

# **Migrant work exploitation and resistance in the Italian countryside: precarious lives between violence and agency**

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## **Introduction: labour, mobility and exploitation in global agriculture**

The last several decades have witnessed a large increase in the forms of exploitation and unfree and coerced labour experienced by workers in the global North, alongside a further aggravation of highly exploitative forms of domination and control over precarious working classes in the global South. According to the latest data available, almost 25 million people in the world are trapped in a condition of forced labour<sup>1</sup>, a large majority of whom are exploited in the private sector such as domestic work, construction and agriculture (ILO 2017). Although Asia and the Pacific region has the highest share of victims of forced labour exploitation (64 per cent), Africa (23 per cent), Europe and Central Asia (9 per cent) follow - before other regions such as Americas (5 per cent) and the Arab States (1 per cent) (ILO 2017, p. 27). This complex and dynamic phenomenon thus takes place within and between the wealthier and poorer regions of the world. In particular, some economic sectors such as agriculture, construction, garment work, light manufacturing, accommodation and food services, and domestic and care work draw heavily on unfree and coerced labour, mostly provided by racialized temporary migrant workers from the Global South (Gordon 2019). According to ILO, 12 per cent of work in agriculture globally falls within the legal definition of forced labour (ILO 2017, p. 33) and irregular migrants, given their limited knowledge of local conditions and bargaining power, are more often subjected to unfreedom and coercion. Their immigration status, however, as well as their denied citizenship, intersect with the global capitalist political economy and the changing dynamics of production, which actually shape their forms of exploitation. During the past thirty years, the profound restructuring of agricultural production and food chains, the lack of appropriate and fair trade policies and widespread underpaid employment conditions for unskilled work have had a strong impact on worker exploitation in farming activities. The global demand for cheap food production has increased the demand for cheap labour, given especially the temporary and precarious nature of agricultural labour and the progressive rural exodus of local populations.

Externally-sourced salaried work has increasingly substituted family labour, while the mostly local workforce of the past has been replaced by work provided by temporary migrants, asylum seekers and irregular migrants (Corrado 2018a; Nori, Farinella 2020). In this regard, the case of Italy is emblematic. This country belongs to the so-called Mediterranean model of migration: traditionally associated with emigration, since the late 1980s it has turned into a country of transit and, ultimately, a destination in its own right. The changes seen in global production processes have had a strong impact on Italian agri-food supply chains, where the constant supply of a cheap labour force has become a structural productive factor (Molinero Gerbeau, Avallone 2016). Here, the transition to a post-Fordist and neoliberal model of production has led to an increased informalisation of work, ethnicization of the labour market, clandestinization – due to increasingly restrictive migration policies – and further racialization of the people involved. Moreover, as this chapter emphasises, the already highly exploitative system has been further exacerbated by the illegal gang-master system, known as *caporalato*, whose presence is historically rooted in Southern Italy and which still plays a crucial role in intermediation and coordination (Corrado 2018a). Informal and illegal employment and recruitment agents, responsible for the payment, working and lodging conditions of the workforce, usually adopt a *modus operandi* based on abuse and violence - both physical and psychological – accompanied by threats and blackmailing practices. Their presence has been facilitated by the economic and cultural backwardness of part of the Italian agricultural system, but the crucial role played by these actors must also be considered within a wider framework. The latter is characterized by the lack or insufficient institutional regulation of the sector, the absence of a fair system of intermediation between work supply and demand, and the deficiencies of a migration policy that, while imposing very strict limits to the entry of foreign workers into the country, has gradually eroded the right to asylum and dismantled previous hosting and protection measures. As a result, the risks of exploitation in this sector have increased, especially for asylum seekers excluded from the reception system and left in a sort of limbo, as well as workers' vulnerability and isolation, as shown by the living conditions experienced by migrants in ghettos, i.e. shantytowns far from urban centres, where they suffer social marginalization and stigmatization. Paradoxically, however, these places are also among the few where migrant workers can experience some forms of solidarity and self-help support (Pugliese 2013). This is where they come into contact with the services provided by NGOs, cooperatives and trade unions and engage, both individually and collectively, in forms of resistance and activism against the exploitation

and violence which actually represents an essential part of the current global capitalist political economy.

