

# Local struggles over the re-regulation of migrant labour in the German meat industry

WP5 Working Paper – National report: Germany

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## Acknowledgements

The DignityFIRM consortium would like to thank all study participants for their valuable time and inputs, and the reviewers for their feedback on an earlier version of this working paper. The authors are thankful to the rectorate of the Bielefeld University for family-supporting assistance, which partly funded one of the authors (LN).

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## Executive Summary

The German meat industry has long been criticized for its reliance on precarious employment arrangements and related substandard working conditions for migrant workers. In response to COVID-19 outbreaks in several meat plants, the German government introduced the Occupational Safety Control Act (OSCA) in 2020, aiming to improve employment conditions and worker protections by banning subcontracting and temporary agency work in the industry's core areas. This working paper examines the impact the OSCA had on migrant workers' working conditions. Our analysis, based on 14 semi-structured interviews with N=15 key stakeholders, reveals mixed results. The law has led to improvements in employment relations and transparent working hours and salaries; and it has resulted in reduced accident rates. However, economic and political interdependencies among local actors and entrenched hierarchies constrain the law's impact, limiting it to contractual aspects of the workers' conditions, without achieving more far-reaching transformations. Our analytical approach - using five frames (no alternative, workers' choice, employer responsibility, corporate power structures, and multiple precarity) to analyse the different perspectives and narratives surrounding migrant labour in the meat industry - contributes to a deeper understanding of key challenges that prevent fundamental changes in the conditions of migrant workers in the German meat industry.

## 1. The Occupational Safety Control Act: re-regulating labour in the German meat industry for good?

The meat industry showcases the precarization of labour as part of broader economic liberalization (1,2). In many countries, today, its workforce consists largely of precariously employed migrant workers. Indeed, the shift to migrant labor has been described as one aspect of the precarization of labour in the meat industry (3). While the meat industry urgently needs migrants' workforce, it often exposes these workers to significant health risks related to precarious employment, hazardous working conditions, and substandard housing. At the same time, access to occupational health services, healthcare, and support tends to be problematic (4). Insufficient social and health protections for migrant workers not only contradict legal norms (5,6) but also undermine the sustainability and systemic resilience of essential industries (7). The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted these vulnerabilities, with SARS-CoV-2 outbreaks in meat plants across country contexts (8,9) serving as a prime example.

In Germany, the government responded to SARS-CoV-2 outbreaks in the meat sector with a federal law banning indirect employment (subcontracting and temporary agency work) in the meat industry's core areas of slaughtering, deboning, cutting, and meat-processing (8,10). This rather drastic legislative intervention is widely seen as the outcome of a prolonged struggle over the German meat sector's labour regime, including several attempts at reform and reregulation. From this perspective, the COVID-19 provided a window of opportunity to re-regulate labour: *"We would never have gotten a majority vote in Parliament for the ban on subcontracting, if it wasn't for the [COVID-19] pandemic."* (Int.4, Academia) (see also 11). The Occupational Safety Control Act (Arbeitsschutzkontrollgesetz, in the following: OSCA) further stipulates the electronic recording of working hours, increases the frequency of inspections and employer penalties, and sets housing standards (12). Government representatives emphasized worker rights as the law's main motive, stating that "some meat companies had, for too long, operated in a system of organized irresponsibility" and that "the excess COVID-19 cases among the workforce of abattoirs... are evidence that systemic change in this industry is overdue" (13). At the law's passing in Parliament, the German Minister of Labour declared: "We are thoroughly cleaning up the meat industry because the human dignity of employees is at stake" (14). Unions, activists, and scholars lauded the law for fundamentally

changing industrial relations and for thus addressing a key determinant of workers' health and social protection (15,16).

Five years on, this working paper asks to what extent the law has improved the conditions of migrant workers in the meat industry. Based on interviews with N=15 key-informants - complemented by a policy analysis and ethnographic research with an activist-scholar network on labour in the German meat industry<sup>1</sup> - it describes migrant workers' employment and working conditions, and occupational safety and health, before and since the OSCA; and it analyses different stakeholders' framings of migrant workers' conditions, related policy problems, and resolution strategies. Based on this analysis, it offers an explanation for how the OSCA played out in practice. Our case study thus provides insights into struggles over the re-regulation of labour within a high-risk farm-to-fork sector characterized by unequal power relations.

