



University of Sussex  
Sussex Centre for Migration Research

# **INTENSIFICATION OF WORK-PLACE REGIMES IN BRITISH AGRICULTURE**

## **THE ROLE OF MIGRANT WORKERS**

### **Sussex Migration Working Paper No 36**

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July 2006

#### **ABSTRACT**

In Britain, international migrants have very recently become the major workforce in labour-intensive agriculture. This paper explores the causes of the dramatic increase since the 1990s in the employment of migrant workers in this sub-sector. It locates this major change in a general pattern of intensification in agricultural production related to an ongoing process of concentration in retailer power, and in the greater availability of migrant workers, shaped in part by state initiatives to manage immigration. However, within this narrative of change at the national scale, the paper also finds continuing diversity in agricultural work-place regimes.

The paper draws on concepts developed in the US literature on agrarian capitalism. It then uses case histories from British agriculture to illustrate how growers have directly linked innovations involving intensification through labour control to their relationships with retailers. Under pressure on 'quality', volume and price, growers are found to have ratcheted up the effort required from workers to achieve the minimum wage through reducing the rates paid for piece work, and in some cases to have changed the type of labour contractor they use to larger, more anonymous businesses. The paper calls for further, commodity-specific and spatially-aware research with a strong ethnographic component.

## INTRODUCTION<sup>1</sup>

In Britain, international migrants have very recently become the major workforce in the labour-intensive tasks of harvesting, packing and primary processing of relatively high value products such as fresh fruit, vegetables, salads and ornamental shrubs and flowers (Frances, Barrientos and Rogaly, 2005). This paper explores the causes of the dramatic increase since the 1990s in the employment of migrant workers in this sub-sector. It locates this major change in a general pattern of intensification in agricultural production driven by an ongoing process of concentration in retailer power, and in the greater availability of migrant workers, shaped in part by state initiatives to manage immigration. However, within this narrative of change at the national scale, the paper also finds continuing diversity in agricultural work-place regimes.

The roles of the state, of market relations (along the supply chain), and of local social and spatial relations in shaping work-place regimes across sectors have together been conceptualised as social regulation by Peck (1996). Social regulation has also been used specifically for the analysis of change in the agriculture and food sector.<sup>2</sup> Regulation is seen as being practiced at different scales and by a range of actors, including the local and national levels of the state, and private business interests. As Flynn and Marsden argue, "at a conceptual and empirical level, we can begin

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<sup>1</sup> I am grateful to Bridget Anderson, Martin Ruhs and Sarah Spencer for permission to draw on data from our collaborative study 'Changing Status, Changing Lives? The Socioeconomic Impact of EU Enlargement on Low-Wage Migrant Labour in the UK' (see [www.compas.ox.ac.uk/changingstatus](http://www.compas.ox.ac.uk/changingstatus)); to Stephanie Barrientos, Jennifer Frances and Jim Williams for the same in relation to our study on temporary working in UK agriculture and horticulture, see Frances, Barrientos and Rogaly (2005); to fellow interviewees Donna Crabtree, Lindsey Napier, Paula Tenaglia, Louise Waite and Benji Zeitlyn; to Stephanie Barrientos, Tanja Bastia, Richard Black, Russell King, Linda McDowell, Jeff Pratt, Kirat Randhawa, Martin Ruhs and Jane Wills for comments on an earlier draft; and to all the aforementioned as well as Henry Bernstein, Don Flynn, Zad Padda, Maria Pontes, Donna Simpson and Becky Taylor for conversations on some of the issues discussed in the paper. The views expressed here should not necessarily be attributed to any of them and all errors are mine.

<sup>2</sup> Flynn and Marsden (1995), Goodwin (2006), Lowe, Marsden and Whatmore (1994), Marsden and Arce (1995).

to distinguish between more traditional regulatory styles based upon notions of the 'public interest' and an emergent private interest style of regulation" (op cit: 1185-86). In Britain a critical part of this movement towards regulation by private interests, has been the changing power relations among private actors, the "fundamental shift of power...in the food industry away from manufacturers to a small number of rapidly expanding retail corporations" (Marsden, Munton, Ward and Whatmore, 1996: 365 ).<sup>3</sup> However, in spite of these perceptive analyses of the key ways in which private corporations and the state have influenced the production decisions of agricultural businesses in Britain, little attention has been paid to associated changes in agricultural work-places themselves, in the relations, that is, between wage workers, labour contractors, such as gangmasters, and grower and packer businesses.<sup>4</sup>

In contrast, the role of the concentrated power of British retailers in social regulation of work-place relations *has* been analysed with respect to *international* agriculture, particularly with regard to the production of fresh fruit and vegetables in sub-Saharan Africa (eg. Barrientos and Kritzingler 2004; Dolan 2004; Kritzingler, Barrientos and Rossouw, 2004). The methodological approach of such studies in food and agriculture has been inspired by the seminal work of Gereffi (1994) in relation to manufacturing supply chains. These studies have shown that supply chains have become increasingly 'buyer-driven', with retailers (the buyers) exerting power over the rest of the chain, and have drawn out the impact of these changes on relations between wage workers, growers and labour contractors at the point of production. 'Farm to fork' studies of particular products have also been valuable in elucidating the commodity-specific dynamics of such chains (Cook 2004; Daviron and Ponte 2005; Hughes and Reimer 2004; Pritchard and Curtis 2004)<sup>5</sup>.

It is only in relation to the US that a large body of literature exists connecting social regulation by large-scale capital and the state with changing work-place regimes in labour-intensive *domestic*

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<sup>3</sup> See also Lang and Heasman (2004), Wrigley (1987).

<sup>4</sup> Though a small number of other studies have focused on this. See, for example, Frances and Garnsey (1996), Lawrence (2004), Pai (2004), Pollard (2006). The UK does, of course, have its own literature on agricultural employment relations, including Collins (1976), Grieco (1996), Howkins (1990), Johnson (1967) and Newby (1977).

<sup>5</sup> For a two-part review of some of this recent work in commodity studies, see Bernstein and Campling (2006a and b).

agriculture.<sup>6</sup> In this paper, I draw on some of the conceptual advances made by these studies to raise questions about changing work-place regimes in British agriculture. I make use in particular of the extensions by Guthman (2004) and Henderson (1998) of Mann's theory regarding the natural obstacles to agrarian capitalism. These shed light on the processes by which value is captured by capital outside as well as within agricultural wage labour processes. Even in a climate of global concentration in the grocery retail sector, this is of particular importance in Britain, where concentration of supermarket power has been greater than in other northern countries (Flynn, Marsden and Ward, 1994:93; Morgan, Marsden and Murdoch, 2006; Vorley 2003).<sup>7</sup> This article represents a first attempt to analyse the connection in Britain between retail concentration and work-place intensification through the employment of foreign nationals.

## CAPITALISM IN HORTICULTURAL SUPPLY CHAINS

How capital reproduces itself and accumulates in agriculture and horticulture is in part a matter of definition. For Mann (1990), the defining feature of *capitalist* labour relations is the use of hired wage labour.<sup>8</sup> It is the surplus value of this labour which accrues to capital. Mann deploys this concept of capitalism to explain the obstacles facing capitalist investment in agricultural production and thus why 'family farms', not based on the use of wage labour, persist. Mann's theory, an extension of Mann and Dickinson (1978), is undergirded by Marx's notion of the nonidentity of production time and labour time in agriculture,

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<sup>6</sup> These include, among many others, Friedland, Barton and Thomas (1981), Henderson (1998), Martin (1988; 2002), McWilliams (1945), Mitchell (1996), and Wells (1996).

