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POLICYBRIEF

JUSTMIG

Finnish Unions Should Resist Restrictive Migration Reforms

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SUMMARY / EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Orpo government's labour, industrial, and migration "reforms" risk entrenching inequality and weakening Finland's historically egalitarian labour model. Trade unions should resist government-led efforts to segment the Finnish labour market and undermine solidarity in the working class by weakening the rights of migrant workers. Behind the government's strategy is the notion of turning them into a weak link through which to undermine labour security and trade union strength.

Unions and policy makers in Finland should adopt inclusive union organising methods and strengthen solidarity between Finnish and migrant workers to resist segmentation in the care labour market. They should also oppose restrictive immigration policies that increase precarity and undermine professional standards in care work through migrants.

INTRODUCTION

The Finnish government, under Prime Minister Orpo is advancing a wide array of interlinked policy changes that, while often fragmented and seemingly technical in isolation, collectively amount to a systemic weakening of migrant worker rights, labour protections, and social solidarity. These reforms, spanning migration and residency policies, union rights and industrial relations, social security and integration services, and pathways to long-term settlement in the labour market or in Finland in the case of migrants, are converging to produce a more segmented, precarious, and unequal labour market, with serious implications for the entire working population (see Government of Finland, 2023).

Migrant workers in Finland – particularly in the care sector, where they are increasingly concentrated – already face structural disadvantages due to socio-economic and legal limitations imposed by their temporary residence permits, non-recognition of foreign qualifications and expertise, employer discrimination, and exploitative recruitment practices. The government's agenda risks deepening their vulnerability by promoting circular migration, limiting pathways to permanent residence, and making them more susceptible to substandard working conditions. This undermines the bargaining power of all workers, as a weaker migrant workforce sets lower industry-wide labour standards.

The regressive policies designed to create a class of workers with less secure access to rights, billed as “reforms,” should be regarded and resisted together as part of a coherent effort to segregate and transform Finnish society into something less solidaristic and egalitarian. We use the case of migrant workers' position in the Finnish care sector for illustration.

CONTEXT

Present day threats to the Finnish egalitarian ambition

Finland starts from a position of a well-regulated labour market bolstered by a strong welfare state. Well into the 2000s, migration and integration policies have been less punitive than in many other countries, emphasising decommodification through e.g., education and skill training. Union density is high, although it has fallen rapidly in recent years to 55% in 2021, according to a Work and Economy Ministry report (Ahtiainen, 2023). Workers, including migrants, are covered by extended collective agreements regardless of whether they are union members or not, and trade unions have broad legal rights, including, until recently, a flexible right to strike. This has added up to egalitarian wage outcomes, and unions being regarded as partners in labour market governance. This position is under threat, with consequences that will threaten migrant worker rights and employment conditions.

Despite the unions' position, strong labour market segmentation and racial/nationality-based discrimination exists, due to extensive discrimination in employer recruitment practices (Ahmad, 2020,) and racism among co-workers. Occupational discrimination is quite strong. Many migrants are segregated into socio-economically less desirable jobs, typically low paying, low status, menial jobs with limited opportunities for upward mobility. However, the egalitarian wage structure ensured by a system of consensual decision making by social partners such as generally extended collective agreements has meant that migrant workers' position in terms of wage levels and labour rights is not as bad as in many other countries. Segmentation primarily affects the types of jobs that migrants can access, but has less influence on how they are treated once employed in those jobs. Migrant care workers in Finland are mostly or entirely long-term residents of Finland, because of the qualification requirements in Finland, and the need for Finnish or Swedish language skills

(Koivuniemi, 2023, pg.68). The Orpo government's agenda appears intended to weaken this temporal feature and its link to professional standards.

Conditions are at risk of rapid deterioration if trade unions, Finnish workers, and migrant workers do not unite to interpret ongoing government reforms as a collective threat and mount an effective resistance. Of all the three groups in the government's line of fire, migrants are particularly vulnerable. The "reforms" will affect them in an intersectional way, compounding the anticipated negative outcome of socio-economic vulnerability. By deepening the precarity and vulnerability of migrant workers, they are positioned as the entry point through which lower labour standards spread to the wider workforce – threatening the foundations of Finland's labour market model and welfare state. Care work has both public and private sector employers in Finland, with migrants more prevalent in the private sector (Kaasinen & Kiuru, 2023).

Care work in Finland has long been an area of labour shortage in Finland. The Finnish government maintains that to maintain service levels, the number of practical nurses should increase by 20,000 by 2030, and 45,000 by 2040 (YLE 1/2025). Foreign recruitment is regarded as a way to address this issue, without raising wages. However, the fact that recruited migrant workers must undergo training in Finland – to acquire the necessary language skills and meet national care standards – requires a level of investment that works against temporary or circular migration models and instead encourages more permanent settlement and integration.

