
ARTÍCULOS / ARTICLES

“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

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Abstract: The COVID-19 pandemic placed great stress on food supply chains, following the policies adopted to contain the spread of the virus. The labour shortages in agriculture emerged early in Spain and Italy during the first months of the pandemic revealed the essential role of migrant farmworkers in ensuring food security. The purpose of this article is twofold: firstly, to examine whether the coronavirus pandemic contributed to change the public and political attitudes towards farm work and migration; secondly, to assess which type of epistemological perspective prevailed in these countries when debating on seasonal migration and industrial agriculture. The article uses a mix of research methods based on the Critical Discourse Approach, which includes a systematic review of media sources, the examination of relevant legal and administrative acts, the analysis of secondary statistical data, and, finally, the analysis of auto-representations and proposals put forward by migrant farmworkers and trade unions through their blogs, websites, and Facebook accounts. The major trends found as a result of this analysis indicate that even though the pandemic contributed to shed light in both countries on the pivotal role of migrant farmworkers and the forms of labour exploitation they suffer in the agricultural sector, this increased visibility did not shift into real policy and attitudes changes. At the heart of this problem is the fictitious separation between labour and capital, whereby migrant agricultural labour remains on the sidelines of the major discussions centered around the capital that are undergoing in European advanced economies.

Keywords: migrant farmworkers, coronavirus, seasonal migration, industrial agriculture, labour mobility, regularization, COVID-19, social conditionality

“Todo cambia, todo sigue igual”. La gobernanza de la mano de obra migrante en la agricultura española e italiana en el primer año de la pandemia de Covid-19

Resumen: La pandemia de la COVID-19 junto con las políticas adoptadas para contener la propagación del virus, tensionaron profundamente las cadenas de suministro de alimentos. En ello, la temprana escasez de mano de obra en la agricultura surgida a raíz de estos acontecimientos en España e Italia puso de manifiesto el papel esencial de los trabajadores agrícolas migrantes para garantizar la seguridad alimentaria. El propósito de este artículo es doble: en primer lugar, se perseguirá examinar si la pandemia causada por el coronavirus contribuyó a cambiar las actitudes públicas y políticas hacia el trabajo agrícola y la migración; en segundo lugar, se evaluará qué tipo de perspectiva epistemológica prevaleció en estos países al debatir sobre migración estacional y agricultura industrial. Para ello, el artículo utilizará una combinación de métodos de investigación basados en el Enfoque Crítico del Discurso que incluye una revisión sistemática de noticias producidas por los medios de comunicación, el examen de actos jurídicos y administrativos, el estudio de los datos estadísticos secundarios y, por último, el análisis de las autorrepresentaciones y propuestas formuladas por los trabajadores agrícolas migrantes y los sindicatos a través de sus blogs, sitios web y cuentas de Facebook. Las principales tendencias identificadas en este análisis señalan que, aunque la pandemia contribuyó a arrojar luz en ambos países sobre el papel fundamental de los trabajadores migrantes y las formas de explotación laboral moderna que sufren en el sector agrícola, esta mayor visibilidad no se tradujo en cambios reales de políticas y actitudes. Como se pondrá de manifiesto, en el centro de este problema se encuentra la separación ficticia entre el trabajo y el capital,

por la que la mano de obra agrícola migrante permanece al margen de los grandes debates introducidos por las economías avanzadas europeas, centradas exclusivamente en el capital.

Palabras Clave: trabajadores agrícolas migrantes, coronavirus, migración estacional, agricultura industrial, movilidad laboral, regularización, COVID-19, condicionalidad social

INTRODUCTION

The coronavirus crisis has shown in the clearest possible way the centrality of food production in human daily life together with the fact that large parts of farming production in Europe depends on migrant workers. In the countries early affected by the crisis, Italy and Spain, the debate about labour shortages in agriculture, especially for seasonal agricultural crops, sparked off in the first two weeks of the crisis in March 2020, following the adoption of measures aimed at reducing the spread of the SARS-CoV-2 virus and the implementation of closed border policies which prevented movement across Europe, ultimately threatening food security.

This paper has two aims: first, to explore whether the COVID-19 pandemic has changed the public and political attitudes toward farm work and migration; second, to assess which epistemological perspective has been embraced to talk about migration during the first year of the pandemic.

Therefore, the major objective of this study is to firstly examine how the main political parties, the current governments in Italy and Spain, and EU institutions envisaged to adapt farm work to the new conditions created by the coronavirus crisis. The political attitudes developed have been examined by focusing on the first political and institutional reactions evoked by this new situation, sifting through all relevant political proposals that have been put forward since the beginning of the crisis in the two countries, Italy and Spain. In particular, by closely observing this debate we can identify which type of policies were proposed at the onset of the pandemic and which ones were implemented to ensure the inflow and availability of foreign workers and also investigate whether some specific political groups were inclined to propose new farm labour's rights, new migration policies and a different management of the food supply chains.

Secondly, the purpose of this study is to examine what kind of epistemological attitude towards migration prevailed in the public and political debate, focusing on the main narratives developed throughout the debate, in order to evaluate to what extent this has been led by State and national society's narratives and interests, or whether migrant farmworkers' narratives and interests played a more prominent role.

The words and narratives used to observe, describe, and make sense of a social phenomenon are not neutral. This is even more true in the case of migrations, which have been historically studied and understood through an approach based on the centrality of the immigration State and its interest (Sayad, 2007; see also Dahinden, 2016). This State-centric approach has traditionally inserted migrants in an epistemological relationship in which they occupy the position of object, determined by others, thus nullifying their own lives and characteristics, whose definitions are determined by subjects, institutions and forces empowered to carry out this operation of attribution of characteristics.

This article is structured as follows. In the next section of the article, we present our methodological approach to study the observed phenomena. Subsequently, in the third section, we describe the situation of migrant farm work in Italy and Spain prior to the crisis, highlighting its structural centrality as well as their social and political marginality. In the following section we discuss the impacts of the COVID-19 crisis in Italy and Spain's food sectors during the first year of the pandemic, showing the political measures adopted to address the predicted labour shortage. The fifth section isolates and examines factors of discontinuity in the social and political debate on migrant farm work in Italy and Spain. We end the article with a concluding discussion on the migration-agricultural labour nexus during the pandemic reflecting on the valuable lessons that can be drawn and setting the conditions under which the increased visibility of labour exploitation in the agricultural sector can shift into real policy and practice changes.