<sup>7</sup> The dominance of national retailers in the food supply chain made Britain "crucially distinctive" Flynn, Marsden and Ward (1994). Until recently, power in the US supply chain lay with large-scale processors and manufacturers rather than retailers, although the concentration of retail power in the US has been catching up with that in Britain (Wrigley, 2002).

<sup>8</sup> Henderson argues that this definition is contested around two axes. Firstly, for some writers, a farm is capitalist if it sells a certain proportion of its product. It does not necessarily have to involve wage labor. Secondly, it can be argued that even when production is non-capitalist by both the market sales and the wage labor criteria, if money "can be plowed back into the farm from elsewhere, making the farm an instrument for capitalist exploitation and a site among others for circulation," the agriculture concerned is therefore capitalist (op cit: 29).

the associated periods of idleness (of labour and machinery) and the resulting slower turnover of capital, than in, say, manufacturing industry. Moreover, because of the perishability and shrinkage of certain crops, there is more limited potential for storage as a response to price and demand fluctuations than with non-perishable products. As suggested by Guthman, this often makes growers into price-takers (2004: 65). Taken together these factors limit the value that can be accumulated by capital from agricultural production processes.

More recent work, including Guthman's, locates capital accumulation in agriculture away from the production site, for example through lending money to growers (Henderson, op cit) and marketing agricultural produce. Such processes fall within Guthman's concept of "appropriation" (op cit: 66). Guthman holds that in response to the obstacles to capitalist accumulation in agricultural production, innovation takes place in context-specific ways through three sometimes simultaneous processes: appropriation, valorisation and intensification. *Appropriation* is the investment in specific non-farm activities that "[extract] value from others" (ibid: 66). It may involve input manufacture, food processing or marketing, including appropriation of value by corporate retailers (Morgan, Marsden and Murdoch, op cit: 121) "In effect, the labour value farmers add (as well as value extracted from nature) is shifted to nonfarm industry" (Guthman: loc cit). *Valorisation* involves "seeking value through the realm of consumption.....finding new ways of enhancing the desire for the product itself" (loc cit). This has special salience for organics, in relation to which, at the conjuncture of the late 1990s/ 2000s in California, "valorisation appear[ed] the more lucrative avenue" (ibid: 67).

Here, however, I am mainly concerned with the third form of innovation, *intensification*. Importantly for the analysis that follows, Guthman argues not only that intensification is "broadly characterised by efforts to speed up, enhance or reduce the risks of biological processes" but that "*even some nontechnical innovations in labor control can be considered intensification..., for example, the use of vulnerability to ensure a timely and compliant labor force come harvesttime*" (ibid: 65, emphasis added).

The research reported in the section that follows is aimed at unpacking such innovations in labour control, in particular the use of foreign nationals in the workforce. It examines the extent to which such intensification is connected to the relation between retailers and growers. The analysis makes use of the concept of work-place regime,

which encompasses the whole set of labour arrangements<sup>9</sup> made, largely by employers, with varying degrees of negotiation with labour contractors and workforces, and in response to wider labour market, legal and commercial conditions. These arrangements include decisions about whom to employ with regard to nationality, immigration status, gender, age and skills. From the perspective of employers, particular kinds of worker may be considered suitable because of their acquiescence to (or compliance with) tasks set and working norms, their degree of willingness to commit to a pre-determined programme of work (or alternatively to come to work without pre-set end times), and the ease of disposing of them when they are no longer needed. The arrangements also involve decisions over whether workers are employed by a labour contractor (gangmaster), or directly by the grower, the conditions of work and divisions of labour between roles and between work-sites and how much room for manoeuvre exists in practice for workers to move between them; the amount, form and basis for remuneration (piece rate or time rate, weekly or daily, cash or electronic); accommodation and transport arrangements where relevant; hours and days of work for each worker and the degree of control the worker, labour contractor and grower have over them; methods of supervision and quality control; informal and formal relations between individual workers, groups of workers, labour contractors and the grower.

I focus on three aspects of changing work-place regimes in contemporary British agriculture, which may be expected to indicate intensification: the employment of international migrant workers, the 'return of the gangmaster' (Brass, op cit), and the use of piece rates.<sup>10</sup> All three can be interpreted as nontechnical innovations in labour control of the kind identified by Guthman, that use vulnerability to ensure compliance in the labour force. Evidence which follows does indeed suggest that all three are indicators of intensification. However, as we shall see, care is required in interpreting this because of the diversity of interests involved.

The main sources of data for this paper are case histories. Faced with the daunting prospect of accounting for diversity between regions,

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<sup>9</sup> See Rogaly (1996).

<sup>10</sup> This paper is primarily about waged labor in labor-intensive worksites and it does not analyse the gender division of labor within grower households, nor the important role of 'unpaid' work (in spite of the warnings of Marsden et al, 1987, op cit, fn 1).

commodities and types and sizes of grower businesses in processes of agricultural restructuring, Marsden, Whatmore and Munton (1987) called for the use of case histories in order to be able to account for multiple causes of change and to *suggest* prevailing patterns. While they cannot be *representative*, the depth involved in case histories is particularly insightful for the understanding of processes. The case histories referred to in what follows are based on face-to-face interviews carried out in 2004 with thirteen businesses in British agricultural/ horticultural production and one involved in first-stage processing. I spent two days on-site with the latter company and with three grower businesses (involved respectively in the supply of salad onions, strawberries and hardy shrubs), interviewing five directors, seven managers, five labour contractors and thirty-six workers. This approach meant that it was possible to take account of workers' as well as employers' perspectives. However, there were important limitations. Interviews with workers, though conducted behind closed doors, were mostly coordinated by company managers or directors who selected workers from the field or packhouse for the interviews. In contrast, all nine of the other grower interviews were tape recorded and transcribed.<sup>11</sup>

In what follows, therefore, greater attention is paid to employers' (including labour contractors') perspectives and the 'logic of capital'. This contributes to addressing the lacuna of such analysis in migration studies, as highlighted by Krissman (2005). Krissman argues that mainstream studies have focused almost entirely on the supply side, sustaining policy responses that emphasise greater policing of international borders. This in turn makes migrant workers more desirable to employers than they would be if all were regularised. In contrast, according to Krissman, a greater research focus on the practices of employers and labour contractors in hiring migrants would lead to a stronger case for regulating capital.

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<sup>11</sup> These nine interviews, five of which I carried out myself, formed part of a larger study coordinated by the Centre for Migration, Policy and Society (COMPAS) at the University of Oxford, see Ruhs, Anderson, Rogaly and Spencer (2006). The four case studies, coordination of which was assisted by Paula Tenaglia, also formed part of a larger study, commissioned by the UK's Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (see Frances, Barrientos and Rogaly, op cit). The names of interviewees referred to in this paper have been anonymised.

As this paper suggests, with respect to agriculture such an agenda should not be concerned with the practices of growers and labour contractors alone, but also with the companies that buy their products. The case histories drawn on here are suggestive of the importance of relations between different branches of capital in driving the intensification of work-place regimes. They are deliberately taken from a range of businesses that have (so far) survived in the cut-throat world of retail supply of fresh fruit, vegetables, salads and ornamentals in contemporary Britain.

