
ARTÍCULOS / ARTICLES

IMMIGRANT WORKERS IN THE EUROPEAN AGRICULTURAL SECTOR IN TIMES OF COVID-19. REGULATIONS, WORKING CONDITIONS AND NEW (IN)MOBILITIES

LOS TRABAJADORES INMIGRANTES EN EL SECTOR AGRÍCOLA EUROPEO EN TIEMPOS DE COVID-19. REGLAMENTOS, CONDICIONES DE TRABAJO Y NUEVAS (IN)MOVILIDADES

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Since the end of the 20th century, the presence of migrant workers in the globalised agricultural enclaves of the world-system's core has been increasing and has become a structural workforce for the sector (Molinero-Gerbeau, 2020). There are several reasons for the growing need of this economic segment to employ people mostly coming from the global periphery.

Firstly, following the model launched in the middle of the last century in California, many enclaves opted to make the leap to industrial agriculture, a process consisting of applying the productive logics of the secondary sector to the countryside (FitzSimmons, 1986). Thus, as opposed to peasant or traditional farming, predominant in several countries until the 1980s, industrial agriculture turned rural areas into veritable factories where, applying the Fordist model of chain labour combined with the introduction of technical and technological innovations, robust agro-industries capable of producing tons of food to satisfy world markets were erected (Moraes et al., 2012).

Industrial agriculture, however, soon encountered a structural problem. Its growing need for salaried labour clashed with both an ageing population and the constant rural exodus of citizens who were progressively leaving the countryside to migrate to the cities, reducing the possibilities of obtaining stable sources of employment in the territory. This was coupled with unattractive working conditions, characterised by low wages, irregular working hours and for being an arduous activity associated with low social prestige (López-Sala, 2016).

For an industry structured around the production of cheap food (Molinero-Gerbeau and Avallone, 2016), minimising the cost of labour became imperative to ensure competitiveness in the aggressive international market and to sell at the prices imposed by large food distributors (Garrapa, 2018). Supported by the states, which designed specific policies to guarantee the supply of cheap labour required by the sector, large companies found a solution to their needs in the growing South-North immigration.

The insertion of migrant workers in the sector thus made possible to maintain its scheme of combining intensive production with precarious working conditions. Coming from peripheral environments whose economic differential with respect to the destination states was abysmal, migrants soon showed their willingness to accept conditions that were not only relatively attractive compared to what was offered in their countries of origin, but also allowed them to start a life in the countries of destination, often regardless of their legal residence status.

Over time, the migrant presence became “structuralised” in enclaves of countries such as the United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Japan, the United Kingdom, as well as in many countries of the European Union, becoming an indispensable source of labour for neoliberal agriculture (Molinero-Gerbeau, 2020). However, far from being the result of a synergy between transnational productive needs, the extreme precariousness of both working and residence conditions that have characterised many of these enclaves reveals a model based on the hyper-exploitation of an international proletariat constituted by a large (and replaceable) reserve army limited by restrictive migration regulations (Avallone, 2014). This situation, which over the last decades was denounced by several studies and by protest actions led by migrants themselves and by diverse social collectives, did not activate public authorities who, far from wanting to improve these conditions, tended to act as facilitators so that employers could have the means they needed.

The arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020 will come as a profound shock to these schemes. For a sector heavily dependent on the recruitment of mobile workers, the mobility restrictions put in place to curb the spread of the virus put an unprecedented brake on their ability to make workers available for campaigns. In addition, the fact that many migrants were in an irregular situation meant that they could not go to their jobs because they did not have contracts to prove their status, despite the legal exceptions quickly put in place by several countries to consider agricultural workers as “essential” and therefore exempt from quarantine.

At the level of public opinion, the declaration of this labour force as essential allowed the spotlight to be shone on a sector that had hitherto been invisible. In a context in which leaving home was severely punished, producing food became a vital necessity. This led both the public and the media to focus on the countryside, and become increasingly interested in those who, by

exposing themselves to the virus, risked their health to provide food for all of us.

Soon the conditions of exploitation, precariousness and misery occupied an important place in the public debate in many countries, which were then joined by the fear that new sources of contagion would emerge from these conditions. The problem was not COVID-19, it was the industrial production model whose pattern no longer only attacked migrants themselves, but now threatened to affect societies as a whole (Molinero-Gerbeau, 2021).

This new tension around a sector that is as key to any national production system as it became dangerous for the health security of society generated a series of dynamics which, manifested in different ways in the diverse globalised agricultural enclaves, are the ones we have sought to analyse in this issue.

