

## Forms of mobility and resistance of agricultural day labourers in Southern Italy

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### 1. Introduction

Cerignola is an *agrotown* in southern Italy. A century ago it witnessed an episode which is still relevant today when we examine the ongoing relationship between agricultural work and migration. This was a period of intense union activity in the Italian countryside. Cerignola's League of Day Labourers was one of the best-organised groups in Italy and had secured high wages for workers in the surrounding area. The big landowners tried to challenge the League by using labourers who were *forestieri* (outsiders). These workers came from districts within a 100km radius of Cerignola. They were poorer and were willing to work "for a piece of bread". The League responded in two ways. On April 17th 1914 the day labourers from Cerignola clashed violently with the *forestieri* in an effort to stop them from working for low wages and protect their own bargaining power. Meanwhile their leaders, including Giuseppe Di Vittorio, who came from a poor family of day labourers and became general secretary of the biggest trade union in Italy and chairman of the World Federation of Trade Unions from 1949 until his death in 1957, tried to set up union headquarters in the *forestieri*'s home towns in order to reduce competition between workers. Cerignola is in Puglia, one of Europe's most productive agricultural regions. Local produce travels via canning factories and large-scale retail chains to supermarkets throughout Italy and all over the world. A century on, *forestieri* labourers are still a major issue within this sector since they often represent cheaper labour than local workers. But since the 1980s and '90s these *forestieri* are no longer Italian. They come from Eastern Europe and North and sub-Saharan Africa.

This article analyses the connections between mobility, willingness to work for low wages and conflict in the workplace. It stems from research into the agricultural sector in Puglia and neighbouring Basilicata and into migrants from Romania and Burkina Faso. The research was conducted through interviews (with day labourers, labour contractors, agricultural business owners and expert witnesses) and the ethnographic study of migrants' accommodation situations between 2010 and 2013. After outlining the context of the research and the forms of mobility and settlement occurring in this area, the analysis focuses on two issues. The reasons why migrants are willing to work for lower wages than the rates fixed under existing collective agreements will be explored first. Migrants' *deportability* (De Genova 2002), which is often discussed in research on this

subject, is relevant, but it is not the only answer. Workers settling for lower salaries include EU citizens (such as Romanian nationals) who aren't *deportable*. Other factors to take into account include the competition within the job market between day labourers from different countries and with different legal status, the segregation of seasonal workers through accommodation and social factors and the existence of the *caporalato* system, an illegal form of mediation and labour organisation. The conflicts engineered by the day labourers will then be analysed. These range from clashes in the workplace to larger-scale mobilisation, including the biggest-ever strike held by foreign day labourers in Italy, which took place in Nardò in 2011, almost a century after the Cerignola episode described above. The article will show how, in this instance, breaking the migrants' segregation was a key factor in transforming a clash in the workplace into a much larger-scale episode of collective action. Studying forms of mobility also plays a vital role in understanding the different forms of conflict. Paradoxically Romanians, who enjoy greater freedom of movement, seem less willing to engage in clashes in the workplace than Burkinabes, despite the Africans' much more precarious legal position.

## **2. Southern Italy within the European framework**

Southern Italy isn't the only area affected by the issue of migrant agricultural workers. Since the 1950s and '60s many western European regions, from Saxony to Provence and Andalusia to the Peloponnese, have witnessed the spread of intensive agriculture along the lines of the "Californian model" (Berlan 2002). It is "labour-intensive" and therefore requires large amounts of flexible low-cost labour, especially during the harvest season (Lawrence 2007; Michalon, Morice 2008; Crenn, Tersigni 2013; Georg, Sippel 2014). In the last two decades, farmers have been under increasing pressure to reduce the prices of their products because of international trade liberalisation and the oligopoly of large-scale retail chains (Ploeg 2009). In an effort to tackle this need for labour, farmers and farming organisations turn to private recruiters on both a "formal" (temporary agencies or international subcontracting firms) and an "informal" level (the *caporali* in southern Italy, for example), as well as seeking support from their governments. As a result, governments have implemented migration policies which make the position of foreign labourers increasingly precarious. They have set up programmes to recruit seasonal workers in other countries and have deregulated labour markets both nationally and within Europe. In many areas day labourers from different countries are competing against each other in the employment market.