METHODOLOGY

The perspective followed to achieve the stated objectives is based on the critical discourse analysis (CDA) which is used to study primarily the way social-power abuse and inequality are enacted, reproduced, legitimated, and resisted by text and talk in the social and political context (van Dijk, 2015). CDA, rather than being a uniform methodology related to a single theoretical approach, is more properly described as an "academic movement" (Baker et al., 2008); it is actively and openly interested in effecting social change by studying the implicit and indirect meanings in talks and texts and focusing on practices of dominance

and resistance behind language, with the objective of identifying, revealing and critiquing facets of power structures that contribute to systemic social inequality, which are ultimately enacted, re-produced, and resisted by language (Gellen and Lowe, 2020).

The article is based on CDA applying a mix of research methods oriented to identify, describe, and interpret the main public discourses developed around the link between migration and farm work during the observed pandemic period. The methods used included the analysis of public and official secondary statistical data; a systematic review of mass media and specialised media sources; the examination of relevant legal and administrative acts passed by Spain, Italy and the European Commission; and finally, the analysis of auto-representation and proposals made by migrant farmworkers' groups and trade unions through their websites and Facebook pages.

These methods were chosen to examine the migration-agricultural labour nexus during the pandemic focusing on the working and living conditions of migrant agricultural labourers, the policies adopted to combat the detrimental effects of the pandemic, the different proposals debated and the public and more underground narratives developed, updated and changed, also on the basis of the new epidemiological data available on the spread of the new coronavirus. At the same time, these chosen methods allowed us to identify the different points of view and narratives developed during the pandemic, and consider also the needs and preferences of those migrants involved in agricultural work who were directly affected by the decisions on mobility taken by the EU and single member states, as well as the perspectives of the main associations of agricultural employers and trade unions in Italy and Spain.

With the approach determined, the research procedures followed for this article were structured as follow: firstly, we conducted a background research on the main policies and initiatives on migration and agricultural labour taken at the European level as well as in Italy and Spain at the national, regional, and municipal level in response to the health and economic crisis created by the pandemic; we then proceeded to isolate and extract the main keywords that populated these official texts, organising these in thematic categories that reflected their scope (e.g. EU, Ministry of Agriculture, Regional government); and finally, we used these keywords to guide the selection of textual, video, and audio materials examined between February 2020 and April 2021.

Before delving into the content and results of this analysis, the next section presents a detailed review of the migrant-agricultural labour nexus in the Italian and Spanish contexts before the breakout of the pandemic.

THE EMPIRICAL SITUATION OF MIGRANT FARM WORK IN ITALY AND SPAIN PRIOR TO THE CRISIS

Spain and Italy are two highly comparable cases as they underwent similar processes in relation to the historical evolution of their agricultural sectors as well as the employment of migrant labourers (Molinero-Gerbeau and Avallone, 2018). Agriculture has been one of the economic pillars of both countries, remaining, according to ISTAT, the main employer sector until the 1960s in Italy and 1970s in Spain (Mata Romeu, 2018). The productive schemes implemented in both countries were also very similar; in those years predominated a family-owned agriculture with subsistence income and a strong orientation towards local sales circuits.

However, from the 1970s onwards, an industrial agricultural model gradually began to be implemented, accompanying a total transformation of national economies, this time oriented towards tertiarisation (Pedreño Cánovas, 1998).

Industrial agriculture is characterised by the conversion of fields into food factories. Through the application of the Fordist regime of production and the implementation of specific technologies, such as greenhouses and the application of chemical fertilisers, among others, it was finally possible to mass produce tons of fresh products largely oriented towards exportation (FitzSimmons, 1986). The process of conversion towards an industrialised agriculture was progressive and reached its peak only in the 1990s when Spain and Italy, members of the recently created European Union, became its main producers of fresh fruits and vegetables (Molinero-Gerbeau, 2020a; Avallone y Ramírez Melgarejo, 2017).

One of the main features of industrial agriculture is its critical need for wage labour, in contrast to traditional agriculture where the family unit was sufficient to grow crops. This strong demand for labour entails a twofold problem: on the one hand, rural spaces had been emptying for decades, as cities offered more and better working opportunities compared to the countryside, and, on the other hand, the jobs offered are unattractive since agricultural work is notoriously arduous and poorly paid (López-Sala, 2016). The combination of these factors quickly caused problems in finding labour.

Facing this situation, agricultural producers found in the growing emigration directed to both countries, a solution to this problem, as foreign workers, usually with irregular status, were willing to accept any job. Thus, agriculture soon emerged as a refuge for a large number of migrants looking for jobs, regardless of their legal status (Avallone, 2017).

Over time, the percentage of agricultural workers of migrant origin grew in importance in both countries. In the last decade, in Spain, according to the Active Population Survey (Encuesta de Población Activa – EPA, in Spanish) it reached 20% of the labour force, whilst in Italy it has been steadily growing from 10% to 18% according to ISTAT (Molinero-Gerbeau, 2020a). Today, it can be said that migrant labour is a structural element of production in both countries, as it fulfils a double function for its reproduction: it guarantees the availability of labour as well as cheap food production (Sajir, 2021). This last point is central, because in a neoliberal context of global competition, where large distributors set selling prices (Garrapa, 2018), according to the entrepreneurs themselves, labour is the only cost they can control (Filhol, 2013). Within this regime of production the commercial businesses, acting as intermediaries or final buyers, are able to put strong pressure on agricultural producers for the price of their produce, leaving the downward pressure on labour costs, supposedly, as the only available way to face price limitation and guarantee the profitability of their business. The irregular status of migrant labour then serves two purposes: firstly, to attract workers to a sector whose main appeal lies in offering a job to those who are not legally authorised to work; and secondly, to ensure that wages are not only low, but sometimes below the legal minimum, ensuring productive profitability (Molinero-Gerbeau and Avallone, 2016).