The geographical dimension plays a key role here, as not only did each state react differently to the pandemic challenge in this field, but global agriculture, being organised around differentiated enclaves with very particular productive, political and social logics (Molinero-Gerbeau and Avallone, 2016), gave rise to disparate situations in the local management of agricultural work during the pandemic.

This issue aims to reflect, from a spatial perspective, on how a global phenomenon, that of the insertion of migrant workers in neoliberal agriculture, has been governed at the state and local level in various European spaces to cope with another global phenomenon such as the pandemic. With this premise, we pursued three objectives: to see what types of extraordinary regulations were articulated and which new mobilities were activated to manage the availability of migrant workers in agriculture, to identify the impact of the pandemic on the working and residential conditions of these workers, and to highlight the agency actions deployed by migrants themselves to improve these contexts.

With the aim of providing an extensive but also in-depth analysis of this situation, the editors have sought to focus the compiled articles on the European case, showing how, in the same geopolitical space affected by a pandemic, different responses have been given and new mobilities have been activated that have completely changed the panorama.

This monograph will be made up of articles dedicated to analysing the governance of migrant agricultural labour in two Eastern European countries, Romania

and Poland, both of which are the countries of origin of a large part of the agricultural labour force in Europe, although Poland is also a destination country. As a representative of the North of the continent, we will analyse the British context and, focusing on the South, we will analyse the Italian and Spanish cases, both of which produce almost 50% of the fresh fruit and vegetables sold on the continent (Molinero-Gerbeau, 2020). At the regional level, we will delve more deeply into the Spanish reality, including specific case-studies of the enclaves of Huelva, Murcia and Ribera del Xúquer (Valencia), which will show how differentiated tensions have emerged within the same state and have been governed by actors in very different ways.

In the first article, entitled ““Everything changes, everything stays the same”. The governance of migrant labour in Spanish and Italian agriculture in the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic”, Sajir, Molinero-Gerbeau and Avallone make a comparison between how the Italian and Spanish states administered the availability of agricultural labour during the first year of the pandemic. Focusing on the management of the public debate, the authors show how the context under COVID-19 reinforced the utilitarian logic that has characterised the approach of both governments to the availability of migrant agricultural labour for decades, and how the applied policies have been a faithful reflection of this. Thus, formally, it would seem that the governments of the two countries, different in their ideological orientation, have opted for diverse paths, with Italy advocating for a massive regularisation of undocumented workers while Spain, having opposed it, opted instead for the employment of the unemployed and minors formerly under guardianship. However, as the authors will point out, the specific materialisation of concrete measures obscures the fact that both states govern migrant agricultural labour from the same perspective, one that ignores minimum conditions of decent work and housing, excludes migrants from public debate and, replicating neo-colonial logics, imposes the availability of labour for the sector as the sole objective. Although the pandemic represented a historic opportunity to reverse the dramatic situation of thousands of agricultural workers, many of whom have been living and working in subhuman conditions for decades, the policies applied were exclusively geared towards satisfying the demands of agribusiness, whose need for labour became the central problem for the Spanish and Italian governments. The title of the article is a good reflection of what happened, as the measures adopted to deal with the radical change brought about by the

pandemic served, as a famous sentence from the novel “The Leopard” said, to keep everything the same.

In the second article, entitled “The COVID-19 pandemic as an opportunity to bring the migration of agricultural workers into focus through media coverage” Şerban and Croitoru offer a perspective from one of the main countries of origin of migrants working in European agriculture, Romania. As the authors point out, those who choose to migrate to work in the primary sector in other countries are often not only invisible at destination, but do not enjoy any kind of visibility in their areas of origin, even though their emigration has significant effects there as well. According to the authors, the COVID-19 pandemic has provided an opportunity to reverse this as, with the border closure imposed by the EU, Eastern European workers were among the few migrants allowed to move internally for agricultural work, creating a race between countries for this labour force. From Romania, the press dealt with this issue, debating between the message of the essentiality of their work and the fear that they would be carriers of the virus, although, as the authors rightly point out, this message would reproduce a discourse rather similar to that of the destination states. Perhaps what is most remarkable is the fact that the migration issue carries less weight in the Romanian press than their status as Romanians, thus showing a certain patriotism that connects those who went to carry out agricultural work during the beginning of the pandemic more with the country’s diaspora than with the temporary mobilities that are of so much interest in the countries of immigration. Nevertheless, the article highlights the missed opportunity to promote a national debate on a type of migration that, despite being crucial for producers in the main European enclaves, goes unnoticed in the country of origin. In fact, the systematic analysis carried out by the authors once again highlights a prioritisation of governmental and, above all, business perspectives, which demonstrates the strength of the utilitarian discourse that, although it does not seem to benefit the contexts of origin, is also reproduced there.

