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## FROM SLAVE LABOR TO YOUR DINNER TABLE: MIGRANT WORKERS ON ITALY'S FARMS

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Tens of thousands of people were swallowed up by the Mediterranean Sea while attempting to reach Europe between 2008 and 2015.<sup>2</sup> Survivors had to face European Union (EU) authorities, which are more concerned about protecting their borders than addressing the structural violations of human rights that are often at the root of forced migration.<sup>3</sup> The integrated border management system established in the Schengen agreement is not fulfilling its purpose. Instead of ensuring well-regulated movement, EU legislation is paving the way to increased militarization of land and sea borders.<sup>4</sup>

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The authors dedicate this article to Giulio Regeni, a young researcher on trade union movements, who was kidnapped and killed under unclear circumstances in Egypt in early 2016.

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2 Amnesty International. *Lives Adrift: Refugees and Migrants in Peril in the Central Mediterranean*. London: Amnesty International, 2014. Available at: [www.amnesty.org.uk/sites/default/files/eur050062014en.pdf](http://www.amnesty.org.uk/sites/default/files/eur050062014en.pdf).

3 For more information on forced migration, please visit: [www.iom.int/key-migration-terms](http://www.iom.int/key-migration-terms).

4 Traynor, Ian. "Is the Schengen dream of Europe without borders becoming thing of the past?" *The Guardian*, January 5, 2016. Available at: [www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jan/05/is-the-schengen-dream-of-europe-without-borders-becoming-a-thing-of-the-past](http://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jan/05/is-the-schengen-dream-of-europe-without-borders-becoming-a-thing-of-the-past).

5 Please see: United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). *1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and Its 1967 Protocol*. Geneva: UNHCR, 2011. Available at: [www.unhcr.org/about-us/background/4ec262d9/1951-convention-relating-status-refugees-its-1967-protocol.html](http://www.unhcr.org/about-us/background/4ec262d9/1951-convention-relating-status-refugees-its-1967-protocol.html).

6 Please see, for instance, regulation 604/2013 (the so-called *Dublin Regulation*) of the European Parliament and of the Council of the European Union. Available at: [eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=OJ:L:2013:180:0031:0059:EN:PDF](http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=OJ:L:2013:180:0031:0059:EN:PDF).

Italy is a bridge between Africa and the European continent. People migrate for many reasons: Some flee from conflict and war, others from socio-economic structural violence. Yet, current integration and protection measures for migrants, asylum seekers and refugees in Europe are clearly inadequate. Many are forced to live in substandard conditions and seek informal and precarious employment. In Italy, agricultural workers' conditions reflect the failure of states to protect migrants' human rights.

The international legal framework for refugees has limited scope of application.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, under present EU rules,<sup>6</sup> asylum seekers have to remain in the country where they first register. Consequently, thousands find themselves unwillingly 'trapped in Italy', awaiting a decision. According to official figures, out of 170,000 people who disembarked in Italy in 2014, 65,000 applied for asylum.<sup>7</sup> The others risked irregularly crossing internal EU borders.

### MIGRANT LABOR IN ITALIAN AGRICULTURE: WORKERS DENIED OF THEIR RIGHTS

Italy is home to thousands of migrants and asylum seekers from India, Eritrea, Nigeria, and West Africa, aiming to reach Central and Northern Europe, which is more attractive in terms of integration measures and job opportunities. The state offers shelter, food, legal assistance, and healthcare to asylum seekers until international protection is recognized and granted by a special commission,<sup>8</sup> which, however, does not provide legal authorization to work.<sup>9</sup> Many migrants urgently need to start working: Even a small remittance is vital to supporting themselves and/or their families in their home country. Asylum seekers who receive a final negative verdict, or whose temporary humanitarian protection has expired, rarely return to their home country.

This 'invisible' population of undocumented migrants, devoid of state protection and denied basic human rights, is growing and significantly impacting some sectors of the economy. Undocumented migrants thus enter the labor sector with no bargaining power and *de facto* no rights. They live on the fringe of a system that marginalizes and pushes them into sectors where they fall prey to exploitation.