This structural condition explains the subaltern insertion of migrants in the agricultural productive scheme of Spain and Italy, whose working conditions, according to the vast majority of studies, are characterised by precariousness and exploitation (Rye and Scott, 2018). Yet, this contrasts sharply with their essential role in keeping alive a sector that is critical not only for the Spanish and Italian economies but for the European Union as a whole, since the ability of producing cheaper food is fundamental for capitalism' productive schemes (Moore, 2010).

Although this logic has been the basic feature of the agro-industrial production model in Spain and Italy, their sectors were affected in different ways.

In Italy, the incidence of irregularity in agriculture has remained high over time, ranging from the most optimistic estimates of the National Institute of Agricultural Economics (INEA, 2014), which would reach 12.2% of the workforce, to the estimates of the Public Body for Research on Issues of Social and Labour Policy Formation (ISFOL, 2014), which raise it to 41.6%. This has been combined with a succession of massive regularisations that has not always led to any improvement in their living conditions, as keeping the contract is a *sine qua non* for renewing the permit. This is what has come to be known as “grey work” (Avallone, 2017); a job that formally complies with the basic legal requirements of having a contract and a residence permit, whilst, among other strategies, keeping remuneration below the legal threshold, a condition that most foreign workers accept in order to aspire to permanent residence and in the absence of real employment alternatives. These conditions have thus become the “labour standard” in the sector (De Castro, 2014) and have therefore ended up also being applied to workers from Eastern Europe, who, despite holding a valid residence permit, have had to accept the same low wages offered to other foreign workers.

In Spain, although there has always been a certain percentage of irregular employment, two main elements have contributed to keep it to a minimum: 1) the implementation of temporary migration programmes in specific enclaves, known as *Contratación en Origen* and 2) the growing reliance on labour migrants from Eastern Europe.

Temporary migration programmes were implemented mainly in two provinces, Huelva (in Andalusia) and Lleida (in Catalonia), both characterised by a strong seasonality and thereby making it possible to bring in workers from third countries for short periods of time to carry out agricultural work. Their high flexibility, where employers decide when contracts should start and end and how many hours migrants must work each day, ultimately determining their income, along with the payment of the legal minimum wage, meant that, despite complying with the law, these programmes were highly profitable for producers (Molinero-Gerbeau, 2020b).

On the other hand, the employment of workers from the East (mainly Romania) provided a stable, efficient and cheap workforce that made it unnecessary to employ irregular workers on a massive scale. Even so, irregular labour has always been present; yet, in the last two decades, this has been employed as supplementary workforce, notably when production

needs could not be covered by labour from Eastern Europe or the programme (Márquez Domínguez and Gordo Márquez, 2014).

Despite the differences existing between Spain and Italy, the same logic has predominated in both countries: their industrial agriculture has relied heavily on the subaltern incorporation of migrant workers as a way of guaranteeing cheap production. An important paradox has thus arisen: while migrants play an absolutely essential role in the Spanish and Italian, as well as European, economies, these have been condemned to social marginality as well as worked and lived under deplorable working conditions.

FIRST IMPACTS OF THE COVID-19 CRISIS IN ITALY AND SPAIN'S FOOD SECTORS

The labour conditions and relationships described in the previous section have remained more or less intact over the last two decades, until the health crisis caused by the spread of COVID-19 disrupted the entire sector in both countries.

In the case of Spain, the first confinement was decreed on the 14th of March, barely a month after Philip Alston's (UN Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights) had visited the shantytowns in Huelva, where live some 500 migrant farmworkers. The UN Special Rapporteur decided to carry this visit with the specific purpose of examining migrant farmworkers' living conditions in the most emblematic agricultural enclave of the country, famous not only for being the second world's largest strawberry producer (Molinero-Gerbeau and Avallone, 2018) but also for the bad working and housing conditions imposed on workers. In his official statement after visiting Spain, Alston said:

In Huelva, I met with workers living in a migrant settlement in conditions that rival the worst I have seen anywhere in the world. They are kilometers away from water, and live without electricity or adequate sanitation. Many have lived there for years and can afford to pay rent, but said no one will accept them as tenants. They are earning as little as 30 euros per day, and have almost no access to any form of government support. One person told me, "When there's work, Spain needs migrants, but no one is interested in our living conditions". [...] the conditions I observed in Huelva are simply inhuman (Alston, 2020).

Those words strongly echoed in the media, making migrant farmworker's conditions become a hot topic in public discussions, however, weeks later, the spread

of the SARS-CoV-2 virus attracted public attention, making the issue of seasonal workers' conditions disappear, but only momentarily, since labour shortages in agriculture soon became a topic of national debate.

The measures implemented in response to the pandemic did not affect directly those workers who had a valid residence and work permit, considering that in the first Royal Decree 463/2020 of the 14th March, which imposed home quarantine for most of the population, they were considered as "essential workers" and therefore were not affected by mobility restrictions (Ministerio de Trabajo y Economía Social, 2020). Yet soon after, the sector trembled at the possibility of not having the required workforce for two reasons: on the one hand, irregular workers in agriculture, which are estimated around 20,000 in the whole country (Fanjul and Gálvez-Iniesta, 2020) did not have any document proving their labour condition and thus, were not authorized to go to their workplaces. On the other hand, the international closure of borders completely blocked the arrival of workers from Eastern Europe and places such as Morocco, the country from which the Spanish temporary migration program usually recruits most of the foreign seasonal-circular workers (Molinero-Gerbeau, 2020b). As a result of these restrictions, of the approximately 17,000 workers who were supposed to come to work in the fields of Huelva in 2020, only 7,000 could reach their destination (Martín and Saiz, 2020).

Taking advantage of the fact that the words of the UN Special Rapporteur were still ringing, irregular workers residing in the settlements organised themselves to demand a massive regularisation to obtain legal documents and thus go to work. The campaign was quickly supported by numerous social organisations which using the hashtag *#regularizaciónya* (regularization now), called on the government to put an end to their irregular situation so as to avoid making their conditions more precarious and contribute to the availability of labourers in the countryside (*#RegularizaciónYa*, 2020). The proposal was not disproportionate, as Spain had already carried out massive regularisations in 1991, 1996, 2000, and 2001 (Molinero-Gerbeau, 2020b); furthermore, as occurred in Italy, authorities considered this as a possibility from the very beginning of the crisis.

