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No flower power for workers – GLA uncovers worker abuse

An unannounced raid targeted labour providers in the flower, plant and bulb industry around Spalding and Boston in the run up to Mothers Day and Easter.

GLA officers with the assistance of the Vehicle & Operator Services Agency (VOSA) entered the premises of a number of nurseries, inspected vehicles used to transport workers and carried out worker interviews on several daffodil fields in the area.

The gangmasters were supplying hundreds of mainly English, Polish and Slovakian workers to pick daffodils and work in the nurseries.

Officers found:

- workers were transported on a plank of wood held up by breeze blocks in the back of a transit van
- some workers had been charged £60 a week for accommodation and had not been given any work for three weeks
- workers were required to surrender their passports to the gangmaster
- agricultural minimum wage was not paid
- excessive accommodation charges, some charges were over £30 per week more than the legal requirement for minimum wage workers.
- workers did not receive holiday pay
- workers were charged for Personal Protective Equipment to carry out their jobs
- VOSA issued two prohibition notices on minibuses used to transport workers.

Thirteen licensed gangmasters are under investigation as a result of the operation.

Paul Whitehouse, Chairman of the GLA said:

“These flowers would be given as Mothers day and Easter gifts across the UK, I find it unacceptable that loving gifts from a child to their mother could be tarnished by the exploitation of the workers who picked them.”

The aim of the raid was to enforce legal requirements and identify unlicensed gangmasters activity at a peak time of production.

During the extensive three day operation, over 130 workers were interviewed and GLA officers unearthed evidence of numerous violations and abuses of workers' rights. The GLA have since been carrying out further investigations and thirteen inspections of gangmaster businesses and their records will be taking place shortly to follow up the initial findings.

Paul Whitehouse, added:

“When a worker does not get a chance to work and owes mounting accommodation debts to the gangmaster they are in grave danger of exploitation. Debt Bondage is a disgrace and I will not stand for it.”

“The GLA is making its mark in the fight against exploitation. If you suspect worker abuse including workers in overcrowded housing or see unfit minibuses used to transport them, tell us and we can do the rest.”

Anybody who is aware of exploitation should contact the GLA on 0845 602 5020 or at www.gla.gov.uk/report.

More than 1,100 gangmasters are now licensed to operate legally in the UK and the GLA has uncovered worker exploitation and illegal activity that led to the revocation of 49 licences.

Notes to editors

1. The Gangmasters Licensing Authority was set up to curb the exploitation of workers in the agriculture, horticulture, shellfish gathering and associated processing and packaging industries. It was set up following the death of 23 Chinese cockle pickers in Morecambe Bay in 2004.

The majority of workers involved in these industries come from countries such as: Romania, Poland, Slovakia, Hungary, Bulgaria, Lithuania, Latvia, India Pakistan and Portugal.

2. There are currently 1170 gangmasters licensed by the GLA

3. A gangmaster is an individual or business who:
 - supplies labour to agriculture, horticulture, shellfish gathering and food processing and packaging
 - uses labour to provide a service in the regulated sector, eg harvesting or gathering agricultural produce
 - uses labour to gather shellfish.

To be granted a GLA licence all businesses must meet the GLA licensing standards and the principle authority of the business must meet 'Fit or Proper' person criteria. Cross government checks are made on all licence applications.

4. It has been an offence to supply labour to the GLA regulated sectors since 1 October 2006, with the maximum penalty being ten years imprisonment and an unlimited fine.
5. All licences that are revoked have the right of appeal including licences revoked with immediate effect.
6. Paul Whitehouse Chairman of the GLA is available for interview requests.

End

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