There are a lot of parallels within the overall European framework, but each regional context needs to be analysed individually to understand mobility strategies and the ways in which governments and business owners try to exploit and control people's movement. There are, for example, significant differences between the situation in France, where recruitment of Moroccan seasonal workers has been endorsed by the government since 1945 through *contrats OMI* (*Office des migrations internationales*), and in southern Italy, where informal mediators like the *caporali* play the biggest intermediary role in the employment market.

The first foreign agricultural labourers in southern Italy were Tunisians, who arrived in Sicily in the 1970s. They were joined in the 1980s by migrants from sub-Saharan Africa and in the last 15 years by eastern Europeans, first Albanians and Poles, then Romanians (the largest group of migrants in Italy today) and Bulgarians, as well as Indians, who mainly work in livestock farming. According to official figures, there are around 110,000 foreign agricultural workers in southern Italy and the islands, 16% of the total number employed in this sector. Trade union organisations estimate that there are at least as many workers in the black economy, although these alternate agricultural labour with work in other sectors. If we look at African migrants, these workers are almost exclusively men, but a lot of the eastern Europeans are women. Compared with provincial collective agreements which set a daily wage of 42 to 48 euros for six and a half hours' work, migrants' wages are often lower, 25 to 35 euros for eight- to twelve-hour days, and a lot of jobs are commonly paid at piece rate. Very few foreign labourers, particularly Africans, have their social security contributions paid, which would entitle them to unemployment benefit for seasonal workers.

The areas that I studied (in Puglia and Basilicata) experience a peak in labour demand between June and October for tomato farming, especially at harvest time. A lot of companies use harvesting machines but just as many use teams of day labourers paid at piece rate. The tomatoes go to canning plants in Campania, between Naples and Salerno, where they are turned into "pelati" (peeled canned tomatoes), one of Italy's best-known and most exported food products. Every summer, between 13,000 and 20,000 migrants come to this area looking for temporary work. For several years the majority have been from west Africa (especially Burkina Faso, Ghana, Mali, Senegal and Ivory Coast), east Africa (Sudan) and central and eastern Europe (Romania and Bulgaria).

### **3. *Forestieri* from two continents**

The Romanians in this area exhibit two types of mobility. The first group, permanent residents,

grew significantly in the first five years of the 21st century, making Romanians the largest group of foreign nationals in many districts. They live in built-up areas and seek employment throughout the year in various sectors, with men employed in construction, agriculture and transport and women in domestic work, catering and agriculture. The second group, on the other hand, only comes to this area during periods of peak labour demand. It is made up of labourers based in other parts of Italy or Europe who move here temporarily, as well as teams of several dozen people who come straight here from Romania for a few months and then return home once the tomato harvesting season is over. These workers often live in run-down farmsteads in the countryside, a long way from built-up areas, and are more likely to fall victim to forms of forced labour.

Very few of the Burkinabes in this area are permanent residents. Most of them move around the region according to the demand for labour. Some, particularly unauthorised immigrants and asylum seekers who have crossed the Sahara, Libya and the Mediterranean to reach Italy, follow the harvest cycle in the regions across the south. In the winter they pick citrus fruit in Calabria, in the spring they pick strawberries in Calabria and in the summer they pick tomatoes in the area being examined in this article. Others, especially if they have a residence permit for employment purposes, move to the north and look for work in small and medium-sized manufacturing businesses in the “industrial districts”. As a result of the economic crisis, however, these businesses have had much less need for migrant labour in recent years. As the sub-Saharan African migrants move around the region, they create “ghettos” of varying sizes in the countryside (shanty towns, clusters of abandoned farmsteads, disused factories). The biggest settlements house between 500 and 1,500 inhabitants. One is very close to Cerignola and is known as *Ghana House* because mainly English-speaking Africans live there. The “ghettos” also have food and clothes shops, restaurants and bars, car mechanics’ workshops and brothels.

