

Now Hague says freeing Lockerbie bomber was 'misguided'

THE release of Lockerbie bomber Abdelbaset Al Megrahi was 'wrong and misguided', Foreign Secretary William Hague said in a letter to American Senators yesterday.

But he accepted it was 'legally and constitutionally proper' that the decision was one for the Scottish government.

Mr Hague also said several discussions were held between then Foreign Secretary Jack Straw and oil giant BP ahead of a controversial prisoner transfer agreement (PTA) being agreed with Libya in 2007.

Megrahi was convicted of the 1988 bombing of Pan Am flight 103, which killed 270 people. He was released last year on compassionate grounds after medical evidence indicated that he had only three months to live.

Mr Hague's letter was sent to Senator John Kerry, chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, which is holding an inquiry into the bomber's release.

The issue flared again last week as David Cameron made his first official visit to Washington, amid



RELEASED: Abdelbaset Al Megrahi

concern that BP had lobbied the UK Government over a PTA with Libya. Mr Hague said both he and the Prime Minister had previously criticised the decision to free Megrahi.

'We think that the decision taken by the Scottish Executive to release him on compassionate grounds was wrong and misguided,' Mr Hague wrote.

The Scottish government had wanted anyone convicted of the Lockerbie bombing excluded from a PTA with Libya in 2007. But this condition was opposed by the Libyans, and the UK Government eventually agreed to the PTA without exclusions.

BP was made aware by the Libyans that failure to agree a PTA could damage an exploration deal it had signed with the country, Mr Hague said, and BP wanted to bring this to the UK Government's attention.

My misery on Britain's

by **Antonia Hoyle**

LIFE in a meat-packing factory might not appeal to everyone. But for Donna Dickinson, the offer of a job with Continental Fine Foods seemed a welcome opportunity. After all, employment is hard to come by in Leigh, a town on the edge of Manchester once famous for mills, but now famous for nothing in particular. Jobs are especially difficult to find for those, like Donna, who left school aged 16.

In taking the post of 'quality assurance technician', she would find herself working for one of the biggest and most successful suppliers to British supermarkets, providing corned beef, Parma ham and other cooked meats to Sainsbury's, Asda, Marks & Spencer and Morrisons.

It is well-respected, too. The Cranswick Food Group, Continental's parent company, has won industry awards, and in January it announced plans to collaborate on a new line with Jamie Oliver. Last year its pre-tax profits rose by 26 per cent to £43.8million.

Yet today, 20 months on, Donna has a rather more troubling view of the work she once embraced so enthusiastically. For Donna found that she was one of only five British workers among 120 on the factory floor – the great majority came from Eastern Europe. It is a situation which, as *The Mail on Sunday* has previously reported, is common in the meat-processing industry.

And while there is legitimate concern about the effect this has on British employment prospects, there are also serious implications for the wellbeing of the foreign workers, as well as for the handful of Britons who work alongside them.

Donna's experience will alarm the millions who think nothing of visiting the delicatessen at their local supermarket.

So alien was her mother tongue at Continental that Donna's induction session at the company was held in Polish and she says she was asked to sit it out because she could not understand what was being said.

She believes she came across breaches of health-and-safety rules at the plant and that her bosses seemed indifferent to the wellbeing of staff – never more so than when work was ordered to continue even though a woman collapsed to the ground and died.

IT IS only a few months since the Equalities and Human Rights Commission found that some firms are turning to migrant workers because they are easier to exploit and less likely to complain than their native counterparts. Foreign labour accounts for a third of the permanent workforce in the meat and poultry business and for 70 per cent of agency workers.

Certainly, the effect on Donna, 35, has been considerable. She became introverted and lost two stone in weight. She says it is only since handing in her notice last month that she has finally been able to regain the confidence to talk about the conditions she suffered at the plant.

'I am disgusted by the way we were treated,' she says. 'The managers' behaviour amounted to bullying, in my view. It is incredible that, as an English person, I wasn't able to make myself understood in my own country. Communication in an environment like that is essential and I had no option but to resign.'

'With a recession on and with so many people looking for work, I find it hard to believe that there

weren't Britons who would gladly have accepted a job there.

'I think my former employers prefer hiring foreigners because they are easier to bully and will be grateful for the opportunity to work in Britain. I still speak to some people who work there, and they say it is still going on.'

Today, sitting down in her modern semi-detached home in Leigh, Donna is determined and upbeat. She has just started a new job as a food inspector and is engaged to project manager Steve Lee, 33, with whom she has an eight-

month-old son, Owen. Donna left school at 16 with good GCSE results, then spent the rest of her teenage years and her 20s working in local factories, where she says she was known as diligent and enthusiastic.

In October 2008, a recruitment agency offered her a job at Continental's sparse factory on an industrial estate in Stretford, Greater Manchester.

At £18,000 a year, the pay was modest and the hours were long, with alternating shifts of 6.30am to 3pm and 3pm to 11pm. But



Young mother who meat-packing plant

● She was one of only five British workers out of 120 – and her induction was held in Polish

● Workers had to process 2,000 packets of meat a day – in a temperature one degree above freezing

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mins
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a month

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among the migrants factory frontline



quit this
claims...

● And bosses didn't even stop the production line when a woman packing boxes of chilli beef pizza topping dropped dead on the factory floor



MINORITY REPORT: Donna Dickinson says she was disgusted by the way staff were treated

Donna felt it was a real opportunity. Her duties included helping prevent contamination of the food and ensuring that temperature checks on the meat were recorded.