Many undocumented migrants find work as agricultural day laborers,<sup>10</sup> and are employed in the agricultural sector in both the South<sup>11</sup> and North of Italy. Despite the prohibition of illegal labor intermediation in 2011, they often fall victim to intermediaries who have links with agricultural businesses and the mafia and act almost like ringleaders, retaining their monopoly over local human trafficking.<sup>12</sup> The situation varies according to contract conditions and the legal status of workers (e.g. temporary residence permits, undocumented migrants, asylum seekers waiting for refugee status). Migrants with no residence permit are the most vulnerable.

Exploitation is a permanent feature of much of the agricultural economy in Italy. It is worth highlighting that farmers using migrant labor are also suppliers of the international markets. The exploitation of irregular workers allows large farm owners to increase profit margins and force their competitors out of the market, especially local small-scale farmers.

Migrant seasonal and day laborers often live in precarious conditions due to inadequate wages, which forces them to seek shelter for the night in abandoned farmhouses, camps or uninhabited residential areas. They have insufficient food supplies and often live without electricity, water, sleeping or toilet facilities, frequently becoming targets of xenophobia and violent attacks by the local population, who blame them for the appalling sanitary conditions of their settlements. These human rights abuses are of the utmost severity, especially those that violate the rights to adequate food and nutrition, housing and decent work.<sup>13</sup>

## THE PROVINCE OF LATINA: A PRIME EXAMPLE OF SLAVE LABOR

In the Province of Latina (Lazio region, in Central Italy), a community of around 30,000 Indians, mostly Sikhs, work as agricultural day laborers. Their conditions are symptomatic of this kind of labor exploitation, akin to slavery. Many of these migrants are also victims of international human trafficking and illegal recruitment. Several Indian workers consume substances such as methamphetamines, opium and antispasmodics to withstand the rigors they are subjected to.<sup>14</sup> They work 14 hours a day, seven days a week and are paid around €3.50/hour.<sup>15</sup> Indian day laborers are now filing the first ever criminal cases and class action lawsuit against an Italian employer for forging documents, supported by the agricultural trade union of the Italian General Confederation of Labor (FLAI CGIL), and In Migrazione, a civil society organization (CSO).<sup>16</sup> Since 2015 the Italian Parliament is also leading an inquiry into illegal intermediation.

## THE RESPONSE OF SOCIAL MOVEMENTS AND TRADE UNIONS

Following the increase of Syrian asylum seekers since 2012, NGOs and human rights groups invest their efforts mostly in their reception process and the day-to-day management of this complex and critical emergency situation. Several social movements and trade unions offer legal advice and support to migrant workers, and/or conduct monitoring, awareness raising and training activities. Some organizations offer Italian language lessons to encourage social inclusion.<sup>17</sup>

New forms of slavery are thriving under our very eyes. And yet, instead of forcing migrants into a hopeless plantation-like slave system, trade unions should recognize the opportunity they represent in helping to repopulate the countryside. For instance, the hill of Sonnino (Lazio) boasts the top three awarded olive oils in the

