Twitter Thread by Zoe Gardner



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On the face of it, this looks good, govt extending the Seasonal Agricultural Workers' visa scheme from 10,000 to 30,000 to address lack of labour for farming industry after the end of Free Movement.
Here's grinchy Zoe to explain why it's bad. Sorry...

Until now, most seasonal agricultural work was taken on by migrants benefitting from the right to Freedom of Movement in the EU. This meant they could come, pick on this farm, move to that farm with the changing harvest, switch into other work, basically just live.

With the end of Free Mov the Home Office insists less & less convincingly that all lower-paid work our industries need can be covered by the domestic work force.

The "pick for Britain" drive to get British workers into these jobs was a car wreck, filling just 15% of vacancies.

So, yes. There is an urgent need for an alternative source of probably migrant labour to pick, sort and package food on British farms from January.

Two years ago they introduced a pilot visa scheme for this, originally to bring over 2,500 workers for 6 months at a time.

One year ago they extended and expanded the "pilot" scheme to 10,000 workers. There was of course no evaluation of the pilot's success before this expansion, no consultation with expert groups, no evaluation of the risks of the scheme (which I'll explain, are many).

Knowing the "pilot" was due to end again we, with @NadiaWhittomeMP's help, submitted a parliamentary question asking what evaluation was to be carried out of the pilot scheme before it was expanded.

I mean, that is the meaning of a pilot scheme... right? https://t.co/kGmD7kRB1d

We asked, 1. what evaluation was being carried out & when would it be published? 2. what plans are in place to consult w migrant rights orgs (as required by the recommendations of the Windrush review, which the Home Office claims it is implementing...)

No prizes for the answer.

So what's the problem? Farms need these workers, don't they? Yes. They do. & farmers deserve a govt capable of providing a system where they can access the workers they need.

A good e.g. of a system like that was Free Movement. A system based on the rights of migrant workers.

The new seasonal agricultural worker's visa is, to put it mildly, not based on those rights.

It is a strictly time-limited visa, restricting workers to 6 months in and 6 months out of the country. It relies on workers being housed on-site in shared accommodation.

In a pandemic scenario, it's hardly surprising why this model didn't work particularly well, but even in normal times it entails serious risks.

A person accommodated at their work place & who must leave in 6-months is not a person empowered to challenge exploitative conditions.

A person who, regardless of circumstances, is turned into an overstayer and a criminal if they exceed 6 months in the country is at the mercy of traffickers and has no escape to get back on track or seek help if this happens.

2 companies run the Seasonal Workers Pilot scheme. On 25 February 2020, Stephanie Maurel, CEO of one of these, described in an MPI seminar I attended how they have taken extreme care to monitor the risk of exploitation & trafficking with in person interviews & inspections etc.

She stated that if the scheme were expanded much more it would be impossible to continue to provide the high level of monitoring required to guarantee the standards that they have so far.

The government is expanding the scheme without, as far as I know, hearing that evidence.

This scheme is unfit for purpose. It is a recipe guaranteed to produce exploited migrant labourers & to vastly increase the population of undocumented migrants in the country.

Calling it a pilot is a lie. There are no plans to publish any assessment, they're just barrelling on.

I know that there are a million & 1 ways the government is fucking up at the moment, and most of it seems a lot more dramatic than this, but this is about our rights, or food chain, our democracy and the right to scrutinise policies and develop them on the basis of evidence.

I don't know how to end this thread. It's depressing to try to use the mechanisms of our democracy to ensure people's rights are protected & to fail.

Why do they even bother to call it a pilot? So they can get away with another back-of-a-fag-packet scheme without consultation.