Her first reaction was surprise at how few people spoke English. Only four senior managers and five workers on the factory floor were British. Of the rest, the greatest number came from Eastern Europe. The factory's five other quality assurance technicians were Polish, Moroccan and Nigerian.

'Of course, the other factories I had worked in hired foreign employ-

ees but none to anywhere near this extent,' she says. 'It seemed that most of them had just stepped off the plane from their home country. It was so difficult to make myself understood. As I drove home along the M60 after my first day, I wondered what I'd let myself in for.'

Four weeks later, when Donna was finally due to have a formal induction, her fears intensified.

'The induction was done in Polish by a Polish line manager and I couldn't understand a word,' she says. 'The health-and-safety manager, who was present, told me I

would be better off leaving and coming back when there was an English induction. But there never was. I was the last English person to be successfully employed by the factory. Two British people did start after me, but they both left after a day.

'Everyone seemed mistrustful of me because I was English. At first they were hostile, not looking me in the eye and pretending they couldn't understand my instructions. I later heard that some of the production workers thought I had been sent to spy on them.'

The routine never varied. Every

day she would clock in, putting on her regulation blue overalls, blue hair-net and steel-capped boots. Workers were entitled to one half-hour break every shift and they would often be reprimanded if they returned just two minutes late.

'The factory temperature was only one degree above freezing and the staff, myself included, would often need a hot drink to warm up,' she says. 'But there were cameras everywhere so workers would hide behind the sink in the canteen, the only place apart from the lavatory where they wouldn't be filmed.'

Production workers were expected to process an average of 2,000 packets of meat a day. 'I heard them being sworn at by the two English line managers if they didn't pack fast enough,' Donna says. 'I could see the fear in their eyes. Because nobody understood each other they didn't speak - they gesticulated.'

'Staff would bang on walls and stick their fingers up at me if I didn't understand them. I hated it but I was determined to stick it out for six months so I could put it on my CV.'

Then, on June 5 last year at 5.30pm, Donna witnessed something shocking and distressing. Hearing a commotion on one of the production lines, she looked over to see that a young Latvian woman, who had been packing 5kg boxes of chilli beef for pizza toppings, was sprawled on the floor, her blue overalls unbuttoned.

An ambulance was called and a health-and-safety worker attempted mouth-to-mouth resuscitation before the woman was taken out of the factory. No one seemed to know her name.

'It was obvious that she had died,' says Donna. 'I told this woman's line manager that the production lines should be stopped. He said, "Why? Life goes on." Several workers were in tears but they weren't allowed a break for another two hours, and then it was for only two minutes.'

'We didn't know at this stage what she had died from. There could have been a fault in the machinery or she could have had an infectious disease. I couldn't believe everything just carried on as normal. I was disgusted.'

Donna says that an hour later, a line manager left staff with the impression that their jobs might be at risk if they talked about the incident. 'To our employers she seemed to be just another faceless worker,' Donna says. 'I'd always been told the lines weren't to be stopped under any circumstances except for issues with the quality of the meat. But I would have thought they could make an exception for someone dying.'

The job began to take a heavy toll on Donna after just a few months, as her fiancé Steve confirms. 'Donna changed while she was working there,' he says. 'She has always had a very good personality and makes friends wherever she goes. She was highly stressed, pregnant and losing weight.' Steve begged her to leave.

Donna claims that for all the communication difficulties at the plant, she built up a rapport with many of her colleagues and was sad to say goodbye when she took maternity leave last September. The lack of

flexible working hours proved the final straw.

'I was the workers' voice,' she says. 'It didn't do any good but they appreciated it. They clubbed together to buy me gorgeous clothes for my baby. As I said goodbye, I felt so sorry that they had to carry on working there.'

Donna resigned last month when her maternity leave came to an end. In her resignation letter she stated her dissatisfaction with conditions in the factory.

'My manager asked me if I wanted to pursue a formal grievance but I didn't see the point,' she says. 'I couldn't see anything changing. The factory will carry on making profits and I'm not sure how much it cares about its employees.'

WHEN The Mail on Sunday put Donna's allegations to Bernard Hoggarth, chief executive of Cranswick Food Group, he denied them. He said that Donna had received 21 warnings for bad timekeeping and had posted a statement on her Facebook page saying she was 'sick of working with foreign "sooks"'.

Donna admits it was a stupid thing to do. 'But I had just resigned and was fed up with working in an environment where I couldn't talk to anyone,' she says. 'I am by no means a racist. Two of my best friends are Chinese and Jamaican and I befriended several of the factory workers who did speak English. And on no occasion was I more than three minutes late to any shift. The fact that they've raised the issue just shows how strict their regime is.'

Mr Hoggarth also said: 'The woman obviously has an agenda. The company has an extremely good reputation with its personnel. I've been here for 30 years.'

'The woman resigned because she wanted to have flexible time. When you're in the food industry you have deadlines to meet and you can't just let people come and go as they please because there's food safety involved.'

'She then resigned and put in grievances. We have responded to her grievances and asked her to attend meetings and we haven't had a reply to the letters we sent her.'

'This situation has been blown out of all proportion by this young lady because she obviously feels hard done by. We have human resources officers on every site. We have health-and-safety officers on every site.'

Mr Hoggarth said the company's 12 factories had been given the highest possible grade for food safety under standards set by the British Retail Consortium.

Referring to the death of Donna's colleague, he added: 'The death on site was that of a lady who had worked for us for two months. She died in the most tragic circumstances of a heart attack. She could have died at any time.'

'We would have said that the company, including employees, should make no comment until we knew what the cause of death was. For someone to die in front of 100 people is quite a traumatic thing.'

HOWARD WALKER