## INTENSIFICATION OF BRITISH AGRICULTURAL WORK-PLACE REGIMES

### *Switching to foreign nationals in the work-force*

'A large number of those employed by the undersellers are foreigners and youths, who are obliged to accept almost any wages they can obtain' (Marx 1867 (1976): 690-1)

International migrant workers in British agriculture long predate the arrival of corporate retailers. Employers regarded them as "indispensable", for example, in the middle of the nineteenth century (Collins, 1976: 55). Demand varied according to crop and region, and between years.<sup>12</sup> It "was most exceptional, in, for example, the Fens (where the tongues were once described as being as many as the 'builders of Babel') and the Kent hop-fields, which polarised the labour markets over whole regions and attracted every manner and nationality of itinerant worker" (ibid: 43). Seasonal migration by Irish workers was particularly common (Johnson, 1967).<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> The employment of women and child workers was common, the breakdown of the workforce by age and sex being time and place specific (contrast, for example, the "travelling bands of [harvest] workmen" in central England with the "women and girl harvesters" in the Scottish highlands (Collins, op cit: 45 and 47)). Whole families from south-east London were hired for hop-picking in Kent up until the 1960s (Grieco, 1996). Anecdotal evidence suggests that, in the last decades of the twentieth century, and prior to the acceleration in employment of foreign nationals (men and women), the seasonal casual workforce involved in fruit, vegetable and flower harvesting was predominantly made up of women (and children) (see also Brass, op cit: 321).

<sup>13</sup> Moreover, it is not only in contemporary British agriculture that employers complain about the attitude

Since the 1990s, there has been a general increase in the employment of foreign nationals across economic sectors in Britain (Anderson, Ruhs, Rogaly and Spencer, op cit: 6). However, a recent comparison of employers' use of migrant labour in five sectors found that the structure of demand in agriculture had particular characteristics (Dench, Hurstfield, Hill and Akroyd, 2006)<sup>14</sup>. Firstly, the preference for migrant workers was much stronger in agriculture, secondly, only in agriculture did employers unequivocally see migrant workers as "crucial" to their businesses, and thirdly agricultural employers were the most hostile to the phasing out of temporary migration schemes under the British government's new points-based system (ibid: 34, 35 and 70).<sup>15</sup>

Our case histories suggest that, while there has been a decline in the availability of long term residents, including British nationals, and an increase in migrant workers willing to work in the sector, the main reason for this structure of demand lies in the relations between growers and retailers. The buyer-driven structure of the horticultural supply chain has enabled retailers to appropriate ever greater value from agricultural producers.<sup>16</sup> This has meant declining margins available for growers on each unit of output. Many producers of fresh fruit and vegetables have gone out of business, as evidenced by the shrinking and increasingly concentrated structure of the fresh fruit and vegetable sectors (Key Note 2004). Others have sought what they saw as the only viable way forward: to supply greater volumes, through intensifying production and becoming involved in the packing and primary processing not only of their own products, but also of imports.<sup>17</sup>

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and application of fellow nationals in their employment (for a US example, see Martin, 1988, op cit:5)

<sup>14</sup> The other sectors studied by Dench et al were construction; administration, business and management; finance and accountancy; and hotels and catering.

<sup>15</sup> See <http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/documents/command-points-based-migration?view=Binary> accessed 21st July 2006.

<sup>16</sup> Competition Commission (2000), Lawrence (2004).

<sup>17</sup> Still others switched *into* horticulture, combining intensification with valorisation. As one former cereals grower put it, "we have intensified our business to try and retain financial viability.....The growing of a greater proportion of vegetable crops...require[s] greater financial input but they also require greater input in other areas too. One of which is the labor involved, to have some weeding and harvesting. And sometimes

'Quality' has been at least as important as volume and price in the governance of retailer-supplier relations.<sup>18</sup> The 1990 Food Safety Act effectively enshrined in statute regulation by retailers of the phytosanitary conditions of production and packing. Quality has also come to be used to refer to the increasingly precise standardisation of size, shape, texture and colour. This has influenced change in work-place regimes aimed at intensifying workers' effort in harvesting and packing only those products that fulfilled the criteria. For example, some fruit growers now impose penalties on workers who consistently select fruit that do not satisfy the criteria. Growers are under particular pressure if they do not have their own packhouse, as the packhouse owners can reject produce on 'quality' grounds, when there is a surplus of fruit. Interviews revealed how the supermarket governance of the chain through the language of 'quality' fed through into a demand by growers for particular 'qualities' in the workforce. In particular, workers were sought who would be reliable, flexible and compliant. For the growers we interviewed, all these 'qualities' were seen as more likely to be found in foreign workers.

Several growers described a shift from employing British nationals (including local workers, Travellers<sup>19</sup> and longer distant commuters), to increasingly greater use of foreign nationals. This is exemplified by the testimony of one vegetable grower in the East Midlands:

"If I go back to when I first started farming sort of the 1970s down here there were a lot of women were carrot picking and parsnip picking and doing jobs like that. Incredibly tough ladies you know they really were.... They were great characters...."

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planting or establishing crops too." (Director, East Midlands grower, April 2004). While there were no subsidies available for horticultural crops, growers had faced continuing decline in the subsidies they received for cereals and livestock production through the European Union's Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) and diminishing influence over British politics (see Flynn, Lowe and Winter, 1996).

<sup>18</sup> See Ponte and Gibbon (2005) and Murdoch, Marsden and Banks (2000) for a critical literature on the use of such 'quality' criteria in the governance of supply chains.

<sup>19</sup> Travellers worked along side rural and urban laborers in fruit and vegetable farms on the Welsh borders, in Scottish berry fields and picking hops in Kent and Hampshire (Taylor, forthcoming; Whyte, 1979).

The question of who worked in these jobs began to change about ten years ago for a number of reasons.

"Number one is that the farming community were reducing their permanent labour because of the financial pressure they were under. So, part of this work would have been done by full time staff in the past. And so there was a casual labour requirement for peak periods of time, and even then the people coming in would have been from local areas, they might have been travelling in ten, twenty miles but it was no more than that each day. And then we saw the transition to, I suppose, deprived, relatively deprived, city areas....that was hard work. It really was.

"...they always basically want[ed] to do as little as possible for as much as possible and they thought it was demeaning work. I think they felt that we felt that they were inferior citizens basically which of course is absolute nonsense.... I think one of the reasons why the Eastern Europeans have come and work so well is because they do have somewhat higher intellect and their understanding, OK, even the language scenarios, of what we're after and what our marketplace is after, and also the fact that unless the job is done well, there really isn't any point in doing it, seems to be very much greater than the people who were coming from ...you know, Yorkshire and Nottinghamshire and places like that. And I think I suppose it comes back to background. I mean it's an obvious thing in terms of the life that they've led and the requirements of that life and they just seem to be quite happy to sort of buckle down and we find them lovely people we really do. I mean you know it's once you've got over any initial misunderstandings about what the job's about they are consistently capable of producing high quality. With the English cauliflower harvesters that we used to use we'd be fighting a battle to try and maintain quality and that's hard work....whereas with the eastern Europeans, generally, once we've set a standard they will stick with it.....[We can] rely on them to produce quality"

(Director, East Midlands grower, April 2004)

A second East Midlands grower (a producer of salad leaves) explained how supermarket-driven

intensification had lead that company from using commuters (British nationals) to foreign nationals employed under the Seasonal Agricultural Workers Scheme (SAWS)<sup>20</sup>:

“There is a two way street...I am happy to be a [supplier to the supermarkets] and it's what has given us opportunity. I get people trying to force you to go down. Anyway, so the driver is certainly the quality of work and we were finding it difficult to source good regular labour”. This company changed its work-place regime, including the switch to foreign nationals because “we are talking about wanting people to work for us from March to the end of November, whereas prior to that we had gangs in to do work but they would be much shorter duration....The way we used to work, if it was wet they didn't come. We are a different game now. We've got certain customers everyday. Weather isn't an issue.”