## 2. Employment and working conditions

### 2.1 Employment and working conditions before the OSCA

Since the 2004 EU expansion, the German meat industry has been relying on EU mobile workers from new member states such as Romania, Bulgaria, Poland, Hungary, and Lithuania. Most of them used to be subcontracted. Subcontracted workers have been providing about half of the manual labour in German abattoirs. In some plants, they comprised up to 90% of the workforce (17). *“Really the vast majority, are migrants... from Bulgaria, Romania, ... from Southeast European countries.”* (Int. 7, Union) With subcontracted workers not being included in employment statistics, no comprehensive information on EU mobile workers in the German meat industry is available (18).

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<sup>1</sup> We analyzed original data from 14 semi-structured in-depth key-informant interviews (see appendix, table 1 for an overview). The interviews were recorded, transcribed (using the AI-based software noScribe), and subjected to software-supported (ATLAS.ti 9) qualitative analysis, applying both deductive and inductive coding. We further reviewed relevant policy documents; e.g., a 2024 evaluation report of the OSCA and the yearly reports on occupational safety and health in the meat industry by the Employer Liability Insurance. Finally, we participated in the activist-scholarly network “Arbeit & Überleben (Work & Survival)”, which addresses labour in the German meat industry from a range of different academic disciplines and practice-based perspectives.

Given EU free mobility, EU mobile workers can legally stay and work in Germany. Nonetheless, the system of subcontracting facilitated irregularities: work-related irregularity, e.g., if (potentially unregistered) workers worked under the name of another worker, or if workers worked double shifts using different names. Legal status-related irregularity could result, e.g., when subcontracted workers were laid off (10). Beyond losing their livelihood, they could become both homeless<sup>2</sup> and irregularized, because EU mobile citizens who cannot prove formal employment in Germany over five consecutive years are ineligible for welfare support and supposed to repatriate in case of welfare-dependency (19): *“In the vast majority of cases, [when there is a health issue] they are layed-off, that much is clear. And those who are provided housing by the company are doubly unlucky, because they lose both their job and their accommodation. So it's not just about unemployment, but also the immediate risk of homelessness... Your stay here in Germany depends on your work, and all benefits depend on work.”* (Int.13, Social counsellor) More insecure residence status, in turn, facilitates work-related irregularities: *“The more uncertain your stay, the worse the working conditions. That's kind of a basic rule.”* (Int.4, Academia)

Characterized by employment insecurity, a lack of de facto rights and protections, and low income, subcontracted employment in the meat industry can be described as precarious (20). Short-term, service- and zero-hour contracts maintained the workers in a state of permanent temporariness and insecurity. Formally, subcontracted mobile workers were entitled to labour rights and a range of social protections (10). In reality, they often did not know or assert their rights and largely bow to their “small boss” (their foreman, supervisor, and/or recruiter): *“They have to get the supervisors' permission. I need time, a day off... and mostly the answer is no... Down to the pee break, they determine everything.”* (Int.13, Social counselling) Intimidation and threats with job loss, wage deductions, allocation to undesirable job tasks, or violence, were reportedly common, *“up to sexual harassment of female workers by supervisors”* (Int.2, Church).

When workers wanted to see a doctor, it often turned out that they had no health insurance for a lack of payment of contributions, or *“health insurance cards... were withheld by the supervisors and you had to report to the supervisor that you are sick and want to go to the doctor.”* (Int.3, Social counselling)

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<sup>2</sup> As housing is often provided by the employer, job loss is associated with a loss of housing.

In case of an accident and subsequent loss of work capacity, in theory, workers could claim a range of benefits via employer liability insurance. In practice, workers forewent their rights. Supposedly, many returned to their home country without proper treatment, without claiming any compensation, and without recourse to support, thus risking disability and wider social consequences. Interviewees reported, e.g., *“[the subcontractor] always made his workers understand that, if you have an accident, you won't get any money... And then [a worker] ended up having an accident with the saw and seriously injured his hand... And he left the hospital after three or four days because he thought he would have to pay the treatment costs himself.”* (Int.10, Employer liability insurance)