Despite pressure from many social and political actors, including Unidas Podemos, one of the ruling parties in the coalition government, the executive did not opt for this path, as the Socialist Party, the leading member of the national Government, decided to

promote two alternative measures to guarantee the availability of workers. Firstly, following the guidelines on the free movement of workers (2020/C 102 I/03) issued by the European Commission on March 30th, opened the borders to the arrival of EU workers. Since most foreign labourers in Spain's agriculture are of Romanian origin — who constituted for instance, between 40% and 50% of the entire labour force employed in the enclave of Huelva and between 20% and 30% of the total workforce employed in Lleida over the period 2009-2018 (Molinero-Gerbeau, 2021b) — the Government considered that enabling their mobility to Spain, would provide a sufficient workforce for growers.

Secondly, an attempt was made to mobilise two specific groups already present in the country: 1) workers who were unemployed (not for COVID reasons), who were offered the possibility of doing agricultural work without having to stop receiving their social benefits, thus creating what some called the figure of the “seasonal worker subsidised by the Treasury” (Echevarría, 2020); and 2) unaccompanied foreign youth aged 18-21, who were offered a work permit valid until June 30th, which was later extended to September 30th.

These exceptions to the current regulations were included in the RD-Law 13/2020 of 7 April. Thus, barely a month after the decree imposing the state of alarm, the government activated these measures to compensate for the lack of labour. This move reflected very lucidly how migrant workers were perceived: resources, rather than humans. Thus, the response to the pandemic in the agricultural sector, far from focusing on regularising the situation of those who were in a more precarious position or on improving labour and housing conditions of those living in shanty towns, it focused exclusively on finding labour, in line with what is known as “migratory utilitarianism” (Morice, 2001).

On 11 May, probably pushed by the failure to obtain the expected workforce, the government issued the order INT/401/2020, which allowed entering Spain for labour reasons, after a 14-day quarantine.

While the country entered the so-called “new normality”, the sector began to return to pre-pandemic dynamics, enabling a large number of irregular workers to return to earning an income. Yet, administration's inaction on the housing crisis, *inter alia*, precipitated the coronavirus outbreaks in the overcrowded seasonal worker settlements and emphasised the absence of protective measures at work. Only a year after, a guide for the prevention and control of COVID-

19 in agricultural farms was elaborated by the Ministry of Health (Ministerio de Sanidad, 2021), but no other significant measures were taken. As a result, the outbreak was so severe in some provinces that it is hypothesised that the COVID-19 mutation called 20A.EU1, supposedly causing the second wave in the continent, originated among agricultural workers in Lleida and Huesca (Aragon) (Ansedo, 2020).

The province of Lleida, during the agricultural campaign that began in May 2020 and ended in September, was crowded with workers sleeping in the streets, in ditches or any kind of abandoned facility, whilst hotels refused to take them in (Burés, 2020). In Murcia, on 1 August, Eleazar Benjamín Blandón Herrera, a worker of Nicaraguan origin who had suffered brutal exploitation for weeks, died as a result of the strenuous working conditions. These problems existed before the pandemic and certainly gained greater visibility during this period, but sadly, the context was not sufficiently disturbing to bring about structural changes (Garcés Mascareñas and Güell, 2020).

Despite the measures adopted by the government to increase the supply of labour, the sector suffered a significant fall in the number of employed workers. Between 2019 and 2020, according to EPA, the number of foreigners employed in the agricultural sector fell by 8%, reaching the level of 2012. The larger fall in the number of employed foreigners seems to indicate that mobility restrictions have had a direct impact on the number of people who came in 2020 to carry out agricultural work in Spain.

In interpreting these data we should also consider the “competition” effect exerted at the European level, since the closure of EU external borders led to a race to employ EU workers from Romania and Bulgaria. In fact, the high number of East-European workers who migrated to the German countryside (EURACTIV, 2020) could imply that, faced with a greater demand for labour across the EU, these preferred to work in Germany rather than in Spain, probably due to its proximity to their countries of origin and the better salaries offered.

Most employers pointed out that the “pull” effect on native Spanish workers did not work, just as it did not work when the temporary program was frozen in 2008 to promote national employment (López-Sala, 2016). In the highly volatile pandemic context — where a sudden closure of borders, both in Spain and in the workers' countries of origin, led to the loss of an important part of the workforce — this gave rise to grave

concerns, leading employers to considering new alternative sources of foreign labour like Moldova, Ecuador, Honduras, Ukraine, and Belarus (Landeró, 2020).

As for the improvement of social and living conditions, the governmental response was nil: the regularisation programme never took place; the employment of young unaccompanied foreigners lasted less than 6 months, and as of yet, no plans are in place to build safe shelters or other types of incentives that would allow seasonal migrants to live in dignified conditions.

The Italian case shares some similarities with the Spanish one, but has been partially different in how authorities have dealt with this issue. In Italy, since the beginning of the pandemic the public debate was fueled by a number of employers' associations and some members of the national government, warning of the expected labour shortages in view of the summer season.

Some of the actors involved went so far as to estimate that the agricultural sector would require 200-400,000 workers (Misuraca, 2020; Borrillo, 2020; Camera dei deputati, 2020). Pressed by such projection, the government adopted some measures oriented to guarantee the availability of immigrant labour force in the fields (Camera dei deputati. Servizio studi, 2021). These measures included the so called "Cura Italia" (Save Italy) Decree (Decree 18 approved on 17/3/2020) converted into the Law 27 (approved on 24 april 2020) that extended to December 31st 2020 all residence permits for seasonal work expiring between February 23rd and May 31st 2020. The article 103 of the Law-Decree 34/2020, known as the "Relaunch Decree" introduced, as well, two measures: the first one was the temporary renewal (for 6 months) of the residence permits that expired starting from October 31st 2019; the second measure was the regularization of irregular employment relationships, for nationals and foreign workers, in only two sectors, agriculture and care work. The array of measures implemented by Italian authorities was complemented by the previously mentioned guidelines of the EU allowing seasonal farmworkers to move freely within the European space (European Commission, 2020). Other initiatives were also implemented by employers' organisations — Coldiretti, Confagricoltura and Cia — to facilitate a match between supply and demand (CREA, 2021).