“I think the other thing was there was a throw back to the miners' strike.....there were lots of areas certainly around Sheffield where a lot of people were screaming out for work at that time, and this is why we got a lot of people out of those areas at that particular time....[But] these people used to come at half past eight and go about half past two or three o'clock which was a very short day, and in terms of what we're doing now we need a longer working day”

(Director, East Midlands grower, April 2004)

Growers of other crops in other regions also made direct connections between the specifications made by the large retailers, and the nationality of workers that worked at their site. This sweetcorn grower in the south-east also made reference to the specific relation between nature and agricultural production (echoing Mann, op cit):

“We wouldn't have dared grow unless we could have solved the labour problem. If we couldn't get the labour, we would have stopped instantaneously because we cannot compete [as employers] with baggage handlers at Gatwick, no way. I mean [in] our discipline we need to work on Sundays; people need to be at work

together so they all start at the same time; you can't run a gang of four or five if two are missing and that's what happens with the Brits. They go on the piss on a Saturday night and you wouldn't see them on a Sunday. Absolutely hopeless.....You see our business has nearly all been supermarket business and delivering what you say you are going to do on time in the right this that and the other is absolutely essential. Without that you wouldn't be asked to do anything for them...you need dead reliable people. I mean agriculture is very unforgiving. You can't stop the clock.”

(Director, South East grower, April 2004)

There are several reasons why foreign nationals may be more vulnerable workers than British nationals, including both locally resident workers and longer distant commuters, and therefore why this growth in their use represents an important instance of intensification through innovation in work-place regimes. Firstly, there is the issue of immigration status. As in the US (Guthman op cit; Martin 2002; Wells op cit; Wells and Villarejo 2004), state regulation played a critical role in the supply of foreign nationals to agriculture, creating a number of different immigration statuses. Each of these defined the rights to work and residence of the migrant workers concerned. In the British case, these included the status defined by the SAWS scheme and its predecessors (Kay and Miles 1992; Tenaglia 2004), the creation (Genova 2002) of the 'illegal immigrant' (including people who overstayed or worked beyond the remit of their visas), and the opening of the UK labour market to accession country nationals from 2004.

The SAWS quota grew from 5,500 permits at its inception in 1990 to 25,000 in 2004. This was reduced to 16,250 for 2005 because of the inflow of workers expected following EU enlargement. In the event, ten per cent of the 345,000 workers registering in employment as accession country nationals between enlargement on 1st May 2004 and 31st December 2005 registered with employers in agriculture or fishing (Gilpin, Henty, Lemos, Portes and Bullen, 2006: 20).<sup>21</sup> In general, vulnerability is likely to be enhanced for workers

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<sup>20</sup> A scheme providing temporary six-month work permits to non-European Union nationals currently registered as students outside the UK specifically for work in the agricultural sector.

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<sup>21</sup> Not all of these workers were entering Britain or employment in the agricultural sector at the time of registering. For workers already in place, the Workers Registration Scheme was a form of regularisation of their status. There was a skewed regional distribution of agriculture sector registrations with high proportions of total registrations being in this sector in Kent, the Marches, Norfolk, Lincolnshire, Cambridgeshire and the Grampians (loc cit).

employed outside the terms of their immigration status. It is much riskier for such workers to try to seek redress (Anderson and Rogaly, 2005).

A second important source of vulnerability for foreign nationals is lack of information. They may in fact have the right to work, to move jobs and to be employed in any sector but may not know that they do (Pontes, 2005). Lack of information is connected to the length of stay in the country and, in Britain, to English language skills. Indeed both these factors can in themselves operate to reduce vulnerability, as, through longer periods of residence, international migrants are likely to become more aware of their rights, the rules of the game, and commonly accepted ways of bending them (Anderson, Ruhs, Rogaly and Spencer, op cit). English language skills have made it possible for international migrant workers to negotiate better within particular work-places:

“it makes a big difference if you can speak English. If you talk with English people they will be happy. They will say morning and bye. You get better jobs. My boyfriend understands English - it is another thing to speak it [as I do]. He gets better jobs because of me. Some people have to work outside in the rain. At the break they are shivering. It's not a pleasure. But me and my boyfriend have been under cover in the rain.”

(Lithuanian gang worker, female, August 2004)

It is important to note therefore that vulnerability cannot be read off from immigration status. Furthermore, workers may be making trade-offs (ibid) between short term pain and long term gain, being willing to put up with the hard work and long and uncertain hours often involved in agricultural work in exchange for relatively high earnings (when converted into the currency operating in their home country) and/ or English language acquisition. Such conscious trade-offs are particularly likely to be the case for SAWS workers, who are university students and may have professional aspirations.

A postal survey was conducted in 2005 and received returns from 120 agriculture and food processing employers.<sup>22</sup> It found that labour costs averaged thirty per cent of total production costs (ibid: 68). Further, ‘work ethic’ was the most commonly given reason why employers in these sectors preferred migrants of particular nationalities (ibid: 78, Figure 3.3). As well as being valued for hard work, foreign nationals are

also used as enforcers of intensified work-place regimes:

“We are also short of supervisors: people who can monitor quality, who can direct the jobs more, motivate workers, identify those workers who can be lost from the gang, de-employed. If we can find some of these, we may be able to get the most out of new immigrants”

(Senior Manager, East ornamentals grower, August 2004)

Foreign nationals have thus been used in different ways as instruments of newly intensified work-place regimes in horticulture. In spite of the trade-offs this may have involved for workers, and the varying degrees of worker agency in the work-place, the growth in employment of foreign nationals in the sector has reflected above all a combination of

- i) regulation by the private interests of corporate retailers summed up by the transposition of a discourse of product quality into growers' search for the right quality of worker;
- ii) state regulation of labour supply through migration policy; and
- iii) lack of effective state regulation of retailer-supplier relations.

However, the ways in which growers have intensified work-place regimes extend beyond the demand for particular kinds of workers. In the next sub-section I consider changes in the use of labour contractors and gang labour.

#### *Labour contractors (gangmasters)*

‘parasites.... interpos[ing] themselves between the capitalist and the wage-labourer, thus giving rise to the “sub-letting of labour”. The profits of these middlemen come entirely from the difference between the price of labour which the capitalist pays, and the part of that price they actually allow the worker to receive’ (Marx 1867 (1976): 695)

In Britain as elsewhere, there is a long history of using labour contractors as sources of temporary labour for harvest work and for other seasonal peaks in labour demand in agriculture.<sup>23</sup> The demand by growers for the services of labour

<sup>22</sup> See Ruhs, Anderson, Rogaly and Spencer (op cit).

<sup>23</sup> See, for example, Banaji, 1992; Brass, 2004; Churchill, 1990; Frances, 2003; Pollard, 2006; Wells, 1996.



contractors derives in part from agriculture's particular relation with nature. The mismatch between production time and labour time in labour intensive crop production make it economically unviable for a constant number of workers to be hired around the year. From a grower's perspective, using labour contractors provides a means of adjusting numbers so that workers are available when required yet are not being paid when there is insufficient work. Moreover, labour contractors may be able to provide transport and supervision for the spatial stretch that is often involved in agricultural production.

