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Exploited and invisible: what role for migrant workers in our food system?

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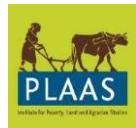
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Abstract

Since Brexit and the migration crisis, analysis, discussions and studies on the link between populism, the economic crisis and the rising of right and extremist right movements in Europe have gained momentum. There is widespread consensus on the fact that multiple crises combined with austerity measures or the so-called “debt tyranny” have caused increased and unequal pressure on low income and middle classes. The erosion of rights expressed by factors such as less social welfare, lower pension wages and postponed retirement age, poorer health services, all of which have a direct impact on the quality of life, has exasperated the sense of insecurity, instability or the theft of “Tomorrowland”, to use Zygmunt Bauman’s words. These feelings have been exploited by extreme right-wing movements and parties. On the contrary, the major left-wing parties which previously had embraced “the third way” as faithfully compliant with neo-liberal ideology, seem to have lost an opportunity as they failed to grasp the growing feeling of frustration, and more importantly, did not articulate any credible policy responses, aimed at re-balancing growing inequalities, particularly in countries hardest hit by debt situations. This fact has been largely perceived as betrayal by a growing number of voters, who in overall terms are decreasing in number in our “post democratic societies”. Living and working conditions of migrants from the global south are the Trojan horse of the neoliberal systems that disregard workers’ rights in the northern countries. The exploitation of these workers is essential to compete on global markets and for corporate profit. However, when combined with drastic cuts in social expenditure, such exploitation generates internal social conflict.

The thesis presented here purports that the left is losing another opportunity, at least in Italy, by avoiding a strong link with grassroots movements and rural struggles for peasant agriculture. In this pre-election period no reference is made to agriculture or to the Common Agriculture Policy (CAP) reform, when talking about migrants no mention of the fact that the “made in Italy” is based on the migrant agriculture work force. If the countryside can no longer represent an interesting electoral base of voters, ignoring it reveals a lack of vision about territorial governance, climate, environment and human health for generations to come. The danger is that extreme right movements and parties take possession of the “food sovereignty” concept and vision, by capturing the need and aspirations linked with re-localized policies for fairer food systems.

Neo-liberal policies, the rising of fascism and the exploitation of migrant workers in agriculture

Italy, as in other European countries, is undergoing structural reforms in the name of financial stability and economic growth. Governments (centre left and centre right) are dismantling labour rights in favour of labour market deregulation, cutting public expenditure and social protection, coupled with high rates of youth unemployment. As a result, instability has increased, along with inequalities and poverty rates which have been growing over the last fifteen years¹. “Europe demands it” has become a powerful slogan in the hands of national elites to justify the adoption of unpopular policies. When governments, as in the case of Greece, tried to reject measures imposed by the unelected and unaccountable European Central Bank, the European institutions were allowed to disregard democracy and popular will. These reforms also have great impact on State authorities and Governments, which find themselves forced to privatize assets and goods to comply with austerity measures. In Italy, for example, in December 2011 a Deutsche Bank report stated that €571 billion (nearly 37% of GDP) could be raised through the sale of State assets. Months later a referendum which unequivocally rejected the privatization of water utilities and local public services in Italy, the ECB explicitly asked the Italian government to start “*a comprehensive, radical and credible strategy of reforms, including the full liberalization of local public services and professional services through large-scale privatizations*”². Since a large part of the Public Real estate belongs to municipalities, the central Government looted local authorities. Over the last fifteen years, decrees with names that recall extreme and vital measures such as “Save Italy”, “Stability and Growth Pact”, or the latest “Spending Review” and “Fiscal Compact” (included in the Constitutional Chart) all followed this direction. One of the most worrying measures for rural areas, affecting land ownership and land distribution is the auctioning of public land. An online platform for land sale and rental (www.ismea.it) has been created. This initiative has been strongly criticized, especially as it denies new young peasants the chance to enter the agricultural sector if they do not have enough money to buy land. In fact, the only prerequisite to access a plot is to have no criminal record, and of course, to offer the highest price. This measure risks exacerbating the land concentration phenomena³ which coupled with the side effects of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP)⁴, have the likely undesirable outcome of selling away common goods, including those where civic uses are still in place.