In a study conducted by the Foundation for Initiatives and Studies on Multi-Ethnicity (ISMU) on the policies adopted by the Italian government to redress farm labour shortage, employers' associations warned

how farms would make little use of the regularisation programme. According to Marta Regalia (2020), who coordinated the study, employers would hardly need to regularise the status of workers since the tensions over the availability of labour in the Italian countryside were greatly defused by the other measures implemented by the national government and the EU.

These findings have been to a large extent confirmed by a more recent study conducted by CREA, which shows how the availability of labour force, notably seasonal workers, is one of the least important problems for agricultural employers, who are mainly concerned about falling sales in the hospitality and restaurant sector, financial availability, export contraction and border controls (CREA, 2021, p. 86).

As reported in the interviews conducted by ISMU and CREA, Italian agriculture did not experience labour shortages during the pandemic, and not even in its first few months. This is to a large extent confirmed by the data collected by ISTAT (2021), which shows a decline of 2,4% in agricultural employment during 2020.

Considering the number of hours worked, the percentage reduction between 2020 and 2019 was on average important but not very serious, as in the first three quarters of 2020 agriculture lost about 3% of hours worked compared with the same period in 2019 (ISTAT, 2020, p. 17).

As regards the number of working days in agriculture, the decrease (1.8%) is slightly smaller compared to the contraction estimated for employment and hours worked. According to Italian trade unions in the agriculture sector, this means that a part of the farmworkers — according to data not yet available — have lost a significant number of working days that will leave them without the agricultural unemployment benefits (Arena, 2021; Castelgrande and Melchionda, 2021). The Italian Institute for agro-food market services (ISMEA) confirms this trend, claiming that during the second quarter of 2020, the number of people employed in the primary sector fell by 2.6%, a smaller drop than that affecting the economy as a whole (-3.6%) (ISMEA, 2020a), even though the same Institute recorded an increase of 2,4% in agriculture employment in the third quarter of 2020 (ISMEA, 2020b).

Considering the composition of the foreign agricultural labour force by nationality, it is understandable why the measures taken by the government and EU Commission were effective in solving labour shortages. The foreign labour force mainly consists of people from Romania and some non-EU countries. According

to the National Institute for Social Security (INPS), at the end of 2019, there were about 368,000 foreign workers employed in agriculture, of which 55% came from 4 states: Romania (98,011), Morocco (35,787), India (35,355) and Albania (33,568) (IDOS, 2020).

The problems of availability of regular third country national labour were mainly solved by the renewal of residence permits that expired from 31 October 2019. The need for more flexible labour was met through the continuation of established recruitment practices, including informal forms of intermediation, which continued during the pandemic, and through the launch of the regularisation programme (Caruso and Lo Cascio, 2020).

In summary, the first year of the pandemic slightly decreased the opportunities for work in agriculture, confirming the structural presence of immigrant labour in the Italian agriculture and the fact that labour policies were exclusively guided by a criterion of utility, at the local as well as national level. Studies focusing on specific enclaves, such as the Piana di Gioia Tauro (Redattore sociale, 2020) and Foggia province (Tagliacozzo, Pisacane and Kilkey, 2021), brought to the fore the deterioration of the living conditions of agricultural workers. In a shack in appalling conditions was found the charred body of a worker employed in Borgo Mezzanone, in the province of Foggia, confirming, among other things, that during the first year of the pandemic rural ghettos inhabited by migrant farmworkers remained active in Puglia, as well as in Calabria, and Sicily (Ansa, 2020). Other studies highlighted how the scope and intensity of agricultural exploitation were not lessened by the pandemic: “COVID-19 did not suspend exploitation, but rather accelerated and complicated it, and worsened the living and working conditions of migrant workers, issues that the measure for the emersion of irregular work did not solve” (Omizzolo, 2020, p. 292).

THE SOCIAL AND POLITICAL DEBATE ON MIGRANT FARM WORK IN ITALY AND SPAIN

The debate in Europe over what types of migrants, how many of them, which ones, should be allowed to enter to work, for how long and under which conditions has never fully abated. Hence, the outbreak of a pandemic has marked a measure of continuity with the past in the essence of the debate. However, the debate on migration in its current form is inextricably linked to the presence and nature of the COVID-19 pandemic. As we will see in this section, the current social and political debate has been recomposed in a different way that

is related to three main factors of discontinuity with the past: 1) the main narratives developed during the pandemic that contributed to define the debate; 2) the nature of social and political actors that played a pivotal role in the debate; and 3) the acts and policies that were implemented as a result.

The first discontinuity factor relates to the fact that the immigration debate touches upon old crucial issues such as labour, individual-collective health, public safety, and border management in an unprecedented way, magnifying issues that have always been present. This recomposition of the immigration debate has given rise to a panoply of narratives at the European and national level centred on keywords such as ‘new normality’, ‘labour shortages’, ‘labour exploitation’, ‘essential and critical workers’, ‘transport, working and living conditions’, and ‘food security’, that defined, to a high degree, the contours of the public discussion on immigrant farm work in Italy and Spain during the pandemic.

The closure of borders due to the COVID-19 crisis highlighted the importance of seasonal labour migration across the whole European continent. Interestingly, the narrative of the importance of foreign labour in the agricultural sector was spread by employers themselves. This narrative did not focus on the dichotomy open vs closed borders, but rather on the economic and strategic benefits accruing to the whole country and the primary sector by virtue of the greater experience and resilience of foreign workers and the lower wages accepted by these in return, especially when compared to the output and concomitant demands of autochthonous workers. On the other hand, although to a lesser extent, border closures following the pandemic also highlighted the importance of seasonal work for many people from the rural areas of Eastern Europe with reduced job prospects in their home country (Edwards, 2020).

Another main narrative was developed in parallel at the European level; and this drew strength from the very contrast between the increased recognition of the essential role of migrant seasonal workers and their poor living, working, and health conditions (Pedreño Cánovas, 2020). As Thomas MacPherson (2020) points out, “while governments have made considerable efforts to ensure continued agricultural output — recognising such work as essential — measures to protect the workers from COVID-19 and ensure decent working conditions are hugely inadequate.” As we will see later, the main promoters of this narrative were labour activists, workers, and trade unions.