The presence of labour contractors is used as an indicator of exploitative labour relations by Guthman, who reveals that they are relied on heavily by organic growers in certain regions of California (op cit). Indeed if labour contractors hoard information about jobs and access to them, or, as is often the case in contemporary agriculture, provide the only means of transport available to the workplace, workers easily become dependent on them. This dependence can be magnified when contractors are also key providers of credit or of accommodation, the latter being especially important for newly arrived migrant workers, or when they are connected to international recruitment agencies. In Britain, lack of English can also be another cause for dependence on gangmasters or their staff.

For growers who used them, gangmasters brought new opportunities for fine tuning their work-place regimes in response to supermarket demands. "They can easily be turned on and they can easily be turned off".<sup>24</sup> For a West Midlands salad onions grower, there was a direct connection between supermarket practices and the use of gang workers:

"Walmart's aggressiveness on price has forced other supermarkets to come down on price [too]." This company now has to run a "lean ship...the biggest problem is labour. It has gone beyond the English...[Moreover], you can't get the 'gypsies' to prepare the salad to the quality required now".

After Travellers, the company started to use Birmingham-based south Asians supplied by gangs.

"It was a revelation that we could give an order on the afternoon before and labour would be there the next day. Also that

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<sup>24</sup> large-scale lettuce grower, East of England, April 2004.

one could write out one cheque for all the labour rather than going through PAYE.... The crop has not really changed over the years. The change is that more preparation is needed. Supermarkets impose more quality standards - products must be the same size and length"

(Director, West Midlands grower, August 2004)

Yet, as their long historical presence implies, the presence of labour contractors *per se* does not necessarily indicate work-place intensification. Rather, the case histories recorded in twenty-first century Britain are suggestive of *changes in the type of gangmaster business* consistent with an overall intensification of work-place regimes. If the need for labour co

ntractors driven by the non-unity of labour time and production time does present an opportunity for capital accumulation, as Henderson (op cit) found it did for providers of loans and mortgages to farmers, then this does not apply to all gangmasters. Indeed a combination of new licensing legislation and downward pressure on overheads seemed to be causing older, smaller businesses to fold.

In February 2004, the attention of government had turned to new legislation to regulate gangmasters, following the deaths of workers at Morecambe Bay, and the impetus that tragedy had given to the Private Members' Bill aimed at the creation of a new licensing regime.<sup>25</sup> An unlikely grouping of unions, supermarkets, non-governmental organisations, employers organisations and government officials worked together on the Act under the auspices of the Ethical Trading Initiative's Temporary Labour Working Group. Key to its success was the backing of the large supermarkets, who were vitally concerned with protecting their public image (and by extension their customer base and market share) (see Freidberg, 2004). As a result of the Act, the Gangmaster Licensing Authority was due to come into force in September 2006.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Introduced before Morecambe Bay by the Transport and General Workers' Union sponsored MP, Jim Sheridan.

<sup>26</sup> Gangmaster licensing applies only to the following sectors: Agriculture, horticulture, processing and packaging of food, including fish, and shellfish gathering. At the time of writing 553 gangmasters had applied for licences and 401 had been received (figures extracted from public register, Gangmaster Licensing Authority website [www.gla.gov.uk](http://www.gla.gov.uk), accessed 21st July 2006).

The new law made it an offence to use labour provided by an unlicensed gangmaster. So gangmasters increasingly had to show they were not cutting corners, for example on wage payments or non-wage benefits such as holiday pay, nor charging excess fees for transport, or exorbitant rents on accommodation. Gangmaster businesses were squeezed from another direction by growers facing ever tighter margins. Growers resisted paying a higher percentage fee per worker,<sup>27</sup> while gangmasters saw that compliance with the new Gangmaster (Licensing) Act would cause their costs to rise.

The gangmasters interviewed explained the pressures experienced by their businesses. All had once been gang workers themselves, and some still worked alongside the people they employed. Deep was the largest, supplying up to 400 workers per day to do field-based harvesting and first stage processing as well as 40-45 workers for the packhouse at the salad onion grower site in the West Midlands. This grower, turnover £7.2m in 2002-03, relied on Deep alone, a Birmingham-based British citizen of south Asian heritage.

Deep expressed frustration with the rates he received both for field and packhouse work. He was paid £4.90 per worker per hour for packhouse work. The workers received £4.50<sup>28</sup>. This was corroborated in interviews with two workers. The grower paid for fieldwork at a set price per box of salad onions harvested and prepared. According to Deep, although he used to make his money in the field rather than the packhouse, the rate paid per box for each grade of product had declined year on year (see next sub-section on piece-rates). He was concerned that the company would ask him to go down further on his unit price which he claimed he simply would not do. "The most important things is the price. I am not going to work for £15 to £20 per day."

Kevin, a white British gangmaster providing labour to an east of England ornamentals company (turnover £6.5m in 2003-04), had inherited the business from his father twelve years earlier. The gang had shrunk from twenty-four to eight core members. Kevin said he made his margins from holiday pay and appeared especially anxious about his business coming under official scrutiny. "When the new legislation comes in and gangmasters are investigated a bit more, that will be it, finished...I pay two weeks

holiday pay when I ought to pay four." Another source of pressure is the customer, the ornamentals company, which has refused to raise the overhead paid to Kevin from twenty-eight to thirty-three per cent. "I told him [the director] that both our fathers were now in the ground and that your father had been happy to pay my father thirty-three per cent...I will stop business if overheads don't go up." Kevin explained that the director also objected to the high turnover of the non-core workers in the gang, which was a strategy by Kevin to avoid reaching the minimum threshold for employer's National Insurance contributions. The director told us he wanted "gangs to deliver regular, reliable people who come in daily." But he was also aware that the employer's national insurance contributions may represent the gangmaster's margin. "You know and I know that the gangmaster can't do everything correctly on twenty-eight per cent, if he is paying holiday pay etc."

Simon's gang too, which was made up of women and men commuting daily from a former mining area in Yorkshire to work at an East Midlands fruit handling and brassica floretting company, had shrunk in recent years.

"There was no other work in Yorkshire after the mines closed...In [this area] they couldn't get people to work so they came up to our area to find workers." Within two or three years Simon was advertising for workers in the local paper and became a gangmaster. "At that time it was very easy to get people to travel up and down from Yorkshire to [the East Midlands]. But now it is much harder. Over the past five years there have been more and more foreign workers coming to work."

(Simon, gangmaster, September 2004)

When he had first started, Simon used to bring down sixty to a hundred people daily with a peak at Christmas. He would hire extra vehicles. Now he had just seven or eight workers and used his own vehicle. It had become more of a family group: Simon's mother, brother and four others from the same village formed the core members of the gang.

A fourth gang, working at the same ornamentals company as Kevin, and made up of white British men and women, had been formed by workers themselves. The gangmasters Helen and Alice faced pressure from the company's attempt to fine-tune labour deployment. The gang had started as a worker-takeover:

"I had been working for another gangmaster, an arsehole. I don't like the

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<sup>27</sup> For another specific instance of this see Dench et al (op cit: 63).

<sup>28</sup> Equivalent to the then National Minimum Wage rate for adults.

way he treated us. His father was a director of [names grower]. I was a single parent living in [a nearby village]. We [the gang workers] had a meeting in a shed and then asked [the ornamentals grower] whether we'd be guaranteed work [if we formed our own gang]. It was February 13th 1991 or 1992."