The failure of the left-wing parties, in collusion with mainstream medium-large agricultural enterprises, to articulate credible policies and challenge neo-liberalism is opening the way to new actors, who are gaining increasing electoral and popular support. The criticism of neo-liberalism and market economy constitutes a central feature of neo-fascist groups. Some of the organizations populating the present radical right area in Italy are responding to the needs and social demands generated by the “financial crisis”. The two most visible parties are defined as “neo-fascist” and extreme right. *Casa Pound Italia*, a former grassroots organization shifted to a political party only in December 2003⁵ while *Forza Nuova* was founded in 1997. The latter, on various occasions, allied

¹ In Italy, in the first half of 2017 the richest 20% of the population owned 66% of the national net wealth, while during 2006-2016 the gross disposable income of 10% of the poorest has diminished of 23,1%. 20% of the poorest dispose of the 6,3% of the national revenue while 40% is owned by the 20% of the richest. Oxfam Report “Disegualitalia: i dati sulla diseguaglianza economica in Italia”, “Ricompensare il Lavoro non la ricchezza” <https://www.oxfamitalia.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/Rapporto-Davos-2018.-Ricompensare-il-Lavoro-Non-la-Ricchezza.pdf>

² Deutsche Bank, Revenue, competition, growth: Potential for privatisation in the euro area, December 2011. https://www.tni.org/files/download/privatising_europe.pdf

³ Land grabbing: case studies in Italy. A cura di Mauro Conti e Antonio Onorati Concentrazione, controllo, integrazione, espropriazione. I limiti delle politiche pubbliche e l’erosione della capacità produttiva agricola

⁴ The acquisition of land by private societies to gain CAP premialities

⁵ Starting from very limited dimensions (the interviewees claim no more than five thousand members in 2013), the group has managed over the past years to attract a vast amount of media attention, way beyond the level of other organizations and parties of the same area. It didn’t receive more than 50.000 votes in the country at the legislative election of 2013. They can forecast on a 3% at next political election round. One seat at Ostia, which will open the door of the parliament. (interview televise ½ rai3).

itself with Lega Nord (a political party originated in the northern part of the country, established in the late 80s, with declared secession purposes and evident populist and racist positions against the people of Southern Italy) which ruled the country in coalition with Silvio Berlusconi from 1994 to 2011. They both relate to transnational movements and parties, such as the Greek Golden Dawn. Casa Pound's policy positions, ideas and practices revolve around economic and social issues, mainly in urban areas, that are strongly interrelated with the crisis and its consequences. From the first house squat in Rome, the organisation was supposed to respond to the long-standing housing crisis faced by the city, which was one of the factors defining them as a "social movement". As the leaders argued, the movement was born to respond to a social need: the lack of housing spaces for Italian families and excessive rent prices. Casa Pound's political discourse reproduces the nationalist and anti-imperialist features of Italian Fascism. In its narrative, the crisis directly originates from the contradictions of capitalism and its economic regime, which Casa Pound would instead control through a strong State capable of avoiding the inequalities caused by the market economy⁶. The idea of a strong state that has to gain back the sovereignty relinquished in favour of transnational organizations, in particular the European Union and the European Central Bank is a clear reference to the ideology of the Fascist National Party, and of the later Italian Social Republic⁷. The group started to promote a series of 'para-welfare activities' addressed to Italian families in difficulty (from food distribution to health assistance and help for disabled and elderly people) and gave birth to right wing "social spaces". In recent years, the organisation's attention has sharply shifted towards migration, identity and race. Their narrative accentuates the general feeling, or fear, of people who are faced with a global phenomenon they struggle to understand in all its complexity: the idea of a privileged group of "others" who is threatening "us", our wellbeing and our national identity is thus re-proposed. All over the country, local groups are reported to threaten foreigners, fuelling a "hate discourse" and vocally protesting against hospitality and shelter/protection programmes activated throughout the country after the so called Mediterranean Migration Crisis, as well as against the "ius soli"⁸ law. Furthermore, occasionally they ally with producer strikes as occurred during the protest organized by the movement of farmers and shepherds, as well as the one of truck drivers in December 2013. By the end of 2017, militants of Casa Pound gathered each night to organize "patrols" in Latina province (south of Rome), with the alleged aim to protect "Italian goods" from small criminals – foreigners. The patrols shared information and pictures of suspects using WhatsApp groups, involving hundreds of people. Eventually, the Commissioner had to gather the local mayors to ask them to stop the practice of chasing immigrants. In this former marshy region drained by Mussolini in the 30s, fascism nostalgia has never completely disappeared, but similar episodes took place all over the country. Militants of the other extreme right party Forza Nuova went to protest in front of the editorial offices of the weekly magazine "L'Espresso" in Rome to blame them and the daily newspaper "La Repubblica" for supporting the supposed "migrant invasion".