### **Poisoned fruits: migrant workers in the agricultural labour markets**

Geopolitical and geoeconomic processes related to the wider post-Fordist restructuring of global capitalism – as discussed in this volume – have contributed to a radical transformation of rural spaces and their social and economic relations (Gertel, Sippel 2014). The re-organization of the agricultural productive system in a direction aimed at meeting global capitalism's interests and processes has been facilitated by the growing ability to exploit a *reserve army* mostly composed of migrants and other mobile workers who currently represent a large portion of the agricultural labour force, especially on the European shores of the Mediterranean (Corrado, De Castro, Perrotta 2017; Nori, Farinella 2020). Here, the decline and ageing of rural populations, together with the counter-effects of the global mechanism of agro-food supply chains - which have concretely incentivized companies to pay lower wages and offer greater informality and flexibility to an extremely precarious and seasonal workforce - have helped make agriculture less attractive to the local populations (Nori, Farinella 2020). Price competition, for example, which pushes farmers towards significant cuts in production costs, has strongly shaped this labour market which is dramatically affected by high rates of illegality and offers, in turn, non-visibility and informality to migrant workers excluded from other forms of economic and social integration due to their irregular status (Pugliese 2013). Moreover, countries such as Greece, Spain and Italy often suffer from a lack of policies aimed at countering the pressure applied by farmers and increasing surveillance of criminal practices and exploitative situations (Nori, Farinella 2020). Thus, the Fordist production rationale, which largely relies on the extraction of surplus value from migrant labour, here shows its most dramatic effects.

In Italy, the agricultural sector presents high diversity in terms of farm structures and production, with the Northern part of the country characterised by intensive production systems and large land-holdings, while in the South small-scale farms make up the majority. In both cases, however, farmers have been dealing with an increase in intensive agriculture, a growing subalternity to major distribution chains and the establishment of large buying centres which tend to impose very low prices (OHCHR 2020, p. 9). The possibility to hire - and often exploit - cheap and flexible labour through an immigrant

workforce represents a crucial factor which has enabled farmers and enterprises to remain alive and productive (Nori, Farinella 2020, p. 40).

In Italian agriculture, it is estimated that there are currently between 400 000 and 500 000 migrant workers (FLAI CGIL 2018; OHCHR 2020, p. 9), although those who are regularly employed come to around 342 000 (CREA 2020, p. 36). The percentage of migrants out of total employment in agriculture has steadily increased since the early 1990s, and has roughly tripled in the last decade due to the economic crisis which drove many migrants away from other sectors and brought them to find a refuge in agriculture (CREA 2020, p. 37). Moreover, the adoption in 2018 of the so-called “Salvini Decree”, which abolished humanitarian protection and further stressed an approach toward migration in terms of security and public safety, led to a significant increase in the number of undocumented migrants (Corsi 2019) – currently estimated at around 680 000, i.e. twice as many as only few years ago (OHCHR 2020) – and illegalized asylum seekers, excluded from the reception system and abandoned to themselves (Omizzolo 2020, p. 45). Hence, according to the latest data available, the already considerable rate of informal and precarious work found in the Italian agriculture sector – where labour is largely physical and unskilled – is particularly high among migrants, who are obliged to accept informal employment relationships (16.5 per cent) or receive non-union pay rates (38.7 per cent), regardless of their legal status (FLAI CGIL 2018). Furthermore, this situation has dramatically worsened since the explosion of the Covid-19 pandemic and the lockdown measures introduced in March 2020. Since then, there has been an estimated 10-20 percent growth in the number of migrants exploited in farming activities, due to a further deterioration of working and living conditions in rural areas. Currently, one out of two workers in the Italian countryside is irregular (Omizzolo 2020, pp. 44-45).