Ironically, the connection between the "essential" foreign workers and the deterioration of health conditions during the pandemic has also been employed to the detriment of foreign workers in the form of widespread tropes about migrants "bringing disease" to Europe. Interestingly, this scapegoat narrative has been more popular in Italy than in Spain, and given its socially undesirable character, this underground narrative is brought to light through the accounts of migrant workers, as in the case of African labourers working in the Plain of Gioia Tauro (Calabria), who revealed how employers refused to offer them jobs believing they were the main responsible for the spread of the Coronavirus (Camilli, 2020). Whilst in Spain this narrative has developed mainly in the form of fake news spreading through social network sites like Twitter and Facebook and messaging applications like WhatsApp (see e.g. Ruiz Andrés and Sajir, 2021), in Italy, the pandemic coincided with an actual increase in hatred and xenophobia fueled by the search for a scapegoat, as shown in a study conducted by the Study and Research Centre *IDOS* in collaboration with *Centro Studi Confronti* (2020).

It is worth noting that even when the increased vulnerability of foreign seasonal workers and the sharp deterioration of their living and working conditions are recognised, workers are often left at the mercy of a blaming game between territorial authorities and employers that ultimately confounds and conceals responsibilities thwarting the efforts of labour activists and workers to improve their conditions. The essence of this narrative is encapsulated in the statement of the UN Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights, Olivier De Schutter (United Nations, 2020): "[g]overnments tend to blame companies for violations of workers' rights, and companies in turn tend to see the enforcement of labour rights as the duty of public authorities, not theirs." This narrative can be readily observed in Italy as well as in Spain and it is regularly reproduced by employers in the primary sector and territorial authorities, notably at the municipal and regional level.

The narrative centered around the return of autochthonous workers to the land was developed in both countries, yet in Italy it was greatly romanticised by placing emphasis on stories of national and personal success, going so far as to greet it as the "Italian way" of responding to the shortages of labour in the agricultural sector and the concomitant rising levels of unemployment in other sectors. It was also argued that the effect of the return of Italians to agricultural jobs tran-

scended national borders, serving as an inspiration to other countries as in the case of the 'Pick for Britain' campaign (Horowitz, 2020). This narrative went hand in hand with a number of measures, such as the *Reddito di Cittadinanza*, a State subsidy aimed at supporting individuals and families below the poverty line.

Conversely, in Spain, the "return to the land" narrative has been developed along a more pragmatic line, rarely exalting its patriotic or sentimental character. As a result, the failures and unhappy endings were not concealed but rather included in this narrative as occurred in the cases of the Spaniards who "escaped" from their new agricultural jobs after a brief experience working in the land, those who decided to file formal complaints against their employers for the inhuman working conditions they found in the fields, as well as the protests publicly uttered by Spanish employers for the lack of professionalism and low productivity shown by their compatriots.

The second factor of discontinuity that breaks with the way the debate on immigration and agricultural labour ensued during the pandemic relates to the type of social actors that took part in this debate and the unprecedented opportunities for lobbying and activism offered to these actors by the extraordinary nature of the pandemic.

In this respect, the COVID-19 pandemic has sparked off social and political debates on a large number of key issues that simultaneously included elements of novelty and repetition (Sajir and Ruiz Andrés, 2020). In particular, the debate on immigration and agricultural labour can be conceived as a reiteration of an old tragedy-comedy based on the same play script that traditionally revolves around inequalities, irregular migration, labour exploitation, discrimination, populism, and racism. Nonetheless, since the start of the pandemic, the old script has been re-enacted by secondary characters and walk-ons — seasonal workers, truck drivers, and farmers — who normally remain in the background of the debate but whose key role in the agrofood chain was revealed during the pandemic, giving more visibility to their preferences and needs.

In Italy, much of the debate has been centred around the issue of regularisation of the status of migrant workers promoted by the Minister of Agriculture, Teresa Bellanova. Ironically, the measure included in the so-called *Decreto Rilancio* came under strong criticism from different sides and for distinct reasons. Firstly, from populist movements inside and outside the coalition government accusing Minister Bellanova

of exploiting the pandemic, and more specifically the powers granted by the state of emergency, to promote a progressive agenda. Secondly, by Coldiretti, the main employer's associations in Italy, for considering this measure inappropriate to respond to the urgent shortage of labour; and finally by trade unions, third sector bodies, and foreign workers themselves, who regarded the regularisation programme as a sector-based and temporary market initiative aimed at responding to the economic emergency by ensuring cheap labour supplies rather than being genuinely interested in promoting the rights of workers in the agricultural sector in the long run.

In the light of this, groups of foreign workers in the agricultural sector have expressed their dissent against the distortions of the Italian agro-food chain and the *Decreto Rilancio*, proclaiming a strike in which they asked for 1) a housing program; 2) dignified salaries; 3) an extension of the period of permit beyond the 6 months and the possibility to convert it into a work permit, and finally, 4) invited consumers to show their solidarity towards them by temporarily refraining from buying fruits and vegetables (Il Fatto Quotidiano, 2020).

In Spain, the strongest voice came from the employers' associations ASAJA, COAG, UPA, Cooperativa Agroalimentaria, FEV and AEVE. At the outset of the pandemic these alerted the Commission to the possible labour shortages that would be triggered by the pandemic and the repercussions that this would have on the whole agrofood chain, calling on the Commission to prepare contingency plans in collaboration with the member states. Employers' associations also spoke out forcefully on the occasion of the inspections ordered by the Ministry of Labour (see next section for more details), labelling them as an unjustified and self-defeating attack on the entire agricultural sector.

The United Nations represented another important actor in the Spanish context, notably with Olivier De Schutter, the UN Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights, who on the basis of the findings of an investigation carried out in August 2020 with 45 migrants employed as farmworkers in Almería, dubbed the situation facing migrant workers in southern Spain as a human tragedy. This investigation confirmed the view expressed by his predecessor, Philip Alston, before the pandemic broke out, leading him to call on authorities to act urgently to ensure that migrant farmworkers were guaranteed decent and dignified working and housing conditions, including access to adequate healthcare. This call was later

endorsed also by other UN Special rapporteurs like Mr. Tomoya Obokata, expert on contemporary forms of slavery and Balakrishnan Rajagopal, expert on adequate housing (United Nations, 2020).