Forza Nuova associates increased from 1.500 in 2001 to 13.000 today, plus 241.000 followers on Facebook⁹. They focus on the rural world in order to attract followers and activists. The party is behind the foundation of the "Lega della Terra", an initiative which has proposed a national agricultural plan and which adopts a strong populist slogan: "buy Italian". Proposing short food supply chain, peasant markets as a solution to help small-medium sized farms and protect the rural and peasant world that "*needs to believe in itself again, in its potential, and be protected from massive productions, globalisation and from a Europe which is controlled by lobbies and strong economic powers*". They claim the issue of land ownership and the need to give public land to young farmers. They organize protests against CETA (e.g. on the massive import of wheat) and on stopping illegal

La Stampa 7 December 2017

⁶ The appeal of neo-fascism in times of crisis. The experience of Casa Pound Italia. Pietro Castelli Gattinara, Caterina Froiob & Matteo Albanese.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ The law concerning citizenship to the children of long-term immigrants. The legislation proposed and debated in the Parliament is based on the concept of *ius soli*, which establishes citizenship depending on where you are born and not *ius sanguinis*, requiring a blood lineage, and would offer citizenship to the children of immigrants born in Italy who have completed at least five years in the Italian school system.

⁹ Attacks on immigrants highlight rise of fascist groups in Italy. Lorenzo Tondo, The Guardian 6 February 2018

middlemen to exploit farm day labourers. The organisation offered legal assistance to people perpetrating attacks against migrants.

As one may think it is only pre-electoral discourse, the fear of the “migrant invasion” is echoed by the right wing moderate coalition that might rule the country in a month’s time¹⁰. Many single episodes, clearly inspired by xenophobia and racism, the random shooting of migrants causing 6 blessed in Macerata as the most recent example¹¹. This new wave sweeps through different European countries such as Poland, Austria, Hungary, Germany, showing the “trilemma” of hyper globalisation, national sovereignty and democratic politics¹².

While the perception of migrant invasion arises in Italy, people fleeing conflict and war or moving for socio-economic structural violence continue to die, along routes across the deserts, and in the waters of the Mediterranean Sea. Massive casualties are seen as the consequence of Europe’s refusal to face their historical and current political responsibility. In recent years after the downgrading of search and rescue missions in the Mediterranean (from Mare Nostrum to Triton/Frontex), EU ministers for Internal Affairs, as well as senior officers in the border security forces have verbally attacked, legally undermined and politically isolated NGOs’ search and rescue operations (SAR NGOs) in the Mediterranean¹³. The truth was clear that border defence, not the protection of life, remains the priority for Europe’s frontiers¹⁴, while those assisting refugees to find a safe place, to feed or clothe them are blamed for the “crime” of solidarity¹⁵. This situation has also opened the way to neo fascist groups to reinforce their positions as in the case of “Defend Europe” groups¹⁶.