Although exploitation practices involve a large portion of agricultural workers, regardless of sex, age and nationality, they are particularly severe for migrant workers and even worse for those who are undocumented, as stressed by the UN Special Rapporteur on the right to food during her visit to Italy in January 2020 (OHCHR 2020, p. 7). Especially during the harvest season and at times when there is a peak in the demand for agro-food products – as occurred during the Covid-19 lockdown – the maximum number of hours of work per day significantly increases, while minimum wage is often not respected, leaving especially irregular migrant workers “unprotected and unable to report any abuse” (OHCHR 2020, p. 7). Farm labourers usually work for 8-12 hours – with peaks of even 15 hours per day – for a daily wage coming to between 20 and 35 euro (FLAI CGIL 2018; MEDU 2020). In some

cases, they even receive piecework pay, which corresponds to 3-4 Euros for a 375 kilogram box of fruit or vegetables (Omizzolo 2020, p. 45). The lack of a regulatory role played by institutions and the isolation in which workers are confined, however, lead not only irregular migrants but also European citizens – mostly coming from Romania, Poland and Bulgaria – to fall into this trap (Leogrande 2016). The latest official data available indicate that Romanians, Indians, Albanians and Moroccans are the largest groups of foreign agricultural workers in Italy, followed by Poles and Bulgarians (Corrado 2018a, p. 9). After the 2007 European enlargement process, EU mobile citizens have significantly replaced African migrants in several areas of the country, given the nature of their migratory project which is temporary by definition and because more inclined to accept unfair and exploitative working conditions. Migrants from Eastern Europe and the Balkans often adopt strategies of circular mobility between different production areas – and across internal EU borders – where they move according to seasonal peaks for labour (Nori, Farinella 2020, p. 48). Moreover, their irregular recruitment is less dangerous for employers, who do not risk being charged with the offence of facilitation and exploitation of irregular migration (Palumbo 2016, p. 19).

Since 2018, the combined effects of the “Salvini Decree” and the Covid-19 pandemic, however, may have had a negative impact on the increased hierarchization and clandestinization of a job market already affected by ethnic as well as gender specialisation. The increased number of rejected asylum requests and migrants losing their legal status have offered employers a labour force more vulnerable to exploitation. Moreover, inequalities based on gender overlap with other forms of discrimination which particularly affect women working into this sector, especially in Southern Italy where the number of EU women employed in farms is significant (Peano 2017; Corrado 2018a). Although more consistent data on migrant women workers in rural areas are needed, information available indicates that their salary is usually 20-30 per cent lower than men (Omizzolo 2020, p. 45), while their vulnerability is very much affected by the condition of isolation, segregation and dependency in which they live. According to the UN Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of slavery, Romanian women employed in the Sicilian horticultural sector, for example, not only face conditions of forced and bonded labour, but also ‘sexual violence, threats against themselves and their children and violations of reproductive and sexual rights’ (UNGA 2018, p. 11). Especially women with family responsibilities are most exposed to abuse and blackmailing because the presence of their children in the place where they work and live forces them to *accept* abuse in order to

prevent further threats to their children's safety (Palumbo, Sciarba 2018, pp. 25-26). Finally, the exploitation of migrant women within this market is also evident in other forms of sexual-labour extraction, such as cases where, especially in ghettos and encampments flourishing in rural zones, women are employed as sexual workers, waitresses and cooks providing services to male seasonal workers, as well as gang-masters and employers (Peano 2017).

