The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Employers, Not Migrants, Are the Problem

By Boris Kagarlitsky

September 16, 2013




Boris
Kagarlitsky

If there was even one point on which the candidates in the Sept. 8 Moscow mayoral race were in agreement, it was on the question of migrant workers. They unanimously described migrants as an evil practically on par with criminals and tried to outdo each other with statements about how they would deal with this blight.

Who exactly were the candidates referring to when they spoke of migrant workers? In the minds of most Muscovites, that word immediately calls up images of workers from Central Asia as they endlessly repair or clean up the roads. They could also have in mind someone from the North Caucasus driving around in an expensive car, black-tinted windows and loud music blasting out the windows.

These two groups have nothing in common besides the fact that neither are Slavs, Russian Orthodox or native Muscovites. What's more, people from the North Caucasus are Russian citizens who are frequently accused of being aggressive or criminal. Meanwhile, workers from Central Asia are accused of lowering salaries in the capital or of taking jobs from locals. But it is highly doubtful that they are taking many jobs from Muscovites because immigrants tend to compete with other immigrants on the labor market. In fact, most migrant workers labor without any protection from the law, and this alone makes them vulnerable and powerless against such accusations.

It is telling that the politicians who like to discuss the dangers of migrant workers prefer to remain silent on the responsibility of employers who hire them. But they are the ones responsible for massive violations of the Labor Code. Although it is not written anywhere, the law is enforced as if it only applies to Russian citizens. In fact, it should apply equally to everyone on Russian territory. Yet over the many years that great numbers of migrant workers have been hired in Moscow, not a single employer has ever been brought to justice for violating labor laws in relation to these laborers.

And herein lies the root of the problem. Those in Moscow and other cities who feel that there are too many foreign workers must attempt to have labor laws strictly enforced. At the very least, that would force employers to stop hiring large numbers of cheap laborers who work in slave-like conditions, a practice that really does have a negative effect on the economy and the social environment. The truth is that the companies and organizations that hire migrant workers have no interest in increasing labor productivity, improving management or eliminating corruption. In fact, migrant labor is largely focused in the construction and municipal services sectors, two areas where corruption is rampant.

With Russia's poor demographics, it is necessary to attract manpower from abroad to achieve economic growth. But why bring in migrant workers rather than immigrants who are ready to assimilate into Russian culture and society as they acquire citizenship? The answer is simple: it is more advantageous for employers to hire defenseless migrant workers whom they can fire and send back to their home countries at any time. They have no need for immigrants holding Russian citizenship who will fight for the same rights accorded to other members of society.

Terrorizing migrant workers and fanning racist hysteria about a "Central Asian invasion" will not improve the situation with the labor market, but achieving universal and complete implementation of the Labor Code will.

Boris Kagarlitsky is the director of the Institute of Globalization Studies.

Original url:

https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2013/09/16/employers-not-migrants-are-the-problem-a27712