The pressure exerted by the trade unions on the central government and the employers' associations focused mainly on the issue of wages, highlighting the breach of collective agreements, the use of bogus self-employed workers, whilst acting to a lesser extent on the issues of living standards and health problems related to the pandemic. One of the two major trade unions in Spain, the Confederación Sindical de Comisiones Obreras (CCOO), directed its efforts also on denouncing important companies like *Haciendas Bio*, for misusing the organic certification whilst imposing substandard working conditions (Fernández, 2020).

The *temporeros* (Spanish term for seasonal farmworkers) represent the last pressure group having played a pivotal role during the pandemic. They acted on several fronts, which included 1) the demonstrations of Moroccan women in Huelva who, after the end of the strawberry harvesting campaign urged the monarch Mohammed VI to open a humanitarian corridor to allow them to return home; 2) the action of the collective "Jornaleras de Huelva en Lucha" which alerted the society and denounce the cases of discrimination and abuse perpetrated in the agricultural sector against women workers; and finally 3) the commitment of individual workers who personally exposed themselves to denounce the shameful living and working conditions that still exist in the agricultural sector, as in the case of Serigne Mamadou, spokesperson for the campaign *#RegularizaciónYa*, and that of a Moroccan woman forced to produce evidence, through a video filmed in secret, of the exploitation and abuse that takes place in the greenhouses of Almería.

At the European level, the strong voice during the pandemic came from the Commission, in particular the European Commissioner for Transport, Adina Vălean, who on March 23rd 2020 issued guidelines expressing the need to urgently create a 'green lane' border crossing to ensure that EU-wide supply chains continue to operate in a smooth way (European Commission, 2020a). This act of pressure by the Commission on member states was followed at the end of March 2020 by the recommendation of the European Commissioner for Agriculture, Janusz Wojciechowski, addressed to member states on the need to facilitate the cross-border movement of workers in the agricultural sector since they were deemed "indispensable to EU food security" (European Commission, 2020b).

The last factor of discontinuity relates to the acceleration of policy making during the state of emergency. This was of benefit to a rapid response, but it came at the expense of trust in institutions and the balance between executive and legislative power, with frequent tensions between central and regional governments, notably in Spain.

Indeed, the health crisis has shown, as Cebada Romero and Dominguez Redondo (2021) point out, that the effectiveness of the response to the pandemic depends not only on human and financial resources but also on good governance and the legal framework used to address the crisis. It is understood that one of the foundational principles of good democratic governance is represented by the separation of powers. The pandemic has put this principle under strain also in established democracies like Italy and Spain leading the executive branch of governments to invoke emergency law-making powers, playing a pivotal role in establishing quick(er) responses at the European, national and regional level against the disruptions caused by pandemic.

In this regard, it is not surprising that in a situation characterised by an extended state of emergency, the political opposition in Italy as well as in Spain played a less prominent role compared to the past, for the reduced opportunities available to firstly shape the social and political debate on labour and immigration in the agricultural sector and secondly to participate in the formulation of policies and acts in response to the pandemic. In both countries we can isolate four main action fronts: 1) the designation of so-called 'green lanes' and relaxation of the state of emergency to facilitate the free movement of agricultural workers; 2) the establishment of 'red zones' to control the spread of the virus from the identified hotbeds; 3) the creation of job-matching platforms and other incentives to promote employment in the agricultural sector; and 4) the provision of inspections and arrests to stem the spread of the phenomenon of *caporalato*, *agro-mafia* and exploitation of foreign labourers.

At the European level, the initiative was taken by the European Parliament, by adopting on June 19th the resolution called "European protection of cross-border and seasonal workers", through which it urged the Commission to propose long-term solutions to tackle abusive subcontracting practices and safeguard seasonal and cross-border workers employed in the subcontracting and supply chain. The European Commission responded to this call by issuing the "Guidelines on Seasonal Workers in the EU in the Context of the COVID-19 Outbreak", hence complementing the "Guidelines con-

cerning the exercise of the free movement of workers during COVID-19 outbreak", offered right after the start of the Pandemic. Through this document the Commission 1) reaffirmed that seasonal workers in the agricultural sector fulfil essential functions and are therefore exempt from restrictions on free movement; 2) invited Member States to raise awareness of the Occupational Safety and Health (OSH) requirements affecting seasonal workers and engage in information campaigns directed towards employers and seasonal workers; and finally, 3) committed to implement a number of measures to improve the working and living conditions of seasonal workers.

CONCLUSION

"This year, the coronavirus crisis has exposed the seams of the system"

— Guillermo Abril (2020)

The COVID-19 pandemic has revealed, and in some instances sharpened, the exploitative work conditions in Europe's segmented labour economy, increasing visibility over the dysfunctions of the agricultural sector (Gómez, 2021). This occurred not just in countries with large informal sectors, weak labour unions and dual labour markets like Greece, Spain or Italy, but also in countries like Germany, where economic informality is considerably lower (Edwards, 2020).

In fact, for those who are ready to look down into the abyss of contradictions, misconceptions and internal hypocrisies on which the most advanced European economies are built, the pandemic has left some valuable lessons.

Although it is true that on the one hand advanced European economies compete with each other to attract selected and skilled immigration to stimulate growth and innovation, on the other hand these same economies not only continue to rely heavily on unskilled labour but also compete for it.

The labour structure and organisation promoted by the process of liberalisation underway over the last 30 years, requires a type of labour that is cheap, disposable, malleable and desperate. This labour force is relegated to a subaltern role not only from an economic perspective but also from a socio-symbolic, legal and political perspective, which ultimately keeps it "socially excluded, legally weak and politically irrelevant", as noted Pietrogiovanni (2020).

The first lesson of the pandemic, therefore, is that sectors like agriculture, care work, and hospitality in-

dustry, can continue to exist and remain competitive only through a constant flow of cheap labour coming in. Even though it is often a matter of debate and controversy, the pandemic has indeed shown that the Italian and Spanish agriculture have become increasingly dependent on the labour of international migrant workers, forcing (almost) everyone to recognise that this type of immigration is “essential” (Pécoud, 2020), and going so far as to describe agricultural workers as “heroes”, in the same fashion as health workers (Secretariat of State for Global Spain, 2020).