Many workers were promised high salaries upon recruitment but eventually received lower pay, after deduction of exorbitant sums for accommodation, transport, and equipment: *“2,400€, I understood, you had to pay for the room and then on top send food and money to Romania”* (Int.6, Health office) Salary rates often remained unclear as workers were paid without or with only a “rudimentary” pay slip. According to interviewees, many workers did not know if they were paid monthly wages, by the hour, or by piece – and they sometimes received part of their payment in cash: *“The workers... only knew that at the end of the month they would have 1,000 € in their hands, and that was enough for them.”* (Int.6, Health office) Allegedly, part of the workers' salaries routinely went to the small bosses' pockets, e.g. *“for protective equipment... housing, transport, some kind of lump sums that no one knew what they're there for, honestly... Everyone else filled their pockets, and the workers were ultimately paid, I don't know, 3 or 4 € per hour. That's disastrous and it was certainly bordering on modern slavery.”* (Int.10, Employer liability insurance)

Subcontracted workers were typically provided housing by the intermediary as part of a “package deal”, which included recruitment, transport to Germany, accommodation, and registration with the municipality. Housing was often substandard, e.g., in dilapidated buildings, crowded conditions, and with inadequate sanitary facilities: *“There were 25 people living on one floor with one toilet and one shower.”* (Int.5, Healthcare provider)

## 2.2 Employment and working conditions since the OSCA

According to our interviewees, many of the above-described issues have improved since the OSCA. Most notably, workers working in the meat industry's core areas have been directly hired by the respective meat companies. Some meat plants had to hire several thousand workers within three weeks over Christmas and New Year 2020: *"The law was passed in December 2020, in the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic, when everything was difficult anyway ... We had to hire all the people within three weeks... Here at this location, there are about 6,500 people, and of those, maybe 4.5 to 5 [thousand] were subcontracted. And so we had to organize everything within three weeks because it was illegal as of January 1."* (Int.8, Meat company management)

For many workers, this has entailed more accurate and transparent working hours and wages. Interviewees noted, e.g., that *"before the OSCA, we had much longer working hours, 12-14 hours... Probably even longer in some cases... In our consultation, people talked about these very long days... about double shifts in the sense that... you somehow lost all sense of time. And that's no longer the case."* (Int.3, Social counselling) Some noted that workers are now more likely to take sick leave and annual leave: *"Everyone now knows that, if I have an injury, in the worst case, I will even receive compensation and so on... I'm taken care of."* (Int.10, Employer liability insurance) Access to healthcare is said to have improved. Some interviewees suggested that the OSCA has generally led to more worker voice and more dignified treatment of the workers: *"people are now more willing to take this step, to approach their employer; they have become more courageous."* (Int.3, Social counselling)

With the integration of the previously subcontracted workers into the general workforce, works councils – where they exist – were expanded accordingly. In the long run, this may strengthen worker voice<sup>3</sup>, as the works councils thus represents a larger, more diverse workforce (including the newly hired workers, but still excluding those who remain subcontracted; e.g., in cleaning, packaging, and logistics): *"We are happy about every employee who has joined us this year. It makes us stronger as the works council in the company... The contract workers, of course, they came over because of the law [OSCA]."* (Int. 12, Works council) Some companies resumed offering company

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<sup>3</sup> to be seen, e.g., in 2026 elections for works councils.

housing; and some have institutionalized Corporate Social Responsibility mechanisms such as an ombudsman, and multi-lingual social integration support services.

However, various issues have remained. Some interviewees noted that employment insecurity is still high, as meat companies give the previously subcontracted workers probationary or short-term contracts, although *“they [the workers] had permanent contracts [with the previous subcontractor]. But when they were hired directly, they were given fixed-term contracts... - even though they were supposed to be transferred [to the meat company] under the same conditions.”* (Int.13, Social counselling). As a result, employers can still lay-off workers easily.

Internal hierarchies persist, inter alia, because intermediaries were hired by meat companies alongside the workers, e.g., as supervisors or human resource staff *“because they had the knowledge of the structure and the personnel, of how things actually worked.”* (Int.13, Social counselling) Consequently, informal power structures that compromise workers’ access to rights may persist, incl. intimidations: *“We... organized an event [to inform about the new law] here locally... And of the 24 who confirmed, only nine showed up... And when I went outside... to see if anyone else was coming, one of my [social counselling] clients came up to me and said, ‘Yes, do you see that guy over there in the parking lot? He’s a foreman at the slaughterhouse, and that’s why many people went back because they’re afraid of being seen coming here.”* (Int.13, Social counselling)

