



# The European Union Steel Industry: Black and Minority Ethnic and Migrant Workers' Experiences of Diversity and Equal Opportunities

In some European countries there is a clear record of reliance by the steel industry on migrant workers. Evidence suggests however, that migrant workers employed to the industry often experience occupational segregation and other types of discrimination and harassment. Black and minority ethnic workers experience similar mistreatment, too. Elsewhere in Europe, these workers appear to be excluded almost entirely from the industry. There are then, a range of issues with regard to the treatment of migrant and black and minority ethnic workers, with which the steel industry must deal.

For the purposes of the discussion it is necessary to distinguish between migrant workers, who have moved from one country to another to find work, and black and minority ethnic (BME) workers, who are part of the indigenous population (often second or third generation migrants).

**Employment Experiences:** Germany, France and the Netherlands are three examples of countries that have relied heavily on migrant labour (from Turkey, North Africa and Spain respectively) to work in the steel industry. Such workers have traditionally populated low-skilled occupations within the industry and filled the jobs that the indigenous population did not take up. However, from this entry point, migrant and BME workers have struggled to advance through the occupational hierarchy and there is an absence of opportunities for alternative career

development paths for these workers. This suggests discrimination through occupational (vertical and horizontal) segregation.



Source: Image provided courtesy of MetSkill

The steel industry has provided a source of stable employment for generations of migrant worker. As a corollary, migrant communities are often well established and located in close proximity to steel plants. This situation is however, beginning to change. Typically, poorly qualified young people from migrant and BME communities situated around steel plants graduate into low-skilled occupations offered by the company. However, as steel companies increasingly focus on recruitment of the more highly qualified, the employment opportunities for people from these communities are threatened.

The phasing out too, of low-skilled occupations by the industry also means that employees with few meaningful qualifications are vulnerable to redundancy. This situation is often exacerbated by language difficulties, which limit the learning

opportunities available to such workers to increase their skill profiles and maintain their employment within (or outside) the industry. Indeed, the industry is in many ways failing to serve the training needs of generations of migrant workers, including for employment outside the industry. Further, where BME and migrant workers are employed in the industry, there is evidence of racial abuse, bullying and intolerance. In some cases such behaviour is explicit, whereas in others it is an implicit part of behaviour and policy.

**Racism:** A number of instances of racial abuse were reported during the course of the research. At one plant a migrant worker from North Africa was racially abused by a colleague. Racist remarks were made and racist material was left on the worker's desk and computer. The offending worker was dismissed, but it was clear that migrant workers from white racial groups at the plant viewed racism as being a lesser problem than was the case by the black workers who experienced forms of on-going racism at the plant. Indeed, there is evidence of a dismissive attitude to migrant workers and BMEs from the majority indigenous worker population, based on skin colour and race.

**Intolerance:** Intolerant behaviour also mars relations within the industry. At one plant, a trainer from a migrant community was forbidden by the company from communicating with workers of the same minority origins in their first language, when attending training courses. Training was only permitted in the national language, and even informal comment was discouraged. This decision led to ostracism of the trainer by his own migrant community, at work and outside. There were moreover, several instances of migrant workers suggesting that they had been refused training because of their migrant status. There were also reports of workers of second or third generation migrant origin making racist remarks to black workers.

**Discriminatory Practices:** In some countries, BME and migrant workers in the industry are notable by their absence. This is despite significant numbers of BMEs in the wider population and the employment of BME workers in similar industries. This might indicate the use of discriminatory practices in recruitment, but perhaps more benignly reflects wider geographical patterns of migration, the particularities of occupational recruitment (e.g. by word of mouth) and composition, and the implications of industry recruitment freezes. However, there was some evidence of **positive** discrimination in recruitment practices, particularly with regard to quotas on apprenticeship intake, often in places with high levels of BME recruitment in production areas.

**Cultural Issues:** There is evidence of little cross-cultural empathy across steel workforces, and thus a need for cultural awareness training. A relatively new issue for the industry arises out of the globalisation of the steel industry and the increasing levels of merger and acquisition activity. Steel companies have been making inroads into new markets by means of such activity for some years now. Many companies offer 'cultural' training for management relocated to new countries and regions. However, as the intensity of internationalising operations grows, so does the possibility of cultural misunderstandings – some examples of which were evident at steel plants at the centre of recent merger and acquisition activity.

**Policy:** Whilst racism and bullying might not be tolerated formally by steel companies, the absence and implementation of an equal opportunities policy at most plants often undermines anti-discriminatory messages and reinforces discriminatory practices.

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