The pandemic has, in this sense, exposed an internal contradiction in advanced European economies. One cannot, on the one hand, want to liberalise economies by allowing greater flexibility to recruit migrant labourers in order to pursue profit and competitiveness, and, at the same time, pursue the objective of having less immigration (Edwards, 2020).

Despite the fact that the pandemic has contributed to increasing the visibility of migrant labourers in the agricultural sector, the in-built tendency to conceal and ignore their existence remains alive and well. At the very core of advanced European economies is a highly profitable agricultural industry specialised in importing cheap labor. There is nothing new about this, yet it is rarely discussed openly as a foundational characteristic of the European project. The pandemic has only shattered the veneer of legitimacy that professionalised recruitment agencies and institutionalisation at the EU level have given to the industry in recent decades (Poenu and Rogozanu, 2020).

The pandemic has also confirmed that labour in agriculture is dominated by a precise but at the same time distorted and stereotyped imagery of the migrant labourer that evokes to a great extent “the myth of the docile negro” as CLR James defined it in 1939 (Johnson, 1939). We have seen this largely in the representations that tend to portray migrant labourers as passive victims rather than agents with specific needs and preferences but also in the narratives constructed during the debate around the regularisation programme in Spain and Italy, which implies that migrant labourers are deserving of access to rights insofar as they are useful to the economy of the country (Pietrogianni, 2020). According to Abdelmalek Sayad, this reveals that migrants correspond to their labour-power, thus their presence is totally and exclusively justified by work. In other words, “a migrant is essentially a labour force, and a provisional, temporary labour force in transit” (Sayad, 2007, p. 50).

The increased visibility of migrant agricultural labourers’ contribution did not suffice to change the political attitudes towards them (Ramírez Melgarejo, 2020). On the contrary, defining these workers as an essential labour force has only contributed to accentuating a utilitarian attitude towards immigration that is based on a cost-benefit balance (Morice, 2001).

The increased visibility of migrant labourers’ personal and collective sufferings and tragedies and the recognition of their essential contribution to the survival of the agrofood chain of modern, democratic, and rich countries in Europe, have not led to policy and practice change. This increased visibility develops within a fictitious contrast between the logic of labour and the logic of capital. As Marx said, “labour and capital are expressions of the same relation, only seen from opposite poles” (Marx, 1971, p. 491). Only a holistic narrative that embraces the entire relationship between labour and capital, implemented through universalistic policies rather than temporary and partial initiatives can help overcome this spurious opposition and allow the light temporarily shone during the pandemic on migrant labourers’ misery and their economic contribution to be translated into real change.

The narrative of exploitation in the agricultural sector develops as in a grand illusion in disconnection with the rest of the capitalist system. This narrative is activated and reproduced by migrant labourers themselves when they are given voice to describe and show their personal and collective dramas and by trade unions when assisting migrant labourers against employers’ organisations that are found guilty of not respecting the agreed minimum wage conventions.

Yet, within this narrative, is not possible to implement a structural change in agricultural labour because it remains artificially disconnected from the core, thus failing to attract sufficient interest to be framed as a social problem — as temporarily occurred in the early stages of the pandemic — and not only a problem of migrant workers and struggles between social partners, trade unions on one side and employers’ organisations on the other, with the intermediation of territorial authorities.

In reality, very little is new. The contours of the problem have been known for some time, and the pandemic has done nothing but shed light on the dysfunctions of a state of affairs we are all used to call “normality” (Molinero-Gerbeau, 2021a). In general, whether migrant labourers are employed through temporary agency, abusive subcontracting practices,

or forced to accept bogus self-employed status, their employment, housing, and working conditions are unreservedly lamentable. This deplorable situation is both the source and result of exploitation, social dumping and unfair competition among European member states (EFFAT, 2020).

The EU's Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) was created to ensure food supplies for the continent and for 60 years the top priority has been to support farmers and improve agricultural productivity. The subsidies received depend on the size of the farms and their environmental practices, but there are no requirements related to the working conditions of the workers. This leads to a surreal situation, as pointed out by Green MEP Daniel Freund, where better protection is offered to animals and the environment compared to that afforded to people working on those farms:

We are not looking at how many people are being employed by a farm. How are they being treated? Are they fairly paid? Do they receive the minimum wage while they do their work? There's lots of issues there and that's something that the Agricultural policy so far has mostly ignored (Borges, 2020).

Although the pandemic has contributed to make these forms of exploitation more visible across the whole European continent, these issues have not yet reached a pivotal role in the debate on immigration and labour; conversely, they remain detached from the capital, most notably from the rather central phenomena of social dumping and unfair competition within the EU. Proof of the marginal nature of the migrant agricultural labour debate at European level is the fact that today the rights of workers in the agricultural sector and their living and working conditions are not even mentioned in the EU's agricultural subsidy scheme.

A promising initiative in this regard have been recently taken by the European Federation of Food, Agriculture and Tourism Trade Unions (EFFAT) in conjunction with more than 300 organisations and personalities by calling on national Agriculture Ministers, the Commission, and the European Parliament to negotiate a new CAP that includes a social conditionality mechanism whereby CAP direct payments are conditional on respect for the applicable working and employment conditions under ILO conventions, EU law and national law, and relevant collective agreements (EFFAT, 2021).

Also at the national level, labour and capital must be reunited. In other words, forms of labour exploita-

tion and left swelling over the last years in the agricultural sector must be publicly and permanently linked to the phenomenon of tax evasion and the concomitant losses to the state coffers — major problems in countries like Spain and Italy — (Fernandez, 2020).

The key question is therefore: will we succeed in turning the lessons of the pandemic into policy and practice change?

Marta Foresti (2020) maintains that the pandemic has created an opportunity to start a new conversation with the politics of migration and agricultural labour. This new conversation should not be so much about whether migration is good or bad, or whether borders should be closed or opened (Shachar, 2020). On the contrary, we need a conversation about "our" future, the future of labour in connection with the capital, the future of our rapidly ageing society, and our economies that need fruit-pickers, nurses, cleaners, drivers, care workers. No matter where these are coming from.

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