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Labour and life in the workplace geographies: food and retail distribution in the migrant city

The growing, packing and processing of food in eastern England has long involved the employment of seasonal, temporary and/or migrant workforces. The historical practice of gangmastering included transporting people to where labour was temporarily needed as the workplace of the day shifted from field to field and landowner to landowner. Employment agencies in eastern England's contemporary food and warehouse distribution sectors follow a comparable business logic, albeit on a larger scale and in the context of a much-changed food sector capitalism. The paper will draw on residential fieldwork and work-life history interviews (as well as the ongoing development of co-produced digital stories) to explore the organisation and experience of work in these sectors, and the ways in which they are shaped by specific workplace geographies. This sub-regional labour market, with an urban hub at its core where workers are housed, demands an extended understanding of workplace geographies that incorporates not only the places where labour is undertaken but also workers¹ homes, the spaces of recruitment and work-seeking, and The car, van and bus journeys to work across the Fens. The paper reveals these capitalist workplaces to be sites of discipline and control, in spite or because of which these non-unionised workers occasionally find means to resist, assert their dignity and experience solidarity and conviviality.