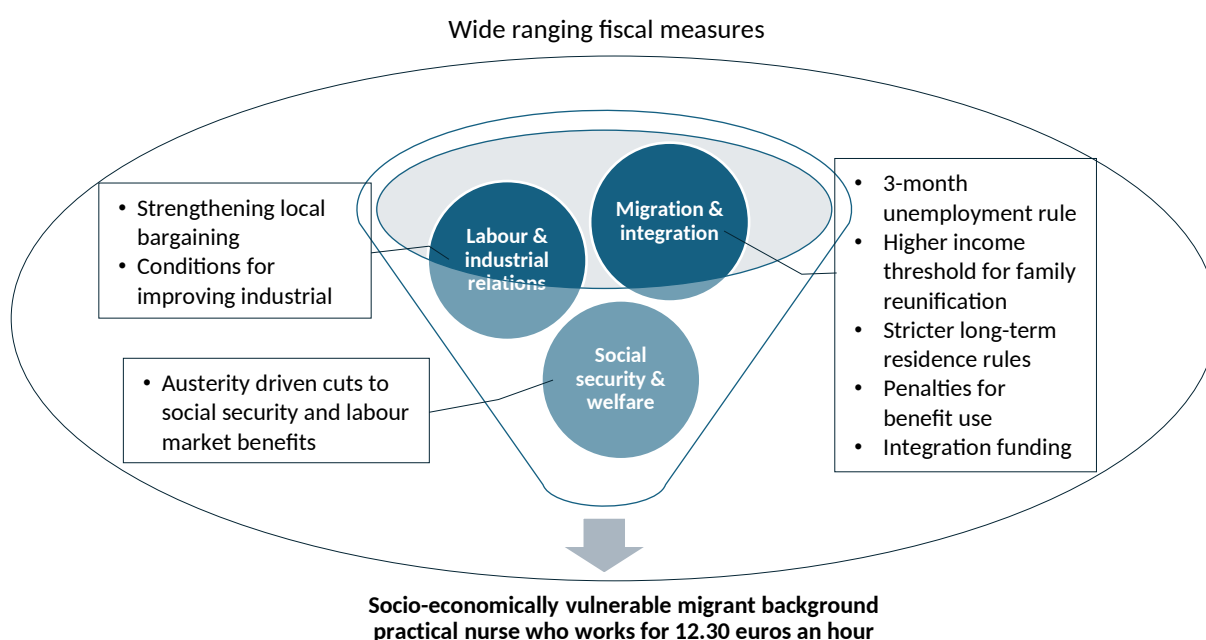


Figure 1: One level of the dynamic system shaping the migrant care worker's labour market position

The JUSTMIG study in Finland 2024-2025

To better understand these emerging developments, the JUSTMIG research project engaged central stakeholders, including trade unions in the care sector, migrant care workers and their representatives, and academic experts on migration and industrial relations, through participatory action-oriented research. We organized information-gathering discussions with union representatives from the Union of health and Social Care Services (TEHY), the Trade Union for the public and Welfare Sectors (JHL), and the Finnish Union of Practical Nurses (SuPer) (4); key

informants (3); and migrant workers (12) in Finnish care. These discussions explored the most pressing issues in migrant employment the care sectors from various perspectives.

The discussions included two multistakeholder focus groups – one national and one transnational – that brought together union representatives, migrant worker representatives, and academic experts. The objective of these focus groups was to identify the key issues defining the labour market position of migrant care workers in Finland today and to assess the likely implications of ongoing government reforms on this position in the future. The transnational workshop incorporated perspectives from Estonia and Ukraine for strategic comparison.

In addition to our empirical data, we consulted an extensive body of secondary data, including publications on ongoing government reforms in Finland, publications by care unions, and academic literature on the integration of migrant workers in Finland, particularly in the care sector.

ANALYSIS / DISCUSSION

The “re-production” of migrant workers as a weak link in the Finnish care working class

The health and social services sector of Finland is currently the biggest employer of migrant workers, employing slightly more than 16% of migrant workers under the age of sixty-four. The trend of migrant workers joining the health and social services sector is likely to keep growing, as there are active international employer recruitment efforts. It is seen as a sector with employment opportunities for migrant workers with the relevant qualifications as well as those able to retrain to join the profession.

However, looking at past empirical studies of migrant labour market integration dynamics in Finland, we see that the movement of migrants into the Finnish care sector is strongly structurally mediated by the various legal status regimes by which migrants gain entrance and residence in Finland, the Finnish welfare regime, and labour market (de)regulation (Ndomo, 2024; see also Könönen, 2019, Martin & Prokolla 2017). The structural mediation of migrant workers' integration in the Finnish care sector has indirect but significant implications by weakening migrant workers' position in the labour market as well as in the workforce and thereby establishing them as a weak link in terms of labour market power.

