

The free movement of workers

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The free movement of workers

Against a general background of economic recession, and faced, as most of them were, with record levels of unemployment, the Member States of the European Economic Community (EEC) were concerned at the possible consequences of immediately extending the Community principle of free movement of workers to the applicant countries. The 1973 oil crisis had actually prompted many industrialised European nations to freeze immigration from third countries. For example, in Luxembourg, where foreigners, mainly Portuguese, already accounted for more than one-quarter of the total population in 1979, there was fear of a massive influx of new, migrant workers on to the domestic labour market. In the same period, almost 470 000 Portuguese and 400 000 Spaniards were working in the Community that had six million unemployed at the end of 1978. Portugal, with an unemployment rate above 10 %, was also facing the difficulty of absorbing more than 600 000 people returning from the African colonies of Guinea-Bissau, Mozambique, the Cape Verde Islands, Sao Tome and Principe, and Angola, all of which had gained independence in 1974–75.

In order to avoid an excessive wave of emigration or an excessive pool of labour within the Community, Lisbon and Madrid agreed to extend the transitional period to seven years before introducing free movement of workers towards the Member States of the Community. In the special case of Luxembourg, the transitional period for the free movement of Portuguese workers was extended to ten years. During the intervening period, migrant workers continued to require prior authorisation and a work permit issued by the European country in which they planned to settle.