



45th congress of ASÍ ASÍ priorities 2022 – 2024

Immigrant workers' affairs

ASÍ priorities

- The labour movement should serve all its members equally, regardless of language or background. This requires specific action. In service provision, it should always be kept in mind that some workers do not speak Icelandic and do not have knowledge about the Icelandic labour market and society.
- Union and federation staff, and their elected leaders, including reps, should reflect the diverse composition of workers. All education by the labour movement should take into account equal access for all, also those who don't speak Icelandic or don't know much about the Icelandic labour market. Immigrants have a voice in the movement and their points of view and interests are an obvious part of the movement's struggle for better conditions. Their interests are all of our interests.
- The condition of vulnerable groups, such as asylum applicants and refugees, needs to be looked at. As for action on criminal activity, refer to the congress doc on the labour market, wages and conditions.
- The movement's staff and elected representatives should get education on multicultural awareness.
- Clear and high-quality information about rights and duties in the labour market should be spread in many languages to workers.
- Icelandic courses should be expanded, and workers should be able to attend them during working hours without charge.
- Immigrants should get work appropriate to their level of education and skills. The movement should speak in favour of immigrants getting appropriate jobs.

- Further investigations into the living conditions of immigrant workers should be encouraged. A lot of public research and surveys has a weak spot in weak responses from immigrants. Analysis of their situation based on data from unions should be strengthened.

ASÍ tasks

- Set up a guide on harmonized union service for immigrants, in coordination with immigrant members and unions.
- Regular education on interpretation for the movement's staff.
- Encourage the unions to utilize varied interpretation- and translation devices and methods.
- Encourage the hiring of people with diverse language skills into the labour movement.
- Prepare a guide on interpretations, translations and readability of published material and events held by ASÍ.
- Define the challenges which prevent the union rep system from reflecting the diverse composition of workplaces.
- Present the work of unions and talk to foreign members and reps, via workplace visits in collaboration with unions.
- Call for a review of the employment rights of asylum applicants.
- Review the state of refugees in the labour market, since they have low labour participation rates despite frictionless access. Afterward, evaluate whether an employment campaign for refugees should be started.
- Offer union staff courses in diversity and cultural awareness.
- Prepare central information about rights and duties in many languages which can then be used by unions.
- Set up a central website for information on rights and duties in many languages (labour.is).
- Encourage unions to start a campaign to introduce their work to immigrant workers.
- Call for dialogue with the government and the employers' associations on access to Icelandic lessons and evaluations of its quality.
- Strengthen collaboration with Varða, the labour research institute, on more varied and deeper research about the condition and wellbeing of immigrant labour.
- Find ways, in cooperation with unions, to gather information on the proportion of members who are foreign.

Report

No chain is stronger than its weakest link. This reference to the ASÍ emblem, on the strength of the whole, is apposite. Immigrants are now a fifth of all workers, and 15% of the country's residents. In two decades, their numbers have grown sixfold.

The labour movement has kept a close eye on this development through the years. Alongside the influx of workers, the movement has witnessed and needed to react to growing criminality in the Icelandic labour market.

Unions get ever more numerous, and serious, cases relating to wage theft and breaches of contract. This is detailed in an ASÍ report, published in 2019, which says that the breaches are focussed on those who are less likely to know their rights, including immigrant workers. They are also more likely to suffer insecurity and instability in the labour market, and are concentrated among the lower paid. They work longer hours and have a harder time having their education and work experience assessed. The labour movement has to do its best to empower the weakest groups, the weakest links, because otherwise the chain may break.

Iceland's accession to the EEA, in 1994, laid the foundation for a changed labour market – freedom of movement for labour and more immigrants in Iceland. Immigration to Iceland started slowly, however, and immigrants were 2% of the population at the turn of the century. The Schengen-cooperation (2001) made moving to Iceland easier, but immigration really began to get going when the EU expanded in 2006, into Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia and Poland. Their citizens now did not need special permits to work in Iceland. Today, Poles are by far the largest group of immigrants in Iceland, about 40% of the total. In 2.-4. place we have Lithuanians, Romanians and Latvians.

In the globalized and growth-based common European labour market, the flow of labour is mostly driven by business' need for cheap and temporary labour in boom times. Iceland is no exception. Workers go where wages and conditions are better, and people from low-wage regions get a chance to work in countries where wages are higher and working conditions may be better. Sadly, these people often get stuck in low-wage work and even a poverty trap which they can't work themselves out of.

Even though most immigrants come to Iceland via the free travel for workers in the EU, it shouldn't be forgotten that people come here from other places and for other reasons. People come here to work, due to familial connections, they may be on the run, to name but a few things. They are all a part of society and, often, the labour market. Regardless of whether people are here short- or long-term, the labour movement is their advocate – as research shows, people tend to settle. So it is appropriate to assume that immigrants are here to stay, and to base services on that assumption.

On the other hand, it must be kept in mind that the flow of European short-term labour is here to stay, and it is one of the mainstays of European cooperation.

The labour movement has to keep an eye on the regression wherein ever larger groups work outside the regular labour market. Refugees must be looked at especially, falling into three different categories:

1. Refugees who get automatic work permits when they get protection. There are indications that their labour participation rate is very low compared with other groups, but data on the issue are scant.
2. Refugees who get subsidiary (humanitarian) protection status, and need to apply specially for a work permit, which will be tied to a specific employer.

3. Finally, applicants for asylum, who can apply for a temporary work permit, also tied to a specific employer, after fulfilling many strict and often barely surmountable conditions.

When such strictures are put on legal labour participation, it creates a haven for black work and abuse, and the danger of a dual labour market arises.

Workplaces and unions are often immigrants' first contact to society and it is important for that contact to be professional and for there to be patience for further communication, cooperation and future community. The weight of the labour market and the labour movement is key to further positive developments.

The labour movement must surely seek to strengthen further its weakest links and take steps to widen the chain so it encompasses all workers and thus reflects the new constitution of the labour market.