In the third article, entitled “Agricultural exceptionalism, migrant farmworkers and the pandemic - evidence from Poland as a new immigrant destination country” Fiałkowska, Matuszczyk and Szulecka address the Polish case not as a country of origin of workers, but as a new destination country for migrant farmworkers. The research, based on a multi-situated ethnographic methodology, will show how, while for decades Poland has been one of the main countries of

origin of migrants engaged in agricultural work in Europe, it has also been during the same time a country of destination, given its dynamic primary sector that requires a huge number of workers coming mainly from Ukraine. Interestingly, the logics described by the authors coincide with those prevailing in contexts as distant as Spain and Italy, where the working and living conditions of agricultural workers have never received public attention, nor have measures been put in place to control and improve the sector. During the pandemic, as the article shows, a series of exceptional measures were put in place, as occurred in many other states, to guarantee the availability of workers, but none aimed at ensuring that their work was done in dignified and safe conditions. Once again, their declaration as essential and the public focus placed on these workers not only did not serve to change their conditions, but the migrants themselves often saw the pandemic situation not as a moment of vindication, but as an exceptional context that justified their compliance with conditions that were perceived as exceptional by them, despite the fact that they had been the predominant ones in the sector for decades. This article thus reveals how the normalisation of exploitative and precarious conditions is a common defining feature of neoliberal agriculture based on producing cheap food and pushing down the cost of labour, a predominant logic in countries as diverse as Poland, Italy and Canada.

In the fourth article of this monograph, entitled “Media reporting of labour shortages in UK horticulture during the COVID-19 pandemic: the use of wartime metaphors in the selective unveiling of precarious work/ workers” Scott and O’Reilly focus their study on the British case. Again, as in the article by Şerban and Croitoru, these authors will conduct an analysis of how the media have treated the national need for migrant labour in agriculture during the pandemic. In this case, however, the pandemic will be a moment where this issue will not come spontaneously to the fore for the first time in decades, but as part of a government strategy to obtain the necessary labour for the sector. Thus, there will be the paradox that the actor that will put the spotlight on the prevailing conditions in the sector will not be the media, but the government itself, which will articulate what the authors have called a “rhetoric of war” in order to deal with the shortage of workers. This discourse will serve not only to normalise the precariousness of the sector, but also to highlight the employers as victims of the lack of labour and the migrants as national heroes who carry out work that is indispensable for

the survival of the state. In a way, these discourses will, in the context of Brexit, seek to activate the national workforce, conceived as “lazy” for not wanting to pitch in to help the country in a situation of need. With slogans such as “Feed the Nation” or “Harvest for Britain”, the government, and therefore the media, ended up normalising extremely precarious working and living conditions that were romanticised in order to focus the public debate not on how to produce, but on the need to produce, a national demand to which everyone should contribute.

With the fifth article of this special issue, we now turn to the Spanish case, focusing on how some of its most characteristic productive enclaves governed migrant labour during the pandemic.

The article by Torres-Pérez and Pérez-Alonso, “Essential but forgotten. Migrants picking fruits during the COVID-19 pandemic in Valencia” looks at the case of agricultural migrant workers in La Ribera del Xúquer, a Valencian citrus-producing area during the first year of the pandemic. Based on extensive fieldwork, and focusing on an agricultural enclave that is not as well-known as others included in this monograph, the article shows that during the pandemic, although the situations of risk in agricultural harvesting were common to all workers (both Spanish and immigrants), they affected them to a lesser or greater extent depending on their origin, the position they occupied in the ethnofragmented work structure and, more broadly, their social and living conditions. In this context, the pandemic situation and the measures taken have reinforced the pre-existing ethnic segmentation of the labour market. Throughout, the authors argue that the pandemic caused by the COVID-19 virus has exacerbated existing inequalities, rather than creating new realities. They also point out that the pandemic revealed two major paradoxes: firstly, that most of the workers who ensured social sustainability were employed in extremely precarious conditions and of little social value; and secondly, that those on whom we depend on to ensure that sustainability was put at risk (increased risk of contagion and disease). The authors conclude, on the basis of the research carried out, that during the first year of the pandemic, an unequal distribution of risk was observed, and that the type of contract (permanent-discontinuous or temporary), the entity being worked for (cooperative or temporary work agency) and the living conditions (accommodation and living conditions) became determining factors in this risk. The social recognition of agricultural workers as essential has not led, however, to improvements in working conditions or to

the adoption of far-reaching measures to minimise risks, which is why, in their opinion, migrant agricultural workers can be considered as the most ignored and mistreated essential workers.