### **Rural violence and exploitation practices: the *caporalato* system**

As seen above, the Italian agricultural production model, due to the wide prevalence of informal and irregular practices aimed at appropriating labour at a low cost in order to sustain cheap food production, displays a highly exploitative rationale. Labour, mostly provided by global periphery migrants but also by European and native workers, actually represents a crucial productive element whose control allows producers to maintain their production stable and to survive in a market heavily affected by malpractice and even criminal interests. Although this system is well-rooted, especially considering the history of Southern economic and cultural backwardness<sup>2</sup>, nowadays it perfectly fits post-Fordist modes of production and the changing dynamics of the global political economy and geographies of production. Hence, the full inclusion of Italian agriculture within the globalised flow of goods, capitals, information and people has actually been facilitated by a sort of delocalization *in loco* promoted by owners and producers who, by drastically cutting the cost of labour, managed to meet the goal of productiveness at the expense of workers' rights, safety and, in some cases, even life.

The subaltern integration and sometimes intense exploitation of migrants in this sector have been also facilitated by the lack of forms of institutional mediation between supply and demand and the fragmentation of regulatory frameworks. This has allowed historical forms of labour intermediation, in decline during the 1970s and 1980s, to come back to the fore (Dines 2018). Reference is made here to a complex intermediation and management system – largely irregular and most often illegal – where a wide range of actors play fundamental roles. One of the most well-known is the *caporalato* system, i.e. gang-mastering, which consists in informal labour contracting agents who not only oversee the recruitment of workers, but also control the cost and timing of their work and often provide them with transportation and housing. These are all areas in which migrants may face high costs and risks, since the use of violent methods which has traditionally affected

manpower intermediation in the countryside, especially in the South, is further exacerbated by criminal interests often linked to forms of entrepreneurial organised crime which find a source of illegal income in the agri-food sector (Corrado 2011; Colloca, Corrado 2013; Pugliese 2013; Perrotta 2014; FLAI-CGIL 2018).

According to the data available, currently about 25 per cent of Italian farms rely on gang-masters for manpower intermediation (FLAI-CGIL 2018). Gang-masters or *caporali* show the main features of the mediators between landowners and day labourers in the past, even though they are mostly migrants themselves and in many cases former workers who establish variable and ambivalent relations with their national and ethnic-based networks (Perrotta, Sacchetto 2014). While *caporalato* is an illegal intermediation system widespread in the Southern Italy's agriculture since the beginning of the XX century, until the 1970s it was characterised by the fact that both *caporali* and farmworkers were mostly part of the same community, sometimes even the same village. This allowed to put some limits to the worst forms of exploitation, since they were subjected to specific social constraints which usually deterred from the use of extreme forms of abuse and violence (Leogrande 2016, pp. 66-68). Nowadays, the new *caporali* – mostly foreigners – do not share the same community and social background. Although they often speak the same language of their workers, they are *strangers* to each other: their relationship is not destined to last – even through different generations as it was in the past – but is just finalized to the maximization of profit at any cost (Ivi, p. 69). Case studies concerning the Punjabi Sikh community near Rome (Omizzolo, Sodano 2015), Macedonian and Bulgarian workers in the vineyards in Piedmont (Donatiello, Moiso 2017) or migrants working in the vineyards of Southern Tuscany (Oliveri 2015) confirm that the phenomenon goes far beyond the South of Italy. In the 220 Italian agricultural districts monitored by the Osservatorio Placido Rizzotto in its latest report, there seem to be around 15 000 *caporali* spread across the country, having different socio-demographic characteristics and profiles. They range from the so-called “foreman gang-masters” to “violent gang-masters” and “criminal or Mafia gang-masters” depending on their methods, modus operandi, structure of action and conditions of autonomy vs. exploitation granted to their clients (FLAI-CGIL 2018). In 2016 a new law considering *caporalato* a form of severe labour exploitation was approved by Parliament, but it is still not fully and effectively enforced (OHCHR 2020). Moreover, poor working conditions can be found in sectors where other forms of apparently *legal* intermediation are carried out by temporary staffing agencies, service agencies and cooperatives who regularly ignore social security obligations, minimum legal

wages and laws regarding working hours (Dines 2018; Nori, Farinella 2020). The emphasis put by media reports on the unacceptable standards of working and living conditions suffered by workers employed into this sector, however, has not yet led to a wider critical discussion of the position and role of these labourers within the agri-food supply chain, nor of the complicity of a legal and policy framework that actually enables illegal and/or irregular practices at the expense of migrants' rights. Thus, the image of migrants as pure slaves, victims of violence and human rights abuses tends to overshadow the underlying political agency, to absolve the state of its responsibilities and to conceal the industrial and global dimension of an economic sector structurally affected by grey (i.e. between legal and illegal) practices.