- 7 Serughetti, Giorgia. "Migrants arriving in Italy are mostly economic"—Incorrect." *Open Migration*, December 27, 2015. Available at: [openmigration.org/en/fact-checking/what-is-the-real-number-of-refugees-arriving-in-italy](https://openmigration.org/en/fact-checking/what-is-the-real-number-of-refugees-arriving-in-italy).
- 8 For more information on the special commission for recognizing international protection (*Commissioni territoriali per il riconoscimento della protezione internazionale*), please see: [www.interno.gov.it/it/temi/immigrazione-e-asilo/protezione-internazionale/commissioni-territoriali-riconoscimento-protezione-internazionale](http://www.interno.gov.it/it/temi/immigrazione-e-asilo/protezione-internazionale/commissioni-territoriali-riconoscimento-protezione-internazionale).
- 9 For more information, please visit: [www.asylumineurope.org/reports/country/Italy/asylum-procedure/general/short-overview-asylum-procedure#footnote1\\_080sk3](http://www.asylumineurope.org/reports/country/Italy/asylum-procedure/general/short-overview-asylum-procedure#footnote1_080sk3).
- 10 For more information, please visit: [www.istat.it/it/files/2015/09/SPA-2013.pdf?title=La+struttura+delle+aziende+agricole++02%2Fset%2F2015++Testo+integrale.pdf](http://www.istat.it/it/files/2015/09/SPA-2013.pdf?title=La+struttura+delle+aziende+agricole++02%2Fset%2F2015++Testo+integrale.pdf).
- 11 For more information, please see insight box 14.1 "Rising Up Against a System of Near-Slavery" below.
- 12 According to 2014 data from the Placido Rizzotto Observatory in the FLAI CGIL trade union, there are around 400,000 exploited agricultural day labourers in Italy employed by illegal intermediaries, of which 80% are non-Italian and 100,000 are seriously exploited.
- 13 Ethical Trading Initiative Norway (IEH), Ethical Trading Initiative (ETI) and Danish Ethical Trading Initiative (DIEH). *Due diligence in agricultural supply chains: Counteracting exploitation of migrant workers in Italian tomato production*. 2015. Available at: [s3-eu-west-1.amazonaws.com/www.ethicaltrade.org/files/shared\\_resources/italian\\_tomato\\_production\\_report.pdf?C3ONcqtKIkBGYcgoLAFnJBjNqOHul](https://s3-eu-west-1.amazonaws.com/www.ethicaltrade.org/files/shared_resources/italian_tomato_production_report.pdf?C3ONcqtKIkBGYcgoLAFnJBjNqOHul).
- 14 In Migrazione. *Doparsi per lavorare come schiavi*. Roma: 2014. Available at: [www.inmigrazione.it/UserFiles/File/Documents/87\\_DOPARSI%20OPER%20LAVORARE%20COME%20SCHIIVI.pdf](http://www.inmigrazione.it/UserFiles/File/Documents/87_DOPARSI%20OPER%20LAVORARE%20COME%20SCHIIVI.pdf).
- 15 This amount is well below the average monthly wage in Italy. For more information, please visit: [www.tradingeconomics.com/italy/wages](http://www.tradingeconomics.com/italy/wages).
- 16 For more information, please visit: [www.inmigrazione.it](http://www.inmigrazione.it).
- 17 Please see, for instance, In Migrazione's project entitled *Bella Farnia*: [www.inmigrazione.it/it/attivita-51/centro-polifunzionale-bella-farnia](http://www.inmigrazione.it/it/attivita-51/centro-polifunzionale-bella-farnia).

country, yet only 20% of over one million trees can currently be tended. Based on a human rights-based approach, migrants could help rejuvenate an ageing farming population and simultaneously benefit from a revival of rural areas.

### **THE RIGHT TO ADEQUATE FOOD AND NUTRITION: FROM PRODUCTION TO CONSUMPTION**

By applying a food sovereignty lens to the human right to adequate food and nutrition, attention is drawn to the social control of the food system. The question is raised: Who is producing our food and under what conditions?

As seen above, in Italy migrant workers in the industrial food system are denied their basic human rights. It is worth noting, though, that this situation is symptomatic of the conditions that prevail in a large part of the industrial global food system, and that remain invisible to consumers at the end of the food value chain. Unbeknown to consumers who buy low-priced and low quality fruit and vegetables, workers are subjected to extreme conditions.<sup>18</sup> The externalization of costs is generally not on the public radar, reinforcing the common belief that ‘cheap food’ is possible and concealing the human rights abuses of agricultural workers.

The agricultural system has abandoned a wide range of sustainable agro-ecological practices that are based on small-scale farming systems. Meanwhile, the large-scale exploitation of under-paid workers contributes to forcing our food system into the pace, costs and production methods set by profit-oriented industrial food distribution chains. As long as the full cost of externalities is not included in the price, and as long as states do not fully uphold and enforce human rights standards, including the labor standards outlined in the core International Labour Organization’s (ILO) conventions—no one can rest assured that what we are eating is not a product of slave labor.

### **CONCLUSION**

Different trade unions and CSOs are engaged in reversing the negative impacts that the intermediation of migrant employment has had on human rights. The ‘grey area’ of the illegal economy has expanded, resulting in intensified tensions between disadvantaged social classes, and in turn, strengthening the mafia’s presence in agriculture.

The EU needs to define a common legislative framework on migrants’ rights that builds on solidarity and human rights. Immigration laws foster demand for marginalized undocumented immigrant workers, lining the pockets of illegal intermediaries through their flourishing business. A fragmented labor market, in addition to poor communication throughout the food chain, keeps the farms’ concerns separated from those of consumers. The system hides the bitter truth that many farming systems are based on exploitation and that modern slavery has made its way to our dinner tables.