In “Purity and danger in Spanish agriculture: farm workers during the pandemic”, Pedreño, Sánchez-García, Gadea and de Castro focus on another Spanish area where agriculture plays a major role - the region of Murcia - with an approach that is very much in line with the previous article. Their contribution aims to reconstruct sociologically the implications of what the authors have called “the paradox of agricultural workers during the pandemic”. That is, that their consideration as essential workers meant, simultaneously, their conversion into workers at risk and a cause for public alarm. Drawing on the logics of purity and danger identified by Mary Douglas, the article analyses how some of the public health strategies developed by institutions during the pandemic contributed to reinforcing the invisibility and vulnerability of migrant workers. The article also shows that by being placed in the realm of the impure and the dangerous, foreign agricultural workers were unable to receive the health care they required and their living spaces thus became environments conducive to contagion. The authors argue that during the pandemic the mismatch between the view of migrants as workers (in the workspace, their legitimate space) and the view of migrants as threat (in the social sphere and thus outside their legitimate space) became deeper and more complex, as these workers were perceived as essential (increasing their usefulness), but at the same time also as a threat to society and health (exacerbating their threat). The article also explores how the absence of self-care, in the Foucaultian sense of the term, has contributed to the fact that both field workers and those employed in packing plants have become one of the most vulnerable segments of the population during the pandemic and one of the main “hotspots of infection”. The structural working and living conditions they face have increased difficulties for them to develop an ethic of self-care, particularly among those in the most subordinate positions. Self-care among agricultural workers will remain undeveloped as long as the rights that would enable it remain unrecognised.

In “Intersectionality meets seasonal agricultural work: the case of Huelva in times of COVID-19” Güell analyses the processes of discrimination and abuse embedded in the rationality and *modus operandi* of Spanish temporary recruitment programmes at origin, focusing on the case of Huelva, perhaps the most in-

ternationally known agricultural enclave of Spain. The article analyses three aspects of these programmes in which these forms of discrimination are observed: a) the recruitment procedure, b) working conditions and c) housing conditions. In this way, the research, theoretically framed within the intersectional perspective and the feminist contributions of the world-ecology approach, shows the conformation of different axes of inequality (maternity, ethnicity, rural origin) and the practices of exploitation and discrimination suffered by women from Morocco working in Huelva. It also analyses how these intersectional inequalities are geographically concentrated in a specific temporal and spatial context that plays a fundamental role in the construction of power relations on a structural scale. This contribution shows how the recruitment system incorporates a clear form of intersectoral institutional discrimination based on the exclusive selection of middle-aged women from rural areas with family responsibilities. In this sense, the interaction between motherhood, gender, ethnicity, rural origin, age and cultural background shapes an ideal type of worker who can easily be subjected to the hierarchical power relations established by employers. These forms of discrimination are also observed in labour relations where there is a lack of compliance with working and accommodation conditions. The extreme dependence of these women on the contracts established with the employers limits their possibilities of denouncing abuses, especially if they also want to participate in future campaigns within the programmes that are implemented each year. As the author points out, although these women manifest various forms of agency, their low education and lack of language skills, as well as the reproduction of traditional gender roles, reinforce patterns of exploitation that are also conditioned by a tight control of their mobility. Finally, the article reflects on the embedding of this type of mobility management in post-colonial relations that foster the vulnerable position of women seasonal workers and that determine that the inequalities experienced in Morocco are also reproduced in Spain.

Finally, in “Voices from the fields. Migrant agriculture workers during COVID-19 in Spain and new forms of activism for dignity”, López-Sala analyses how the health crisis has made visible many of the structural and endemic problems that immigrant labour in the Spanish agricultural sector has suffered from over the last few decades. The precariousness of legal status and working conditions has been compounded by housing conditions (occupation of abandoned infrastructures, use of substandard housing and the appearance of in-

formal settlements). These structural problems have, however, traditionally been ignored by the administration, in a policy of indifference, which has focused on managing mobility as opposed to managing presence. However, during the pandemic, the emergence of a narrative about their essential nature, even incorporated into political discourse, together with the visibility of their working and living conditions, has acted as catalyst that has generated, promoted or consolidated a series of demands and struggles of these migrants articulated around what the author calls the right to a dignified life. These migrant struggles have been the result of three types of tensions that have manifested themselves in a particularly expressive way with the emergence of COVID-19: the tension between essentiality and disposability, between temporality and “permanence”, and between active and passive citizenship. Thus, these forms of protest, although precarious and volatile, have placed migrant workers at the centre of social and academic attention for the first time in Spain’s recent migratory history. The analysis carried out shows the formation of inclusive, transversal and intersectional solidarities that have given rise to hybrid mobilisations around the claim for regularisation, labour rights, right to housing, right to health or the right to water.

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