The migration phenomena, instead, can be analysed in parallel with the intensification of the agro-industrial production systems, both in the places of origin and in destination countries. Since the 80s, there has been an enormous accumulation of capital as a consequence of a new agro food regime, dominated by transnational corporations (McMichael). Information technology, communication, transport and science developments (linked to changing consumption models) enabled the constant intensification of productions, as well as the growth of large scale organized distribution networks. A brand-new labour architecture was shaped, after the geographical re-organisation of the agro food systems, connecting the world peripheries where production takes place, with consumption centres¹⁷.

Within this framework, intensive fruit and vegetable production spread through southern European countries in the most important rural areas of the continent, employing migrant workers. The workers represent a low cost labour force and reduce production costs. A kind of “delocalisation on the place”¹⁸ stabilizes profit so that production becomes competitive on the global market. Both large scale and family farms employed migrant workforce in Italy. In both cases, the farming systems depend heavily on the phyto-sanitary industry, or on the large market retailers through contract farming schemes, or to the large fruit and vegetable markets, as in the case analysed below.

¹⁰ This text is being written before the political elections of March 4 2018, but it will circulate afterwards.

¹¹ See <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-43030951>; 142 are the neo-fascists attacks counted in Italy since 2014.

¹² Dani Rodrik has introduced the “political trilemma of the world economy” as a heuristic tool to analyse the political options available under globalisation. The three elements of the trilemma are: one, national sovereignty, two, hyper-globalisation, i.e. deep economic integration of the world economy, and, three, democratic politics. The trilemma posits that only two out of three elements are compatible. Meyer, Henning.” Understanding the Populist Revolt” Social Europe. first eBook version of the traditional bi-annual Social Europe Journal

¹³ Humanitarianism: the unacceptable face of solidarity, Liz Fekete, Frances Webber, Anya Edmond-Pettitt. Institute of Race Relations 2017

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ See <http://www.dw.com/en/defend-europe-identitarians-charter-a-ship-to-return-migrants-to-africa/a-39702947>

¹⁷ Colloca C. e Corrado A., La globalizzazione delle campagne, Milano, Franco Angeli, 2013.

¹⁸ Colloca C. e Corrado A., La globalizzazione delle campagne, Milano, Franco Angeli, 2013.

This situation is the result of several causes, such as the very nature of contemporary capitalism, the current legal framework on migration rights, at both Italian and EU level, the rules set forth by the large market retailers, and the lack of social policies that are poorly organized and weakened by years of budget cuts.

Current integration and protection measures for migrants, asylum seekers and refugees in Europe are clearly inadequate for the present situation, which helps explain why undocumented migrants turn frequently into exploited agricultural day labourers¹⁹. They fall victim of intermediaries who have links with agricultural businesses and act almost like ringleaders, retaining their monopoly over local human trafficking²⁰. 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).

A variety of situations are reported in that search and echoed by the life stories of many Italian and foreign workers, who are testimonies of new working relationships in the countryside (and not only), expressions of new forms of international division of labour, able to incorporate, and strongly dependent on heavily exploited work.

Migrant social and working conditions are based on the functional and structural complicity of different actors, such as employers, local middlemen, smugglers, public officers, freelancers, agro-industrial companies, governments, organized large-scale distribution and in some cases even members of various mafia clans (both native and foreign)⁸. The local middlemen are called “*caporale*” (i.e. *Corporal*) in Italian slang, with clear reference to a military power-like relation –contrary to legal negotiations of tasks, working hours and pay for casual workers. They are the weakest and least influential, although an essential link in the chain as they play different roles for producers. It is however this combination of actors, that can vary in relation to the historical-social, territorial, economic and political context of reference, which determines a sort of factual alliance aimed at obtaining profit and power and which is organized in a structured way to comply with the current economic production system.