Some interviewees therefore maintained that, for many workers, nothing has changed – especially in remote locations that elude public scrutiny. Some interviewees also noted downsides of the OSCA from the workers’ perspective; e.g., that net incomes actually decreased, due to the deduction of social contributions, and because workers now cannot work more than the legal maximum hours: *“People were happy because they were hired directly, but they were totally dissatisfied with the pay. Because the pay, now that they are hired directly by the company, is less than what they got from the temporary employment agencies.”* (Int.13, Social counselling)

### 3. Occupational safety and health

#### 3.1 Occupational safety and health before the OSCA

Work in the meat industry (on the work floor) is inherently harsh and hazardous. Like in other countries, the German meat industry ranks as one of the industries with the highest rates of work-related injuries and illnesses (with an average yearly accident rate of 48.2 per 1,000 full-time workers as compared to a rate of 18,1 among the overall workforce in the private industry in Germany in 2023 (21)). Cuts, stabs, slips, and falls are listed as the most common work-related injuries; the most frequent work-related illnesses are hearing loss and skin diseases (22). The literature lists cold and humidity, exposure to dangerous equipment, slippery floors, heavy loads, high noise levels, biohazards, and coping with animal suffering and death as hazards that are directly related to workplaces and job tasks. It further notes that the previously described structural factors and precariousness, too, jeopardize workers' wellbeing; e.g., financial and social insecurity, long shifts and inadequate rest times, high line speeds and per-piece payment, low workplace civility, lack of safety culture, de facto lack of rights (such as paid sick leave), and low job prestige (4,23).

In principle, a well-known hierarchy of occupational safety and health measures exists to mitigate workplace-related health risks. This hierarchy prefers addressing risks at systemic levels above individual levels. It prioritizes administrative controls (e.g., thinning the census of workers on a given shift, ensuring rest times) and engineering controls (e.g., slowing down production lines) over promoting individual behaviours (e.g., the use of personal protective equipment) (24). In reality, in meat plants, some of these systemic factors are designed in ways that amplify inherent hazards; e.g., high line speeds, time pressure, and inadequate rest times increase the risk of injury (25).

Accordingly, some interviewees described safety and health risks – such as the cold and humidity – in the meat industry as a given. But many also described how some risks were compounded by the socio-material work organization, highlighting high line speeds, narrow workstations, and pressure from superiors, among other aspects: *“The line [speed] is controlled by the main contractor... and the subcontractors have to work in this speed... otherwise they'll lose their jobs very quickly. And there have been situations where subcontractors changed the workplaces so this speed was doable, but this has also led to an increased risk of accidents. They removed safety guards, simplified safety measures, and things like that... The workstations are very, very close to each other... And the closer I work, the more dangerous it becomes...”*

*because if you slip, your neighbour immediately... ends up with a knife in their stomach." (Int.7, Union). "The line speed is really high... and you have to imagine that there's a foreman standing next to you or behind you saying, 'Work faster, faster, faster, or else you're out.'" (Int.3, Social counselling)*

Interviewees consistently highlighted workers' *"complete physical and mental wear"* (Int.5, Healthcare provider) and *"total exhaustion"* (Int.2, Church) over time. Many suggested *"It... [the work] simply kills you in the long run. The repetitive movements, the cold, the strain on the entire musculoskeletal system, which is excessive. And also the psychological stress, the violent nature of this work, which is actually organized violence against living beings."* (Int.4, Academia)

### 3.2 Occupational safety and health since the OSCA

There are signs that the OSCA has led to some changes in workers' safety and health. Interviewees stated that occupational safety *"has improved significantly. The... large meat companies have works councils that control this... And they are more than happy that they are now allowed to do so... So, this is one of the few areas that have improved... The number of accidents has fallen, ... because now [works councils] are responsible for training and for implementing occupational safety."* (Int.7, Union)

The 2024 official OSCA evaluation report indicates that accident rates among the specific group of workers, who transitioned into direct employment, were above average before the law change (i.e., while they were still precariously employed). Since the OSCA (i.e., after transitioning into direct employment) accident rates among this group seem to decrease and adapt to those of the overall workforce in the meat industry. At the same time, accident rates among those workers, who can still be subcontracted (e.g., in cleaning, packing) have significantly fallen. "These changes in accident rates clearly show that most accidents occurred where external personnel had previously been employed [in the meat industry core business of slaughtering, deboning and cutting]" (26). Data from the employer liability insurance similarly suggest that accident rates among the workers, who transitioned into direct employment, have decreased (from a yearly accident rate of up to 92.8 per 1,000 full-time workers in 2018 to a rate of 49.0 in 2023).