At first, the integration environment intensifies the socio-economic vulnerability of migrant workers. Legal status regimes, i.e. work visas, residence permits and similar regulatory instruments, regulate access to social benefits and various rights in Finland (or indeed in any country). Provisions which close off access to social benefits, such as the student residence permit which excludes all access to state benefits, ensure those who hold such permits are entirely dependent on paid work and are thus more exploitable than those with benefits access. Non-recognition of foreign qualifications and work experience means some migrants are unable to find appropriate work, while others find work appropriate to their skills but are paid on lower scales because their certificates are not considered valid. Employers are known to use Finnish language proficiency requirement in recruitment to exclude migrants, in cases where the level of Finnish required is higher than what is needed (see Valtonen, 2001). Deregulation and privatisation trends intersect with the availability of a more vulnerable workforce, allowing employers to take full advantage of migrants' vulnerability. The result is a weak starting point in their labour market integration that exposes migrants to opportunistic exploitation. Migrant workers, often desperate for employment, are simultaneously perceived by more powerful labour market actors such as employers and Finnish co-workers as lacking key competences (whether justified or not). This combination of vulnerability and devaluation forces migrants to negotiate from a position of weakness, leading in

practice to lower-status and less secure positions in the labour market. Currently, in Finland, migrant care workers incur penalties for the temporariness of their residence, insufficient Finnish language skills, foreign qualifications, and ethnicity – they have to work harder, accept lower wages and conditions, and remain on the fringes of the care sector (Koivuniemi, 2023). As one immigrant relates, **“In Finnish care, you [the migrant worker] compensate for your language skills with hard work”** Interviewee 1 – department head, service housing, Helsinki.

It is a widely accepted fact that in Finland, migrant care workers concentrate in care work for the elderly. However, what is important to underscore is that this is in fact a structurally produced and sustained segmentation which carries significant adverse implications for migrant care professionals.

In a key informant interview, a migrant worker representative explained that at the core of this segmentation is discrimination and exploitation of migrant workers. The better regulated workplaces run by the wellbeing service counties (formerly municipalities) all too happily discriminate against migrants because of their supposedly weak Finnish language skills. On the other hand, privately owned companies welcome migrant care workers, even those with weak language skills albeit in exchange for less standardised terms of employment. For instance, a lot of work is arranged in gig format through placement agencies, and wages are negotiated directly between the migrant and the employer. **Migrants in difficult circumstances have had to accept below collective agreement wages, as low as 12.30 euros an hour in the care sector (Interview 9, Ukrainian care worker)**. The informant argued that in fact, private sector employers go a step further and prefer to specifically employ migrant students and fresh graduates who are deemed cheap. Their cheapness stems from their socio-economic vulnerability which is shaped by among other things limited understanding of the Finnish labour market and their rights, weak union engagement, and precarious migration status. Migration related challenges are many; for example, they can relate to migration status, a parent's need to meet an income threshold to bring their children into Finland. Some migrants accept part time contracts in addition to their regular work in order to earn the money to meet this threshold, and these have a higher likelihood of being under substandard conditions. According to the informant, the situation is bound to only get worse under the current onslaught of government led “reforms”.

CONSIDERATIONS

The intersection of the Orpo government reforms and the need to act now: Three things to consider

1.) Migrant care workers are multiply impacted by the Orpo government “reforms”.

The immigration “reforms” specifically target migrants. Their implication is a tightly regulated immigration environment in which migrants have significantly limited or tightly controlled pathways to socio-economic integration and freedom. The four outstanding changes are the **3-month unemployment rule, punishing use of social security through tighter long-term residence or naturalisation conditions, raising the income limit for family unification, and reducing funding for integration services to make migrants take more responsibility for their integration by e.g., paying out of pocket for Finnish language lessons.**

Migrants are also indirectly impacted by the government's “reforms” that weaken the role of trade unions in social dialogue. In particular, they stand to lose from **policies promoting local bargaining and increased flexibilisation of key industrial relations processes, such as wage setting**. Some migrant care workers are already earning below collectively agreed wage rates in the private care

sector as a direct consequence of such flexibilisation. The risks are compounded by the government's push for expanded local bargaining and the simultaneous growth of private actors in segments of the care sector, especially service housing, where a large share of migrant care workers is concentrated. Migrants' limited access to the social security system further deepens their vulnerability: they may be required to contribute taxes and social insurance payments without being eligible for the benefits to which those contributions should entitle them. **Additionally, the government's decision to reduce the minimum staffing level in 24-hour care facilities from 0.7 to 0.65 will affect private providers' contracts.** This could lead to reduced working hours or job losses for already precarious migrant care workers who depend on private employers, while simultaneously increasing the workload in an already demanding sector. In practice, these so-called austerity measures amount to deteriorating working conditions and weaker employment protections.