In agriculture only, approximately 100,000 workers live in severe work exploitation situations. Research shows that 62% of seasonal farm workers lack access to any basic agricultural services, while 64% have no water service. After the harvest season, 72% of workers develop professional diseases affecting bones and muscles. Scientific research, along with the work of some associations and trade unions, has seen some cases denounced, including Italian and foreign labourers who died because of the extreme working conditions. Several cases are reported of workers for whom all traces are lost, as well as fatal road accidents along the way to the workplace.

These women and men trapped in a world of marginalization and loneliness, are a typical expression of the “exploitation business¹²” which sometimes is considered as a natural feature of the present development model. A few “collateral bad habits” shape the peculiar situation of agriculture, in addition to the usual conditions of urban and factory workers. Blackmail and sexual harassment imposed by the exploiters– whether middlemen or employers - are not uncommon against migrant agricultural workers (especially Romanians), as well as doping, used to endure fatigue and harsh weather conditions. One such set of behaviours, interests and practices define a new international way to manage manpower (agricultural in this case) which is functional to big industry and goes far beyond the borders of economically less developed countries. The decline of food demand in Italy probably exacerbated the phenomenon, because both industry and the mass retailers had to cut prices paid to

¹⁹ See www.istat.it/it/files/2015/09/SPA-2013.pdf?title=La+struttura+delle+aziende+agricole++02%2Fset%2F2015+-+Testo+integrale.pdf

²⁰ According to 2014 data from the Placido Rizzotto Observatory in the FLAI CGIL trade union, there are around 450,000 exploited agricultural day labourers in Italy employed by illegal intermediaries, of which 80% are non-Italian and 100,000 are seriously exploited.

farmers to compensate the decrease in food consumption²¹. This decline in Italy is due to rising poverty, meaning that good quality food is affordable only by a minority of the population (niche). In the meantime, sanitary rules tailored to large scale production are undermining the possibility for peasant agriculture to fulfil the legal, tax, and sanitary measures required to produce, transform and sell their products at local level, providing healthy food accessible for all. Following a typical capitalistic scheme, farm owners exploit migrants while price policies imposed by large-scale traders ensure that extremely low prices are paid to the producers while they are hiked up for the consumer who pays as much as 10 times the farm-gate price. This distorted mechanism permits a few to make great profits, while at the same time causing huge environmental impacts, in terms of water pollution and loss of soil fertility. It also brings about great social damage by causing the collapse of countless small farms. As a final result, despite its world-renowned food production, Italy's food balance has shown a long-term deficit for decades. In 2013 the negative balance reached the sum of 7 billion euros, meaning that with proper reform aimed at rebalancing this figure, sufficient resources could be availed to create some 30-40.000 new jobs²².

On the contrary, the present system is perpetuated through control of local and national governments, or lack thereof, and businesses. The combination of these conditions, lack of government control and eagerness of large food industries to expand and increase their profits, facilitates the decline in working conditions and wages. Over time, these conditions have become accepted by workers desperately looking for employment, but who are invisible to the media and public debate. After different auditions, and the report of an ad hoc Commission, the Italian Parliament adopted a law criminalizing the “caporale”, but it doesn't tackle the root causes for such intermediation.

This provides the fertile ground for populist approaches to find their place and expand, mixing a real picture of the situation with a simple (yet wrong) analysis of its causes, which leads to the worst possible scenario based on an explosive mix of racism, security and nostalgia.

Xenophobia and violent attacks against migrants perpetuated by the local population are partly due to the confusion between asylum seekers, who receive accommodation, food, legal assistance, and healthcare until they gain legal status of international protection (which on average takes over 2 years), and those living on charity, black labour and other means. The dominant discourse blames all migrants as scroungers or unjustly advantaged compared to impoverished national middle and lower classes. The consequences of years of unfair policies and natural resource exploitation are harder to recall and describe, than the easy-target of an alien attack depriving “us” of something, be it the judicial courts spending time on their cases and legal appeals, beds in hospitals, or our national identity – if ever existed - being threatened, watered down and eventually lost.