<sup>18</sup> Omizzolo, Marco. “Il movimento bracciantile in Italia e il caso dei braccianti indiani in provincia di Latina”, in *Migranti e Territori Lavoro Diritti Accoglienza*. Roma: Saggi Ediesse, 2015.

### INSIGHT 14.1 Rising Up Against a System of Near-Slavery *SOS Rosarno*<sup>19</sup>

The municipality of Rosarno, in the region of Calabria, is one of the most fertile areas in Italy. The town of Rosarno stands on a terrace overlooking the Plain of Gioia Tauro, where the landscape is cloaked in olive plantations, fruit trees and vineyards. However, large part of the land on the plain has been left fallow, paving the way to the creation of new forms of latifundia and a wave of speculation by legal and illegal enterprises. Work relations in agriculture are shaped by these developments and, undoubtedly, as described in the article above, here too migrant workers face horrendous risks, compounded by their absolute vulnerability.<sup>20</sup>

Against this backdrop, an upsurge of 'itinerant migration' has increased the labor force, ready to battle it out over precarious jobs in agriculture. Thousands of migrants (especially Africans, who are either seasonal or settled workers, as well as immigrants from Eastern Europe) arrive early autumn and remain until early summer to make a living from harvesting citrus and olives, or from whatever job they can find. Concentrated in slums that look like ghettos (such as San Ferdinando, near the town of Rosarno), and grouped in large foul-smelling houses scattered throughout the countryside, they set out on their journey at the crack of dawn, waiting at the crossroads for landowners or intermediaries to take them to the fields to work for outrageously low wages (about € 20 to € 25 a day).

The top-down political and economic choices are determining factors in this situation. Over recent decades, the forced industrialization of the fertile Plain of Gioia Tauro, and the approval of 'environmental plans' such as incinerators, power plants, gas turbines and mega-gas terminals have all led to the degradation of this 'Mediterranean garden'. To add to this, small-scale farmers in the region are also subjugated to market forces and suffer the consequences: Major economic powers, after all, determine the price of citrus fruits. In turn, social conflicts between people living in poverty are intensified: the knock-on effect is all the more visible in a society like ours, which is driven by profit. Thus, the exploited exploit the weak—and migrant workers and asylum seekers, especially Africans, are reduced to cheap labor.

Nevertheless, there are pockets of resistance and solidarity and the region is spotted with some examples of alternative practices. In full compliance with current legislation, the SOS Rosarno Association and the Mani e Terra cooperative have joined forces, underpinned by the respect for human beings and for our planet. These two social, economic and cultural organizations of peasants and migrants in the territory of Rosarno work jointly to denounce and monitor the precarious living and working conditions of agricultural workers. Their main goal is to combat the slave-like conditions that engender a loss of human dignity among migrant crop-pickers.

In order to change the system at its roots, both organizations rent land in the region and grow fruit and vegetables, which are sold directly on the local and regional markets or processed and canned and distributed more widely. This production system guarantees a decent income for peasant farmers and workers as well as fair prices for consumers, especially for those who are most suffering the effects of the economic crisis. It demonstrates that there can be a direct relationship between producers and consumers; they can be players in the same team. Clearly, the local food system, a source of life for all, works perfectly well without labor intermediaries who feed on social deprivation.

19 *SOS Rosarno* is an association of migrant workers and farmers in southern Italy, whose work is based on solidarity and organic agriculture. For more information, please visit: [www.sosrosarno.org](http://www.sosrosarno.org). Special thanks to Paola de Meo (Terra Nuova), Judith Hitchman (URGENCI) and Antonio Onorati (Centro Internazionale Crocevia) for their support in reviewing this insight box. This insight box was originally written in French.

20 For more information on the situation of migrant workers in Rosarno, please see: Wasley, Andrew. "How Italy's oranges are linked to modern day story of exploitation." *The Guardian*, February 18, 2016. Available at: [www.theguardian.com/sustainable-business/2016/feb/18/italy-oranges-slavery-coca-cola-exploitation](http://www.theguardian.com/sustainable-business/2016/feb/18/italy-oranges-slavery-coca-cola-exploitation). Please also see: Hooper, John. "Southern Italian town world's 'only white town' after ethnic cleansing." *The Guardian*, January 11, 2011. Available at: [www.theguardian.com/world/2010/jan/11/italy-rosarno-violence-immigrants](http://www.theguardian.com/world/2010/jan/11/italy-rosarno-violence-immigrants).