Overall, our analysis reflects agreement over the OSCA as a positive step. Some interviewees were extremely enthusiastic: “[Labour] Minister Heil has earned himself a medal [for legislating this law]. In my opinion, it is one of the greatest achievements of the last government.” (Int.10, Employer liability insurance) Others commended it as a well-intended measure that may not have achieved its full potential. In more detail, evaluations of the new legislation and of the respective role of the COVID-19 pandemic differed by framing, as will be described in the following sections.

## 4. Framings of migrant workers’ conditions, policy problems & solutions

This section provides a simplified analysis of how the conditions of migrant workers in the meat industry are framed (i.e., explained and/or justified). The analysis is “simplified” because, a) for greater clarity, frames are described in an extreme and artificially “pure” version, in which no interviewee described their views. More typically, interviewees’ statements amalgamate bits and pieces of different frames. b) To reduce complexity, we focus on five central frames: the no alternative- and the workers’ choice-frame - both rather pro-industry - and the employer responsibility-, corporate power structures-, and multiple precarity-frame, which are rather critical of industry and pro-worker. Each frame logically leads to a different perspective of “the policy problem”, its solution, and, in turn, a differential evaluation of the OSCA.

### 4.1 The no alternative-frame

This frame describes the use of cheap, flexible and docile labour as an inevitable must-have for employers, in the face of price pressures and competition. “We are in a highly competitive market and these advantages in terms of flexibility [flexible labour] represent an enormous cost advantage.” (Int.8, Meat company management) Having cheap and flexible (migrant) labour was described as a necessity also for industry-specific reasons such as intermittent (e.g., seasonal) peaks and supply chain pressures: “The livestock has to go somewhere... You can’t just tell the farmers to put the livestock in the barn, because new pigs are being born somewhere, so it’s all one... system.” (Int.14, Policymaker) “[In] farm-to-fork [supply chains] ... everything is integrated, and all these cogs have to mesh together.” (Int.8, Meat company management) Assuming that there is “no alternative” (Int.4, Researcher) to the given

labour regime, this frame also contributes to a normalization and “naturalization” (Int.4, Researcher) of working conditions.

From this perspective, the key policy problem is labour shortage: the growing challenge to find workers who are willing and able to work under the given conditions. High turnover, absence rates, and the “sinking quality of workers” was also problematized: *“We're getting... more and more people sent to us... They don't even know whether to hold a knife by the blade or the handle... So, the quality of the people who are still being brought in is very, very poor ”* (Int.7, Union). The main strategy to address these problems is to tap into new pools of workers. Intermediaries recruit from more and more remote communities within South-East EU member states, as well as more distant countries *“Moldova, for example... Afghanistan... Iraq, Iran, eh... Syria and, yes, from that region. We had [people from] Vietnam now... Recently I see that there are people who come – or were brought – from African countries...”* (Int.13, Social counselling) Improving working conditions or technological innovation are rarely brought up as alternative solutions: *“Workers don't cost money, to put it bluntly... Very little has been invested in automation over the last 20 years.”* (Int.10, Employer liability insurance)

In line with the above logic, industry representatives described the OSCA's ban on subcontracting as an unfounded and politically motivated attack. They reasoned that the SARS-CoV-2 outbreaks had been *“used to highlight [the workers' conditions], but in the end, to be honest, scientifically speaking, the two things [COVID-19 and the workers' conditions] have nothing to do with each other.”* (Int.8, Employer). From their perspective, policymakers had merely seized the momentum to unfairly single out the meat industry: *“Because the meat industry... was the punching bag for this issue... It's actually absurd – why not logistics?! or other industries?!”* (Int.8, Meat company management).