Day Labour and Exploitation of Punjabi Labourers in the Province of Latina²³

The Indian community, Punjabi, established in Latina province²⁴ when intensive agriculture ousted traditional family farming, started in the mid 1980s. Hothouse productions in flat areas are still cohabiting with open air farms run by cooperatives of different sizes and nature. Fruit and vegetables, floriculture and wine growing companies are supported by a system of collection and distribution of

²¹ Antonio Onorati, Mauro Conti, *Agricoltura italiana e agricoltura contadina. L'ingiusta competizione tra modelli produttivi e sistemi distinti. Agriregioneuropa anno 12 n°45, Giu 2016*

²² Tonino Perna, Segni di Rinascita delle Aree Interne. See <http://www.fupress.net/index.php/SdT/article/view/19384/18261>

²³ Omizzolo M., “Tratta internazionale nell’area del Mediterraneo e sfruttamento lavorativo: il caso della comunità indiana in provincia di Latina”, in “Europe of Migrations: Policies, Legal Issues and Experiences”, edito da Serena Baldin e Morena Zago, Biblioteca della Società Aperta – Studi e Ricerche, Eut edizioni – Edizioni Universitarie di Trieste, 2017, p.307-328.

²⁴ Latina is a municipality at 80 km from Rome, (126.161 inhabitants) the capital of the homonymous province of Lazio. Founded under the name of Littoria during the fascist period was inaugurated on December 18, 1932 is one of the youngest Italian cities (Littoria, la "nuova" città della bonifica, raistoria.ra.it. 20 dicembre 2014)

agricultural products, in which the Fruit and Vegetable Market of Fondi (MOF) is a major actor. MOF is the biggest logistic platform for the collection, treatment and selling of fresh vegetables and fruit in Italy, and one of the most important in Europe, serving as the north/south exchanging hub and supply centre for the large market retailers. The worker community originally was composed by a core group of a few dozen people, mostly young men coming partly from Punjab and partly from other groups already established in Europe, especially from Germany, England and France. Today it reaches around 30,000 persons, mainly residents in peri-urban (or rural) areas where lifestyles, social and behavioural models typical of the Punjabi culture are replicated, also as a consequence of the transnational relations that the residents maintain with their home-country¹⁹. The first Punjabi group who arrived in the province of Latina has taken on, over the years, an important role in their community, carrying out functions of representation and mediation between members of the community and the host society and Punjab itself. This role has allowed them to develop advanced knowledge on the functioning of the Italian administrative system (particularly of the area), the needs of local agricultural entrepreneurs and some current informal practices such as corruption. In some cases, this knowledge has been transformed into informal business systems founded on international trafficking of human beings for labour exploitation.

Despite national regulations Punjabi workers in this area are often forced to work 10 to 14 hours a day for around 4 euros an hour, including Saturdays and Sundays. These workers are blackmailed and subjugated also symbolically. They face various types of scams each day, including illegal renewal of Residence Permit, false paycheques and contracts, continuously changing salaries, fake schemes to renew fake documents, salaries being paid extremely late -or not at all, physical violence and subordination. Women workers are reported to undergo sexual harassment frequently, and rape. One specific farm in the Pontine was found to hires exclusively day labourers, and to pay them on a piece rate for less than half the legal rate. At this farm, workers united and found the courage and resources to file a complaint to the employer regarding their rights as workers. After going through the necessary steps and taking the time and energy to adequately communicate their experiences and concerns, they found that not only was their complaint thrown out, their wages were even reduced and they were fired and replaced shortly after by other Punjabi workers, eager for employment. Another farm in the same region, which harvests and distributes massive quantities of fruit and vegetables across Europe, used to employ only a few dozen workers for several tens of hectares of farmland. In collaboration with NAS, a branch of the Italian Army, specially devoted to counter frauds in the food value chain, the President of the Parliamentary “Commission Against Work Accidents” found that at the farm, around 130 Indian workers were recruited and exploited by Indian corporals. These corporals, who were later arrested and detained, underpaid their employees. Employees are often recruited in piazzas or on the streets, through text messages and smartphone applications, such as WhatsApp. This allows employers to contact possible employees while avoiding controls by law enforcement agencies. The recruited workers are selected on their compliance and willingness to work under such exploitative conditions, which may or may not be adequately communicated or disclosed to them at the time of recruitment.