(Helen, gangmaster, August 2004)

For Helen it was key that she and Alice worked alongside workers in their gang, although this had the downside that workers knew they could get their way. For example, if they kept nagging "can we have a fag break?" they would get it. The core group had known each other for a long time. Helen described how the manager expected them to reduce their numbers as the season came to an end each September. "We have had to lay people off and we've felt terrible. The new senior manager, who had been recruited specifically to maximise the efficient use of labour, approached Alice and told her she had to lay off two specific workers that night. "And he wonders why they don't come to work the following year."

In contrast, the new gangs were larger, often regional or even national operations, with multiple customers and gangmasters who were rarely seen at the work site. Instead, leaders were selected from the workforce provided to each company. While there is no evidence that this kind of gangmaster is any more or less likely to abuse workers, the case histories suggest they are more likely to provide accommodation, a source of profit and a means of labour control. The new gangmasters are, it seems, more likely to take advantage of the specific vulnerabilities of migrant workers.

According to the director of the ornamentals company, there was "a continuous pattern of change in the world of gang labour". "English gangmasters" had long supplied his company with white British workers from surrounding villages and regional towns. Sometimes the people they supplied were in receipt of state benefits and were working illegally. "They would disappear when the Home Office came on a raid." These gangmasters had relations going back for generations with the company. However, the company had recently had gangs of workers provided by a "new kind of gangmaster...The modern day labour provider of the sort the vegetable trade is entirely reliant on and we are increasingly reliant on is a much bigger organisation with a mysterious unseen leader."<sup>29</sup>

One of the permanent staff at the site put it like this: "The changes began in the 1990s. There was a lot of fiddling and greedy gangmasters....The volume got bigger and the number of gangs required increased. A group of young foreign workers ...would come in....and move around doing low skilled bulk jobs, like pruning and planting for two to three months" (Junior Manager and former worker, East ornamentals grower, August 2004). According to Kevin, the gangmaster whose business was tottering: "The future of gangmastering lies in foreign labour. Gangmasters that house workers are making money."

Lina, a Polish national, was employed by the new gangmaster at the fruit handling and floretting company. Until two weeks before the interview she and her boyfriend had lived in the village where the gangmaster was located. She had just moved to a nearby town where they now lived in houses rented from the gangmaster and were paying £45 per week each sharing a room with another worker. "It is not good". They were now looking for a flat to rent separately. They had been looking with an agency but the agency insisted that Lina paid six months rent up front. However, she had learned through other workers at the site that "there are Pakistani people in Peterborough who don't want a deposit, or want only two or three weeks' deposit." She intended to take that route.

There was evidence that gangmasters were being used to increase worker output, another form of work-place intensification. Tony, a British national in his early forties had worked on a fruit farm in the east of England when he was younger. They had had "regular gangs in, all women. Gang hours were 8.30 to 2.30 or 3. Now there are more men in the gangs than women. [The ornamentals grower] is pushing gangs to longer hours which is no good for women with kids at school".

However, another worker, a Lithuanian national, found that the 2004 implementation of legislation on illegal working (The Immigration (Restrictions on Employment) Order) together with EU enlargement had changed the employment practices of some gangmasters for the better:

"At the moment here [UK] is better. After May 1st I'm paying tax and insurance. Before it was different. All gangmasters took 10 per cent from wages. If you asked gangmasters then why they did not take tax and national insurance from wages, they would say 'if you don't like my job, you go'"

(Eva, Lithuanian gang worker)

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<sup>29</sup> Director, East ornamentals grower, August 2004.

The case histories, albeit based on a very limited sample, suggest that growers were moving away from continuing reliance on relatively small gangmasters that are either locally based or committed to supplying a particular grower, to larger-scale gangmasters, operating at the regional or even national level, making their profits either from undetected illegal practices, a higher volume of trade, accommodation provision or a combination of these. This is suggestive of a move away from exploitation of workers via personalised relations with labour contractors and margins made from dodging employment law, to the provision of workers by larger gangs, and more anonymised relations between employee and employer. Such gangmasters are likely to have few qualms about dropping workers from the gang as grower businesses bring fine-tuned management to their deployment of labour.

For accession country nationals, there are likely to have been advantages from EU enlargement and the associated change in their immigration status (see Anderson, Ruhs, Rogaly and Spencer, *op cit*), and all workers in the sector may have benefited from the Gangmaster (Licensing) Act. Yet, in as much as the pressure on margins faced by the small-scale gangmasters I spoke to is experienced by all gangmasters, there is likely to be a continuing squeeze on workers. This can be seen through the changing operation of labour arrangements based on piece rates.

#### *Piece rates*

'Let us now look a little more closely at the characteristic peculiarities of piece-wages. The quality of the labour is here controlled by the work itself, which must be of good average quality if the piece-price is to be paid in full. Piece-wages become, from this point of view, the most fruitful source of reductions in wages, and of frauds committed by the capitalists. This is because they provide an exact measure of the intensity of labour.....the quality and intensity of the work are here controlled by the very form of the wage....Given the system of piece-wages, it is naturally in the personal interest of the worker that he should strain his labour-power as intensely as possible; this in turn enables the capitalist to raise the normal degree of intensity of labour more easily. Moreover, the length of the working day is now in the personal interest of the worker, since with it his daily or weekly wages rise' (Marx 1867 (1976): 694-696)

In England and Wales, wage payments to workers in agriculture are subject to minimum hourly rates

governed by the Agricultural Wages Board (AWB).<sup>30</sup> In contrast to the detailed regulation of hourly wages, for which agriculture continues to be regarded as a special case, there is no specification of piece rates according to crop, task or season. Instead, government policy requires that piece rates be set such that a workers' earnings equate each day to at least the relevant minimum wage for that worker, taking account of the number of hours worked.

A small-scale strawberry grower in the south east claimed to follow these rules. She said she used piece rates as motivators when there "was a massive amount of fruit....We'll always work out that they could earn more doing it that way, that they would earn enough to cover the minimum wage". Although the use of piece rates in British agriculture long predated the current wave of foreign nationals working in the sector,<sup>31</sup> for another strawberry grower of similar size, there was a connection. British nationals were not willing to put in the hard work:

"let's face it, it's hard graft out there, you know, picking strawberries....it's piece work too, and you know, people just aren't used to that. They've got a very cushy lifestyle as an employee in Britain and that's what they've been brought up to expect. The other groups have got no such illusions. They come along and think, 'this is my opportunity to make money' and they take it. The difference is, I have an English person who is making less than minimum wage, which means that I've then got to make up the difference to make it legal and that means the price that I'm having to pay to get a punnet of strawberries might be 26 to 30 pence per pound. And I've got

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<sup>30</sup> The AWB, which includes union, employer and government representatives, meets to set new rates each year. The AWB rate for 'standard workers' has exceeded the National Minimum Wage (NMW) each year since the latter was introduced in 1997. However, the wages of workers not classified as agricultural workers, such as those predominantly employed in packhouse and primary processing work are regulated by the NMW rather than the AWB rates. Since 2003, AWB's Manual Harvest Worker rate has applied to agricultural workers employed on a temporary casual basis for harvesting work only. At the time of the interviews in 2004, the minimum hourly rates were: AWB Standard Worker rate (19 years and over) £5.15; AWB Manual Harvest Worker rate (19 years and over) £4.50; NMW (18-21 years) £3.80 and (22 years and over) £4.50.