2.) While many migrant care workers already occupy a weak position in the Finnish labour market, that position can and will be weakened further by the many "reforms" because of intersectionality and systems.

Specifically, it is important to consider the notion of intersectionality and a dynamic systems view when interpreting the likely implications of the government "reforms" for migrant care workers. With a systems lens, we can understand how the "reforms" themselves, will make challenging the status quo even harder – the unions, and class solidarity, the two sure ways to keep the power of employers and even politics in check when necessary have been the first points of attack.

3.) Lastly, we have to consider why care is one of the industries in which migrants can find employment.

Care work is not a lucrative sector; the labour shortage persists because care workers are consistently underpaid compared to other occupations requiring similar skills and levels of responsibility. It carries forward some elements of the exploitative labour division model in which reproductive work was unremunerated, and pay norms suffer from a gender related discount (Saari et al., 2021). Working conditions in Finnish care, even when the additional exploitation of migrants is excluded are average at best. Can the sector afford the risk of any further deterioration?

CONCLUSION

The Finnish government's strategy is to address the shortage of care workers through immigration, a policy which is in apparent contradiction to policies which reduce the social rights of migrants in Finland, and constrain their rights to remain. Finnish care has an apparent labour shortage that both employers in the public and private sectors plan to fill with migrant workers, among other ways. Working conditions in the sector can be difficult, and reforms such as reduction of the required patient ratio discourage Finnish workers from remaining in the sector, but successive governments, including left-wing ones, have proven unwilling to address this shortage by raising wages, but rather to attempt to coerce the workers back to work (Levä 2021; Muhonen 2022)

Care workers with secure residence status have much more bargaining power in this situation. Those with Finnish citizenship, for example, have access to full welfare state benefits, can switch jobs at will, and can decline to work for poor terms of employment. There are worrying reports regarding Finnish care workers' future in the sector. However, any vacuum that Finnish care workers create when they leave the sector or refuse substandard working conditions, can be filled by migrants, although the current recruitment system based on education, integration and professionalization makes this difficult, as the workers recruited absorb local norms as they travel

the integration pathway. Thus, the migration regulatory system appears to be trying to introduce an ephemerality to migrant work in the Finnish care system with greater segmentation in access to benefits, and right to remain.

Migrant workers typically enter the Finnish care sector at its lowest tiers. With a weak labour market position, they are often forced to endure deteriorating working conditions and terms of employment. In doing so, they may inadvertently normalise substandard practices, contributing to a dangerous cycle of labour market segmentation that can ultimately destabilise the entire care sector, and influence conditions in adjacent sectors as well. Encouraging migrants to fill labour shortages while systematically excluding them from rights and protections is not a sustainable solution. Addressing the root causes of migrants' vulnerability is essential. This includes confronting language-related barriers through proactive and well-resourced integration efforts, and re-regulating the care sector to set clear limits on unchecked flexibilisation, particularly in the private sector where many migrants are concentrated. However, structural disadvantage cannot be overcome by regulation alone. Migrant workers also need increased leverage to negotiate better conditions. That leverage must come through collective solidarity. Finnish and migrant care workers must stand together, regardless of who is most affected at a given moment, through their unions and other organising platforms, to hold employers and policymakers accountable and protect the integrity of care work for all.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Focusing not on symptoms, but the whole organism/system

1. **Unions and allies should develop cross-sector strategies beyond collective bargaining that link residence security, qualification recognition, and anti-discrimination into plans to safeguard the care workforce.** Avoiding labour market segmentation is rightly a priority for Finnish unions, yet many of the forces driving segmentation lie beyond the scope of traditional collective bargaining. Addressing this requires a clear understanding of how multiple institutions and actors intersect to shape the migrant care labour market. We recommend that unions engage with the entire migration system. In care work, this means promoting secure residence pathways, supporting integration through language learning and qualification recognition, and ensuring anti-discrimination in recruitment and the workplace. This may require creative approaches, including partnerships with migrant-led initiatives, to uphold professional standards and prevent the marginalisation of migrant workers and the erosion of labour norms.
2. **Expand the mandate and organising strategies of unions to build collectivism and solidarity between migrant and Finnish care workers, especially in segmented workplaces, by adopting socially grounded, inclusive representation models.** Institutional representation models do not perform well in contexts where there is extensive labour market segmentation so that migrant workers and Finnish workers are not necessarily working in close proximity, have a weak sense of unity or shared identity, lack a shared problem perception vis a vis the employer, and lack a unified frame of reference regarding employment conditions. Creative strategies expanding the mandate of unions beyond their current activities should be considered if that is

what it takes to better integrate migrant workers into the labour movement and prevent them from becoming a weak link through whom the entire labour market can be undermined over time.

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