### **Ghettos, survival and resistance**

As mentioned above, although various laws and measures have been approved during the last few years in order to curb the illegal system behind the agro-food chain and improve the condition of the people involved, some of the most outrageous abuses have never disappeared nor become less conspicuous (MEDU 2020). The lack of inclusive policies toward migrant workers and the ongoing representation of seasonal migrant workers in terms of a long-lasting emergency have facilitated their segregation into slums, tent cities, informal ghettos and self-built shantytowns mostly located in rural areas isolated from urban centres. This has not only exacerbated their already appalling living conditions, but has also undermined their possibility to integrate into local societies and generated racialized conflicts and tensions with local populations. Thus, as stressed by Corrado, since the late 1980s there has always been an 'ambiguous coexistence of economic demand for migrant labour in the fields and social hostility to their presence in the streets' (2018a, p. 24).

In this regard, one of the first tragic events occurred in 1989 when Jerry Masslo, a South-African asylum seeker working as a tomato harvester in the area of Villa Literno, near Naples, was killed by a group of four young men who wanted to rob him and other migrant workers living in the same abandoned shed. This murder – which occurred after several intolerant attacks and racist raids against migrants living in the area – became a symbol of the inhuman conditions suffered by agricultural migrant workers, especially in Southern Italy. Moreover, it led, a few weeks later, to the first national anti-racist demonstration and the adoption of the first immigration law in 1990 (Colucci 2018). Several tensions and



racialized conflicts with local populations, as well as numerous migrant demonstrations and strikes, protesting against their lack of access to rights and justice, followed in coming years, such as in Castelvoturno in 2008, Rosarno in 2010, Nardò in 2011, Foggia in 2016 and many others. One of the latest occurred in May 2020, against the temporary legalization measures brought in by the government during the Covid-19 pandemic in order to secure manpower, only for few months, in specific sectors. Over these decades, however, the number of migrant workers in the Italian agricultural system has steadily grown while their working and living conditions have not significantly changed. Just as reported by the NGO *Medecines Sans Frontieres* in one of the first inquiries on the health and living conditions of migrant workers in the Italian agriculture (2005), seasonal labourers still mostly reside in ghettos consisting of large agglomerations of tent-barracks, in remote and abandoned farmhouses or in reception centres where the boundaries between inside and outside are very porous (Campesi 2014). Beside housing promiscuity and a lack of essential services such as water, electricity and heating, in these places migrants often experience conditions of social and spatial segregation, violence, power dynamics related to racial stratification and marginalization, which further exacerbate their exclusion, discrimination and psycho-physical health.

These places, however, have also been spaces of resistance and mobilization. Thanks to the grass-root work and projects carried out by NGOs, activists, cooperatives and unions, promoted by both migrants and local people, ghettos and shantytowns have become sites of socialization, mutual aid, political subjectivation and agency (Brigate di Solidarietà Attiva et al. 2012). Here, a wide range of solidarity networks and grass-root groups and unions have emerged, as well as initiatives aimed at launching quality certification methods. The latter reflect increased attention toward the exploitative conditions suffered by labourers and the responsibilities of large retail chains, transparent supply chains and ethical agriculture projects (Corrado 2018a; Iocco et al. 2018). These alternative experiences, which concretely bring together the needs of small farmers and migrant workers' needs for a just income and fair working conditions – and which are also given greater attention by consumers – are based on forms of mutualism which aim at rebuilding the economic and political power of actors heavily marginalised by a global production model based on the subordination of the working conditions and wages of the people involved to the production of food at a very low cost price (Iocco et al. 2018; Molinero Gerbeau, Avallone 2016). Although it goes beyond the aims of this chapter to assess the actual strength and sustainability of all these initiatives, they clearly challenge recurrent

images of migrant workers as passive subjects and show the multiple forms of collective action and resistance in which they are involved. The fight against labour exploitation and the promotion of ethical and ecological forms of agriculture now overlap with the fight for fair salaries, regular job contracts, permanent residence permits and decent working and living conditions (Corrado 2018b).