<sup>31</sup> Indeed piece rates are common currency in the agricultural sector worldwide (see Ortiz, 2002).

another guy on piece work [at the same rate] getting 18 pence a pound, making [£10 an hour, from Lithuania or Estonia or wherever”

(owner-cultivator of strawberries, West Midlands, May 2004)

The east Midlands salads grower also saw piece rates and the employment of international migrant workers as part of a package:

“I accept [piece work is] a very crude way of motivating people, but it works, and I don’t see anything shameful about that....These people come here for economic reasons in the main, and not only that, they are going to fund their own education, or they are going to struggle very hard. Here, they have the opportunity to earn good money”

(April 2004)

Filip, the Polish worker who had returned to the ornamentals company after a five year gap, felt that the increase in foreign workers was connected to the availability of piece rates. “There is an increase in foreign workers mainly due to the money workers can make, and employers can make better money from them... Foreign workers, because of the piece rate, will work much faster as well”.<sup>32</sup>

Taken as a whole, our interviews suggest that piece rates, long used for harvest work, have played an important part in the intensification of work-place regimes. Firstly, there is some evidence that they have been introduced for tasks previously paid at a time rate to speed up work and enhance labour control. Secondly, there is evidence of decline in the rates themselves linked to the reduced margins growers have been obtaining from retailers for each unit of produce.

A sweet-corn grower in the south-east of England brought in piece rates to accompany mechanisation of harvesting:

“the problem with sweetcorn [plants] six foot high [is] you could never tell if [workers] got lost and they’d come and ask for another stint. It was a nightmare [to know]...whether they had actually done it or [got] fed up with it and just picked a little bit around the bin....[Now] they get paid by the bin, it’s quite hard work....and you would make them go from one end of the field to the other so you could identify precisely whose row

[had been picked by whom].....so [you] could give those that didn’t do a good job a warning and you also knew which bins they picked”

(April 2004)

Whereas this sweetcorn grower measured and remunerated the work of *individuals*, Deep, the gangmaster supplying workers to the West Midlands salad onions company, paid piece rates according to the output of the group. Deep received payment from the grower per box of harvested and field-prepared onions. The grower had told us that the price they received per unit had declined in cash terms by two-sevenths between 1999 and 2004. This pressure had been passed onto Deep through a reduction in piece rates. For one type of harvesting and field preparation process, Deep said the rate had declined from £8 per box in 1999 to £7.20 in 2003. Whereas in that year he claimed he had paid the workers £6.50 per box, in 2004 he had started at £6 and reduced the rate to £5.50 within two months.<sup>33</sup>

One manifestation of intensification was the search for workers who were able and willing to work with care and effort to turn a declining piece rate into at least the national minimum wage. For Conrad, senior manager at the east of England ornamentals company, this meant somebody “not too young because they are not driven enough....somebody who has got material needs.” Because of the minimum wage floor, the SAWS workers that the ornamentals company had been using were

“underperforming everyday....Apart from the individuals who have a drive to work, and want to save as much as they can, and there are some, the others take advantage of the minimum wage as a cushion. The piece rate can’t pay less for less. It pays only more money for more work. We need to look for people who can respond to incentives.”

According to Alice, a gangmaster, piece rates at this grower had declined by fifteen per cent since 1998. That there had been a reduction was born out by the junior manager, Sabrina, who had herself been a piece worker when she had worked in a gang on the site in the 1980s. She remembered having been able to earn the equivalent of a day’s pay in a morning. “You should be getting a day’s pay by lunch...

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<sup>32</sup> interviewed August 2004.

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<sup>33</sup> He explained that the change in the rate during the season was justified by workers’ increased speed as they became used to the task.

rates...have gone down to make people work harder for their money." Sabrina reported that in 2004, workers on piece rates only just made their day's wages after a full day's work. If they worked overtime, the rate did not change. "In my day I still worked well in the afternoon but didn't kill myself..." Now workers "might not even make their wage."

Piece rates can be used by employers to undercut statutory minimum wages (Gidwani, 2001). The translation of earnings from piece rates into less than the minimum wage was acknowledged as an effect (rather than an intention) by Richard, senior manager at a strawberry growing company in the south of England. However, work-place intensification here had come more from the way in which picking was now organised than an explicit reduction in the rate paid. Supermarket retailers issued increasingly precise specification for the quality of produce. Strawberries now had to be more carefully size-graded to within a five mm band. Richard claimed that because workers now took longer to pick the same number of berries, the company had raised the rate per unit.

Richard had joined the company in 2001 and had led the switch to growing a mixture of fruit for fresh and processing uses. Before the change, people had worked relatively slowly and queued to check in their produce. Now, "weak pickers" were identified early and made into runners so "strong pickers" could focus on "making as much money as they can".<sup>34</sup> The new work-place regime involved "paying attention to detail and doing it right." Trolleys had been introduced instead of trays, fruit was checked in on a bar code system and each pallet was scanned. The calculation of daily earnings for each worker was downloaded from handheld devices onto a computer.

White British caravanners at the strawberry grower's site worked under a different regime from the SAWS workers, who were hired for the fresh berry harvest. The caravanners only picked fruit for processing. One caravanner, Karen, observed people vary their working days. During the strawberry harvest she worked two to five hours per day. Her detailed notes revealed per hour wage equivalents in 2004 varying from £2.45 to £4.90.<sup>35</sup> However, it was not only caravanners

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<sup>34</sup> The introduction of polytunnels had also meant that picking was no longer so subject to interruption by bad weather.

<sup>35</sup> Caravanners we interviewed did not raise objections to such rates because their presence at the site was largely recreational and they received free sites for the whole summer in return for a minimum of just eight hours picking.

who could end up with low earnings from strawberry picking. Marta, a SAWS worker and a PhD student studying engineering in Russia, reported earning just £6 on her worst day of the season after working for three to four hours. Richard told us he had been advised by a horticultural industry group to record less hours worked in such cases.

The six SAWS workers interviewed were ambivalent about the intensity of work involved in picking strawberries on a piece rate basis. All talked about maximizing their earnings over the period of the SAWS permit. Marta, now on her second season as a SAWS worker, preferred the employment she had had the previous year. "There were seventeen students - much better accommodation...you got work for more hours and on more days. Sometimes there were no days off in a week....I earned more than £6000 because we worked a lot, sometimes twelve hour days with no days off". Vincent, a Rwandan medical student, studying in Ukraine, came to Britain on the SAWS scheme with the aim of saving £2000. So far he had earned £2500 and saved £1800 of it. He spent £10 per week on food.

However, all the students found the strawberry harvesting very hard work, and were relieved at least occasionally to work in the processing factory on a time rate, which meant lower earnings, but was, according to Eugenia, a Bulgarian law student, a "little rest". She said that strawberry picking was "a difficult job...I know I have to work and I just knew that it will be hard...strawberry picking is not good for the back". What Eugenia most objected to was the intense supervision. If the tray of strawberries was underweight or there was a high incidence of bruising, "the supervisor shouts your number" which is "not pleasant".

In his study of piece-work in Indian agriculture, Gidwani found group-based piece work to be higher status for some groups of workers and less damaging to their self-esteem than more individualised employment relations such as these (2001). However, at the fruit handling and brassica floretting site, group-based rates did not have this effect as they were not known by workers. Payment by the director was calculated according to output but the Yorkshire gangmaster, Simon, claimed he was not told the rate. The director, "has got his own system". A Lithuanian worker, Susan, working for another gangmaster, said similarly that she thought it was piece work but did not know how the rates were calculated. Jim, a white British ex-miner in his 40s said the rate was "30 to 40 pence per box of apples, and more or less the same for oranges, I

think". He collected his wages from the gangmaster's mother's house in his village.