#### 4.2 The workers' choice-frame

This frame assigns responsibility for the workers' conditions to the workers themselves, their choices and behaviours. With great consistency, the need to earn money to support families back home was described as migrant workers' primary concern. Many interviewees put this into the broader socio-economic context (e.g., of a lack of prospects in migrants' home countries), adding that most workers probably

thought that “*this job is sh\* but it is better than no job... The fear of having no work – that is the motor that keeps these people going.*” (Int.6, Health office)

Yet, sometimes, the broader context within which migrant workers make migration and work-related choices was blanked out. Crudely speaking, then, the frame goes that workers’ only interest is in making a lot of money fast. They are not interested in improving employment or working conditions, but in exploiting the system for their own financial benefit. Following the above logic, workers were sometimes described as care- and reckless; e.g., not adequately using protective equipment, and choosing (or creating) substandard housing conditions, thus bringing health risks upon themselves: “*They just do whatever they want... and they don't respect the law, and it's really hard to work with these people, and they were really difficult to control.*” (Int.6, Health office).

As this statement illustrates, such descriptions often involve Othering; e.g., the argument that migrant workers from some countries or ethnic groups essentially “*tick differently. They have a different relationship to health, to self-protection, to dealing with illness... They have significantly fewer problems with amputations than you and I do... It's more or less kind of a heroic thing.*” (Int.10, Employer liability insurance) From this perspective, there was no policy problem and state regulation such as the OSCA is seen as uncalled for.

### 4.3 The employer responsibility-frame

This frame focuses on employers’ responsibility for their product and for the workforce producing it. From this perspective, interviewees generally condemned the excessive reliance on indirect employment. “*You are a meat-producing company and if you want to produce meat then you have to be able to do it [with the company resources and workforce] and not delegate the responsibility for it.*” (Int.7, Union) They emphasized employers’ moral duty to ensure dignified working conditions for their workers, regardless of the precise employment relationship. Dignified work was described as a consensus across German society; e.g., interviewees rejected discussing related questions “*as part of an election campaign.*” (Int.14, Policymaker) In the prolonged political struggle that preceded the OSCA (see 10), it was meat companies’ open rejection of responsibility that enraged policymakers: Following up

on the damning findings of a large 2019 audit in the meat industry (27), they demanded the digital recording of working hours to enable effective monitoring and enforcement of minimum wage guarantees. Yet, meat company representatives claimed that this was impossible: *“If someone complained about a particular sausage, they could say which pig it came from and which farm those pigs were from. But they couldn't digitally record working hours?! So, the problem clearly lay elsewhere.”* (Int.14, Policymaker)

The policy problem, from this perspective, is that indirect employment arrangements allow commercial actors to systematically evade employer responsibilities. By this token, *“[Labour Minister Heil] called it a system of organized irresponsibility, and that actually describes it quite well when no one knows who is actually responsible anymore.”* (Int.2, Church) The corresponding strategy is to “establish clear lines of responsibility” (Int.2, Church) and strengthen enforcement – which is what the OSCA did, indicating that the law very much follows the logic of this frame. Obviously, thus, from this perspective, the OSCA is evaluated very positively: *“The law itself only says ‘I prohibit subcontracting.’ The consequences of this are... fairer wages... and ultimately fairer treatment of workers within companies. In the sense that - I have my workers, I have to take care of them and I can't get out of that [responsibility]... this responsibility must be fulfilled and it is now being fulfilled 100 percent.”* (Int.10, Employer liability insurance)

Together with that, many interviews underlined the need for strong enforcement to realize the law's impact on the ground. Many suggested that, without such enforcement, from experience, industry actors will ignore or circumvent the legal regulations. While the OSCA foresees more inspections, some interviewees noted these were still too rare, too lax and too inconsequential: *“This is also part of the OSCA...5% of companies must be inspected annually. This figure has not yet been reached... They [State Labour Inspectors] don't do it, they can't do it. First, there are too few people and secondly, someone usually has their fingers in the pie.”* (Int.7, Union). On similar grounds, some interviewees warned that industry actors would dodge the law by moving to other countries. *“Social dumping has really been seen across Europe, and you can see it now too... the different legal situations in Europe are actually being exploited in order to be able to produce at the cheapest possible conditions.”* (Int.11, Union) They thus argued for the law's expansion, not only “to

*further problematic sectors; e.g., cleaning, logistics, parcel services.” (Int.2, Church) but also EU-wide and “along supply chains” (Int.11, Union).*