During working hours, accidents or injuries are often hidden to avoid written complaints or checks from the government. Another common issue is the violence endured by employees during their commute to and from their places of work. Especially after payday, small criminals from the surrounding communities will approach, attack, and steal employees' monthly salaries.

Rates of suicide are rising after years of exploitation and subordination, suicide can appear as a possible way to escape from their painful experiences, economic debt, or moral obligations to their families of origin. Exposed to harsh and unsafe working conditions and forced to engage in physically demanding work each day, some Punjabi employees turn to methamphetamines, opium, and antispasmodics in order to ease their mental and physical pain. The study conducted by Medi (Medici for I Diritti Umani), with the Asgi Legal Clinic at the University of Roma Tre on the most common methods of payment amongst these exploitative employers revealed that 80% of the workers claimed to be paid extremely minimal amounts for long hours. Around 67% claimed to be paid directly by the employer, 7% by an Indian intermediary, and 24% preferred not to respond. The study concluded that

payrolls and employment contracts often appear to be legally correct, but include incorrect or barely legible data that end up benefitting the employer. A contract may state that an employee will work for 12-14 hours a day, every day of the month, but will only be paid for 3 or 4 days. Of course, this is written in pencil and in very small handwriting (and in Italian), so that it is not always noticeable by the recruited worker.

In Migrazione published a detailed dossier entitled “Exploited Indefinitely” which describes the ways in which exploitation, enslavement and “caporalato” appear to be legal, legitimate employment opportunities, protected by bureaucratic and hyper-bureaucratic administrative rules.

How to read the signs of emancipation?

Despite the devastating situation described above, in Latina province, conditions of emancipation seem to be rising, through social and democratic union protests. On 18th April 2016, after a long process of study, analysis, elaboration and emancipatory methodologies to enlighten this peaceful community with regard to their social reality, over 2,000 Indian workers held their first strike. Currently some cooperatives are being created and workers are gaining back control of their work and living conditions. This process needs to be accompanied and strengthened. Alliances with other social actors have to be created. Terra Nuova and InMigrazione’s next steps will be to reflect on how to link what is happening in this area to the global situation of exploitation of agricultural workers. Further reflection will be needed on how to link the dispossession of rural communities globally due to “land resource mining” policies provoking migration to urban areas or to rural areas of northern countries to perpetuate the same land mining food systems in Europe. Current debates at the Committee on World Food Security (CFS) on urbanisation and rural transformation are emblematic of the blindness of governments, diplomacies and international agencies on this subject. International institutions tend to have “a vision of urbanization where rural areas have to be incorporated into a mechanized, ‘transformative’, profit-seeking, and predatory approach to rural resources, making food, water, energy, biodiversity, soil mineral resources and human beings appear as faceless commodities”²⁵. The negotiations for a Declaration of the Rights of Peasants and Other People Working in Rural Areas at the Human Rights Council²⁶ could be another important normative setting arena.

Signs of emancipation are seen by the authors into self-organized communities who are re-appropriating food as a common good in a participatory way. Furthermore, local authorities, which are closer to the communities and territories, are experimenting with innovative ways of defending them. Experiences exist such as those of small rural towns whose local councils try to counter depopulation trends. In some cases in small towns in Sardinia and Abruzzo, mayors are giving public land to young people who commit to settle and start farming, or they support short distribution chains, through local markets, direct sales and public procurement schemes²⁷. These Initiatives show the way forward towards production and consumption models embedded in ecosystems and landscapes, relying on solidarity and agro-ecology, and which can create long-lasting, equitable and healthy food systems.

