had children who were settled, or because they felt at home in the place where they lived. Mobility in the context of the deteriorating economic situation in Ireland was often presented as a last resort, rather than a manifestation of liberty and progress (Cresswell 2010). In this way, mobility represents the absence of alternatives for already-mobile subjects. In contrast to the mobility that brought migrants to Ireland, this second kind of mobility is perceived of as a burden or even a defeat because it is 'forced' on people, infringing on their right to self-determination. Our interviewees' reactions suggest that people's capacity for mobility is limited and constrained by emotional and practical factors such as families that are equally or more important than economic and legal factors. Interviewees' narratives also suggest that people's mobility has to be conceptualised as windows of opportunity that are not always open, but usually appear at certain points in life such as during transition periods between life stages.

Concluding remarks

The working lives of people in Ireland, already under attack from the effects of neoliberalisation, have become increasingly at risk in this time of economic crisis. Across

the Irish employment landscape, we are now witnessing redundancies, cuts in working hours and pay, pay freezes and changes in working conditions,. This paper focused on the experiences of a small group of migrants in the midst of the recession, and highlighted the myriad ways in which their lives at and through work have been, and continue to be, affected. Their narratives provide a powerful insight into the ways in which ordinary people are being charged with the costs of the global and national economic crises, and they resonate with the experiences of workers across Ireland and more broadly. They show the extent to which workers have internalized the tenets of neoliberalism, have become 'responsibilised', and see themselves as the solution to broader structural problems. They also show that the situation stifles people's (creative) energies and effectively makes them passive; many people feel that they have to tolerate poor working conditions and resistance, even just in the form of giving up certain jobs, appears increasingly less feasible. Few of our interviewees felt that the changes are easily reversible now or in the immediate future. However, we also see the ways in which working conditions deteriorate at times of crisis, leading to economic, social and personal hardships for workers across a range of occupations and income levels. The narratives of our interviewees also suggest that difficult economic, financial and working conditions are not sufficient to induce mobility. Personal factors are equally, or even more, important.

However, the experiences of migrants at work in Ireland are also important precisely because of their position as migrants. The prevailing discourse in Ireland constructs migrants as temporary, as economic, and as flexible and profoundly mobile. Migrants, in this way of thinking, are most expendable: they, unlike 'indigenous' workers, are seen as having alternatives, as having a 'home' to go to. The principle of 'last in first out', usually seen as referring to length of employment, is newly applied to length of residence. Yet, migrants are no more inherently mobile than non-migrants, and many describe Ireland, and not their place of origin, as home. The challenge, therefore, is to resist dominant discourses of temporary migrants, and to resist the temptation of 'xenoracism' in the face of economic crisis and challenge (McDowell et al 2009: 21; Lentin 2006). Rather than using migrants as scapegoats, our research shines a light onto the ways in which migrants, as workers and employees, bear the cost of recession. Identifying the direct and indirect exploitation of migrants offers insights into how we might challenge the increasing precariousness of work at a time of societal change and crisis.

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