#### 4.4 The corporate power structures-frame

Several interviewees highlighted commercial actors’ great power to shape policies and realities in their interest. First, the meat industry heavily invests in lobbying to influence policymaking - “Every type of sausage practically has its own lobby association.” (Int. 4, Researcher) - and in Public Relations to influence public opinion. Second, the interrelations between a broad range of actors - including, albeit not limited to meat company owners, intermediaries, and real estate investors (who rent out worker accommodations) - were described as entrenched systems of economic, political, and social interdependencies at local and transnational levels. Some described this “*entanglement*” (Int.1, Health office) as “*mafia-like*” (Int.2, Church), citing practices like the intimidation of opponents (28) and the buying of influence: “*They are very generous towards the Catholic Church... And that also has... its effects. And then sometimes you have this conglomerate of, ‘Oh no, we don’t want to give the region bad publicity, and somehow everyone benefits from it, and somehow it’s a win-win situation.*” (Int.2, Church) These systems were said to reinforce the powers of industry actors by undermining attempts to challenge or change their practices: “*No one here in the city wants to mess with these people [in the migrant meat worker business] ... because it’s a completely interwoven system.*” (Int.5, Healthcare provider). Given these power structures, commercial actors may exert influence on political decision-making; and they may shape realities on the ground in disregard of formal regulations. With specific reference to the COVID-19 pandemic, e.g., interviewees recalled that meat company owners assumed “*that all those pandemic rules do not apply to them*” (Int.1, Health office), that they were immune against limiting policy interventions: “*He [meat company owner] acted the way he always acts; namely: ‘I’m the boss and there is no other God besides me.’*” (Int.7, Union)

#### 4.5 The multiple precarity-frame

This frame emphasises the links between precarity and exploitability. It considers migrant workers’ precarious conditions from a broader perspective, related to marginalization in various social arenas beyond work: “*Not only [do they] have the*

*problem of working conditions, but they also have the problem that four of them sleep in one room in a barrack and each pays 300€ for the bed... Or they have the problem of segregated schools and so on and so forth. There's the problem of residence rights for people from third countries. There's the problem of social rights for people who come from the EU... So - multiple precariousness."* (Int.4, Academia) This multiple precarity arguably makes migrant workers a more exploitable workforce.

At the same time, the migrant workforce is diverse, with divisions and hierarchies along the lines of nationality, ethnicity, skill level, language competencies, gender, and further markers. Our analysis suggests that the work organization in meat plants reinforces internal divisions and hierarchies and thereby acts as a further system of control: *"Most of the foremen are from the Iraqi community... [while most workers are Romanian]. So, they also exploit this... uh, difference in cultures and languages and so on, so that somehow people are pitted against each other."* (Int.13, Social counselling) In the end, the same interviewee explained, *"each one tries to get ahead somehow, by giving the supervisor some money or so, to get a better job task."* (Int.13, Social counselling). Several interviewees described how particularly unattractive job tasks were used to discipline workers: *"For example, ... a woman [worker] didn't take a single sick day in four years. Not one. Then she was sick for a week, and when she came back, even though she wasn't 100% healthy, she was sent to the huge refrigerator to take out the frozen meat. As punishment, so to speak, for not being at work for a week."* (Int.13, social counselling) Overall, our analysis shows, the work organization functions as a system of divide and rule, which encourages a "hacking order" among the workers, rather than solidarity and collective action. Ultimately, this helps to "keep the workers in their place". This has been similarly described for other contexts (see, e.g., 29,30).

Both the corporate power structures-frame and the multiple precarity-frame describe migrant workers' conditions as a systemic problem, where various powerful actors and interests maintain migrant workers' exploitability. Improving migrant workers' conditions will therefore require systemic change, beyond a change only in employment arrangements. From this perspective, the OSCA is a positive step, but not enough. It will need to be complemented with strategies to address power differentials; e.g., by strengthening workers individually and collectively, changing narratives, and transforming food systems for greater (social and environmental sustainability): *"It is unacceptable, indecent, that our whole food industry... actually*

*depends on the availability of cheap labour. And that we buy or afford our standard of living to a certain extent by - I don't know how to put it - letting cheap human beings... work according to different standards ... And it isn't just the meat industry. It's only that here I noticed it so systematically for the first time." (Int.1, Health Office)*

## 5. Discussion & Conclusion

This working paper examined how practice stakeholders negotiate the OSCA, a new law aimed at the re-regulation of migrant labour in the German meat industry; and what effects the law has had on migrant workers' employment, working conditions, and occupational safety and health. Our analysis found mixed results. It shows that the OSCA achieved improvements in some areas and fell short in others. Essentially, it improved conditions related to employment and occupational safety and health; whereas, it did not substantially alter the working environment nor long-term health risks.