While neither British nor foreign nationals were told actual piece rates at the handling and floretting site, some British workers at the ornamentals company working on hourly rates were resentful of the piece rates they saw being paid to foreign nationals. According to Alice, her "workers get angry when they see the foreigners doing a lot of piece work". One worker told us that when a gang of foreign nationals working on piece rates had come into despatch, the company cut the overtime available by half. It seems that at the ornamentals site, the extension of piece rates in the work-place regime may also have enhanced labour control through creating envy between groups of workers.

Overall, the data suggest that both the introduction of piece rates (for work roles previously paid at an hourly rate) and reductions in the rates themselves have been important innovations to increase labour control for horticultural businesses and labour contractors. The indirect regulation of piece rates via the notional calculation of an hourly minimum wage, together with ever tighter 'quality' criteria, encouraged further intensification through increasing the speed, care and effort required to meet the minimum earnings target. There is evidence that some workers found it hard to achieve this target some of the time and earned less than the hourly minimum they were entitled to. Yet, workers were ambivalent about piece rates, with a strong strand of opinion welcoming the 'opportunity' to maximise earnings.

## CONCLUSION

This paper has used case histories from the British horticultural sector to suggest an ongoing process of change towards intensification of work-place regimes. It appears to be evidenced by growers' search for certain types of worker, who, seeking to maximise earnings, are willing to work hard to close, detailed instructions, and are available for the amount of time required and no more. For some growers, this could mean workers that are willing to accept being informed of the availability of work only the night before for an uncertain number of hours, while for others it may involve finding workers that will stay for a number of weeks or months,<sup>36</sup> or including some that can themselves be used as instruments of labour control. At root, the drive for intensification

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<sup>36</sup> Business sometimes requires a captive labor force, which is not necessarily delivered by mobile workers (Mitchell, 2005: 85).

has been caused largely by corporate retailers' regulation of work-place regimes in the sector through their requirements for volume, 'quality' and low margins (for growers). To create the workforce they need to fulfil this in the twenty-first century, growers have significantly increased the proportion of international migrant workers employed in the sector. They have ratcheted up the effort required from workers to achieve the minimum wage through the introduction of piece work to new areas and pushed down the rates earned per unit output. Some growers using gangmasters have switched to a reliance on large-scale operators, seen as more likely to provide the 'right kind of worker'.

In spite of the power of corporate retailers in this process, the British state too has had an important influence on changing agricultural work-place regimes. Indeed the two are inseparable as the rise of supermarket power over the last fifty years has been enabled by the retailers' relation with the state, ranging from government-funded visits by directors of Tesco and Sainsbury to the U.S. after World War Two to study emerging multiple grocery stores there, through the end of resale price maintenance in the 1960s following intense supermarket pressure (Bevan, 2005) to the passing of the Food Safety Act. More recently, the state allowed Wal-Mart, the world's largest retailer, into the UK sector and made no effective regulatory response to evidence of oligopsony buyer power in supermarket-supplier relations in the 2000 Competition Commission report on supermarkets (Lawrence, op cit). Among the interests at play here, the state has a political interest in reducing food prices (and retail price inflation in general),<sup>37</sup> and retailers have been handed a lead role in bringing this about.

However, as we have seen, the structure of retailer demand for fresh fruit and vegetables has provided opportunities for growers that are able to fulfil the necessary requirements, through growth in volume. The demand for foreign workers has meant valued employment and earnings for some of those workers. The state as regulator of migration policy has also had more than one kind of impact on work-place regimes. Foreign nationals came with a variety of immigration statuses (eg 'illegally' resident, SAWS worker, EU accession country national on the Workers' Registration Scheme) with different implications for labour control. The SAWS scheme and (in a very different way) 'illegal' working seem to favour growers by effectively constraining

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<sup>37</sup> *Financial Times*, 18th February 2005, p3.

workers' labour market mobility, while the free movement components of European Union enlargement and the new status of accession country worker have, for some foreign nationals, enhanced their capacity to seek jobs across the economy (Anderson, Ruhs, Rogaly and Spencer, op cit), and to seek redress in instances of employment abuse.

This begins to hint at some of the complexity involved in developing a national picture of agricultural employment relations involving migrant workers, especially in a period of rapid change. As Martin put it in relation to the U.S., "[a]griculture is a ...diverse employer...so there is a wide variety of employer-employee relationships" (Martin, 1988: op cit: 11). Class dynamics in agriculture are further complicated by the contradictory class position of many growers, that, facing one way, see value being appropriated by those who buy their produce, and, facing the other, seek ever more intensified work-place regimes to maximise the surplus value from their workforce. With regard to labour contractors, some "are honest brokers between growers and workers and many are not" (ibid: 130). An understanding of why certain kinds of production relations prevail under particular conditions "involves exposing the heterogeneity and fluidity of social and institutional forms of economic activity and assessing how space influences outcomes" (Marsden, Munton, Ward and Whatmore (op cit: 362).

Thus a first step for further research in Britain on the relationships I have explored in this paper, would be the development of studies of labour relations in the production of particular commodities. The turnover time of capital is not constant across agriculture, nor even across the horticultural subsector. At the most basic level, there are likely to be important differences between crops with a single short annual harvest, and those which are picked across many months, between work-place regimes involving field-work alone and those where packhouse and primary processing work also feature. Miriam Wells' study of the labour process involved in strawberry production in California is a model in this regard. Within her study of strawberry production, Wells meticulously differentiates between labour relations in four different valleys. Guthman's work is equally impressive for its spatial analysis of organic food production in California, though, unlike Wells, she did not systematically interview workers.<sup>38</sup> A new generation of British studies of

agricultural work-place regimes could also focus on localities and regions to try to explain differences associated with space, and on the significance of the scale of growers' businesses.

Alongside such studies, ethnographic work involving long term engagement and time spent alongside workers (both foreign and British nationals), and where possible growers and gangmasters too, is needed to elucidate migration histories, and the consequences of interaction between differently positioned individuals and groups of workers for worker solidarity and/ or further labour market segmentation. Future academic research could have an important role in undermining the commodity fetishism entailed in rendering working conditions in horticulture invisible and irrelevant to 'consumers'. It can also play its part in countering misrepresentations and over-generalisations of agricultural workers' positions either as an exploited and powerless class, or as free individuals following ever increasing opportunities for employment and upward mobility.<sup>39</sup>

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this reason that both he and Guthman reach rather undifferentiated conclusions about aspects of work-place regime, in Guthman's case regarding labor contractors and in Bauder's on the subject of the undesirability of temporary mobility schemes. Unlike even the British Trades Union Congress, which, after interviews with Ukrainian SAWS workers, argued in favour of reform (Trades Union Congress, 2004), Bauder saw such schemes as inherently regressive in creating a second-tier citizenship. See also Ngai (2004).

<sup>39</sup> Indeed, variations between seasons in the importance of timeliness of labor supply can shift the relative power of workers and growers across the year.

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<sup>38</sup> Nor, suprisingly, did Bauder in his recent analysis of the Canadian scheme for the temporary migration of Mexican agricultural workers (2006). It is most likely for



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