### **Concluding remarks**

The analysis of the Italian case suggests that the wider process of restructuring global agricultural production and agro-food chains, which began in the 1990s, has had a strong impact on the growing ethnicization, hierarchization and racialization of the labour force employed in agriculture. Here, as in other Mediterranean countries, the availability of an increasing number of mobile EU citizens, asylum seekers, temporary and irregular migrants has been accompanied by a reprehensible lack of appropriate policies aimed at protecting farmers and producers from unfair price competition, cuts in production costs and increasing demand for cheap food production. Italy's highly informal and exploitative agricultural sector, however, has been further exacerbated by the presence of an illegal and often criminal gang-master system, known as *caporalato*. This system is partially different from the one in place until the second postwar period, since it operates outside that set of even unjust social norms that traditionally ruled and governed the old agrarian world - preventing and/or limiting extreme acts of violence to occur - and is just oriented to the maximization of profit through the most intense forms of exploitation. The new *caporali*, however, often co-nationals of *their* workers, still strongly influence both the functioning of the market and the lives of the people involved. In some cases, the situations in which both male and female labourers work recall the miserable conditions suffered by wage-workers, proletarians and labourers in the late nineteenth century: they usually work long hours for less than minimum wage and reside in ghettos with intolerable living conditions and an extremely high amount of both social and physical violence. Over the past few years, several cases have been recorded of agricultural workers who died as result of their work, out of exhaustion and intense manual labour, or in fires that occurred in the shantytowns and encampments, or even killed by gang-masters and other violent entrepreneurs involved into this market or during racist assaults. However, the rhetorical framework used in public discourse -that often depicts these workers as poor victims or *slaves* lacking any agency and driven by desperation, and gang-masters as the only ones

responsible for all this – runs the risk of providing a very incomplete picture. Here, reference goes to the crucial role played by macro-phenomena affecting both the global and the local food production chains mentioned above, as well as the increasingly restrictive migration policies that have blocked regular channels of migration and consequently increased the exploitation of precarious and undocumented migrant workers without alternative legal work options. Hence, institutional responsibilities in intensifying the exploitative nature of the market as well as the invisibilization and clandestinization of the men and women employed have been often ignored. Finally, stereotypes surrounding the depiction of migrant agricultural workers as slaves fail to capture the crucial subjective component inherent to any migration project - where migrants always tend to make calculated choices - and risk depoliticizing their struggle for rights. This shows that although the exploitative nature of the agricultural market has been largely invisible to consumers and citizens, and the social costs for society as a whole ignored, the recognition of workers *and* migrants' rights actually represents a crucial precondition for constructing more equal production and consumption practices.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> According to the International Labour Organization-ILO, '(...) a forced labour situation is determined by the nature of the relationship between a person and an "employer" and not by the type of activity performed, [...], nor by its legality or illegality under national law' (ILO,2017, p. 16).

<sup>2</sup> As noted by Leogrande, it should not be overshadowed that the South, often depicted as downtrodden, has also been a place with a strong tradition of rebellion and workers' struggles during the early decades of the twentieth century (Leogrande 2016).

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### **Suggested videos**

*Il sangue verde*, Documentary by Andrea Segre [Italy, 2010, 57'], available at: <http://www.zalab.org/projects/il-sangue-verde/>

*The Invisibles: Inhumane Conditions of Italy's Migrant Farmworkers*, Documentary by Diana Ferrero and Carola Mamberto [Italy, 2020, 9.33'], available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3b2qx7utFlo>