To be fair, the OSCA has thus improved exactly those aspects that it explicitly addressed: employment relations, working hours, salaries, housing – not more and not less. Importantly, these are considerable achievements that ought to be appreciated as such. The OSCA did not unfold “spillover effects” as many had hoped, e.g., in terms of greater worker organization and voice. In other words, it did not (yet) live up to the expectation of bringing about a “fundamental change in industrial relations”. This can partly be explained by looking at our results through the lens of a power analysis.

From our results, we can discern descriptions of different forms of power, and power differentials, that are leveraged by stakeholders to shape policies and realities in their interest. Gilmore et al. distinguish between three forms of power: instrumental, structural, and discursive: “instrumental - the ability to influence other actors and most specifically their decision making; structural - the ability to use material conditions to shape the structures in which actors interact and thus influence their choices and options (both real and perceived); and discursive - the capacity to influence processes and opinions through the shaping of norms and values” (31).

Applied to our findings, we can interpret the elaborate system of political, economic and social interdependencies around migrant labour in the meat sector, as well as the meat industry's extensive lobbying and its “entanglement” as instrumental power. A lot of different actors profit from this system - e.g., as employers, recruiters,

landlords, small bosses – and thus have an interest in maintaining the system. Others fear negative consequences if they challenge it; e.g., municipalities may be concerned with bad publicity, with a loss of jobs, tax revenues, and donations.

We can further understand the capital, money, and jobs involved in the meat industry and in the import and presence of migrant labour as a considerable structural power, especially given the typically remote rural location. On top, our analysis points to a highly stratified work organization, which builds on and reinforces migrant workers' intersectional precarity, thus consolidating their material and structural conditions.

Finally, we can put the above-described frames in the context of discursive power. Both our analysis and the literature (32) indicate that the meat industry is agile in using and shaping narratives around meat (consumption) and around labour. With regard to labour, the meat industry benefits from deep-seated discourses of racialized Othering (33) on the one hand, and discourses of extractive capitalism as the only thinkable economic arrangement on the other. Both discourses relieve employers of responsibility for workers' conditions by obscuring the broader structural context (e.g., that economic arrangements and labour regimes are political choices). Importantly, both discourses are pervasive and powerful in society today so that they are reproduced across social and political spectrums, incl. by workers themselves.

Overall, our results thus pinpoint a great power imbalance, which currently works to maintain migrant workers' precarity and exploitability: *“The power imbalance is too great. The employer basically holds all the cards, all the advantages over the employee. Even if you are a member of a union, the unions' capabilities... are pretty limited.”* (Int.13, Social counselling) This may explain why a change “only” in formal employment status – from precarious to regular employment – was not enough to substantially shift the balance of power. But it may have been a first small step.

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## Appendix

**Table 1 – List of Interviewees**

<b>Code</b>	<b>Organization</b>	<b>Sector</b>
Int 1	Health office	Administration
Int 2	Church	Civil society
Int 3	Social counselling organization	Civil society
Int 4	Academia	Civil society
Int 5	Healthcare provider	Social and healthcare system
Int 6	Health office	Administration
Int 7	Union	Civil society
Int 8	Meat company management (2 persons)	Industry
Int 9	State administration	Administration
Int 10	Employer liability insurance	Social and healthcare system
Int 11	Union	Civil society
Int 12	Works council	Industry
Int 13	Social counselling organization	Civil society
Int 14	Minister	Government

## Deliverable information

Schedule Information	
<b>Title and number</b>	<b>Local struggles over the re-regulation of migrant labour in the German meat industry</b>
<b>Work Package, Task and Deliverable</b>	WP5, Task 4.2, Part of D3.2 (DignityFIRM Working paper series)
<b>Publication date</b>	1802.2026
<b>Doi reference</b>	10.5281/zenodo.18504193
<b>Authors</b>	Nora Gottlieb, Laura Niediek
<b>Dissemination level</b>	PU
<b>Deliverable type</b>	Working Paper

# **Local struggles over the re-regulation of migrant labour in the German meat industry**

## **ABOUT DignityFIRM**

Towards becoming sustainable and resilient societies we must address the structural contradictions between our societies' exclusion of migrant workers and their substantive role in producing our food.

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This project has been funded by the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement No 101094652