Although this does not represent a systematic or conscious response to the problem, management of the commons by local populations and communities through a system of direct democracy, could contribute to build a fair and effective response to the problem, while waiting for public legislation to recognize the specificities of peasant agriculture and to protect it from disappearing. In this way, fundamental human and workers’ rights could be guaranteed, and mid-term policies could acquire a

²⁵ Felipe Bley Folly, Andrea Nuila, Emily Mattheisen and Daniel Fyfe “Echoes from below: peoples’ social struggles as an antidote to a ‘human rights crisis’

²⁶ For more information on the draft Declaration, please visit: www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/HRC/RuralAreas/Pages/3rdSession.aspx . See also a series of briefings on peasants rights published by FIAN International: www.fian.org/library/publication/publication_of_a_series_of_briefings_on_peasants_rights

²⁷ “L’uso civico: strumento di tutela dell’economia rurale”. Il caso del Comune di Oniferi, Fabio Parascandolo, Irene Meloni 2017

comprehensive rural development approach to embrace the current agriculture workers –no matter where they come from- and include incoming immigrants.

Conclusions

The exploitation of tens of thousands of agricultural workers in Italy has started recently to emerge, after over thirty years of silence: a situation that can be labelled as slavery as shown by the growing amount of evidence from public research, journalist reports and judicial investigations. This situation is the result of many factors, including a predatory production model designed to apply the capitalistic up-scaling approach to agriculture, which implies the constant reduction of prices and increase of farm sizes necessary to maintain the profits of large scale food industries and mass market retailers, to the detriment of the environment and of the rights and wellbeing of both workers and consumers.

Austerity plans fulfilling conditions set by unaccountable financial and political entities at European level, which have often proved to be more powerful than State Authorities and to undermine real democracy, have shrunk social welfare, public services and the purchasing power of middle and low-income families. This is coupled with a general loss of public engagement and trust in politics as a suitable space to inspire new visions, as well as sustainable, long-term solutions.

When this situation encounters the migratory flows that have attracted public attention over the last years, the stage is set for populist leaders to rise and offer cheap solutions where threats and guilty groups are easy to tell and stigmatize. Neo-fascist parties are therefore gaining momentum in Italy, as well as in most European countries.

When it comes to food production models, these movements often take possession of a more complex set of ideas developed and claimed by farmers and peasant's movements, whose basic elements include solidarity, equity in the distribution of resources, rights and opportunities at global level, together with the defence of local food systems and markets. Unfortunately, the populist approach diminishes solidarity and rights and replaces it with xenophobia and racism. No power analysis or class vision but only interest in national local farmers who strive to survive, under the threat of immigrant illegal workers that must be pushed back to their countries, together with their own problems.

It is urgent therefore to avoid the appropriation of traditional claims and visions of the land and peasant's movements by other subjects, and to counter their discourse by defending a wider approach, encompassing a power relation's analysis and rights-based approach. This approach should include the right to migrate and being hosted, as well as embedding new-coming immigrants into the construction of social, cultural and environmentally sustainable food systems.

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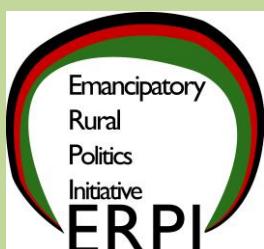
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The Emancipatory Rural Politics Initiative (ERPI) is a new initiative focused on understanding the contemporary moment and building alternatives. New exclusionary politics are generating deepening inequalities, jobless 'growth', climate chaos, and social division. The ERPI is focused on the social and political processes in rural spaces that are generating alternatives to regressive, authoritarian politics. We aim to provoke debate and action among scholars, activists, practitioners and policymakers from across the world that are concerned about the current situation, and hopeful about alternatives.

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