In both cases, the migrant labourers’ mobility is often coordinated by the *caporalato*, a system of informal farm labour contracting (similar to the Mexican contractors in California described by Krissman 2005). Even though this has been a punishable offence since 2011, it nevertheless ensures that the teams of day labourers are efficiently organised and taken “just in time” to the businesses that require them. The *caporalato* system has existed in this area since the beginning of the 20th century. It was used to coordinate the *forestieri* when they were all still Italians, as in the Cerignola episode described at the beginning of this article. The *caporali*, who are often the same nationality as the day labourers nowadays, provide a lot of services. They are responsible for finding

employment for the labourers and providing them with accommodation (albeit temporary) during harvest time, transport to the fields and other places (railway stations, supermarkets), food and water and credit. They also have a commitment to provide labour for business owners (or retailers responsible for harvesting a product) and supervise the work. Employers pay the *caporale* rather than the individual day labourers. For each 300kg container of tomatoes harvested, for example, the *caporale* receives between 3.5 and 6 euros. He then pays the labourers their wages after deducting a mediation fee (between 50 cents and 1.5 euros per container), the cost of transport to the fields (3-5 euros per day) and the amount owed by the labourers for accommodation, food, water and credit. Under this piece-rate system the strongest and most experienced pickers can earn up to 80-100 euros per day, but the slowest don't get more than 20 euros.

The public are most aware of cases where *caporali* have been investigated or convicted for using day workers as slave labour. However in Puglia, more so than in other southern Italian regions, the *caporalato* system is a form of day-to-day mediation that both labourers and business owners see as necessary and practically take for granted. This is especially true for the tomato harvest, which requires immense organisational capacity to move teams of 20-30 day labourers quickly over long distances. When a *caporalato* system operates in a particular area, the *caporali* tend to take over a lot of the other services, resulting in even lower wages for the labourers. The *caporalato* system's "success" stems both from inefficient monitoring by the Inspectorate of Labour and from its lack of "competitors". In contrast to other parts of Italy and Europe, seasonal labour quotas, which are revised annually by the government, state-run job centres and "formal" private intermediaries all fail to have a widespread impact here.

#### **4. Deportability, segregation and escape**

Romanians often work for lower wages than Burkinabes (and Africans in general), which seems paradoxical. One of the main reasons why Burkinabes are vulnerable is their "deportability" (De Genova 2002). Many of them are undocumented, those who do have residence permits are afraid to lose them and therefore put up with harsh working conditions, and those who are asylum seekers often have to wait years to be granted refugee status. Romanians, on the other hand, can move freely within the EU, so they could negotiate higher wages without having to worry about being deported. And yet a lot of Burkinabe day labourers complain that competition with the Romanians is bringing labour costs down. How can we explain this paradox? Which additional factors besides

their “deportability” make this section of the labour force so vulnerable? Three reasons will be explored here.

First, as in other parts of Europe (Potot 2010), competition between workers from different countries and with different legal status has been intensified by the economic crisis and the struggle to find jobs in other sectors and regions. This makes it hard to organise collective forms of action, which are vital for maintaining wages at a certain level. Cerignola’s early-20th century League of Day Labourers understood this problem only too well and tried to set up trade union headquarters in the *forestieri*’s home towns.

A second factor involves segregation through accommodation and the *caporalato* system. During the harvest period, day labourers live in ghettos of varying sizes in the countryside, a long way from built-up areas and the local population. They sometimes benefit from “humanitarian intervention” but rarely interact with trade union organisations and local institutions. Once the season is over they move on to other ghettos in other regions. Racism, in an institutional sense as much as a more general one, is a key factor in managing the labour market. *Caporali* derive their power (and profit) from this segregation because it allows them to monopolise communication between the *forestieri* and the locals and control the labour market.

The third factor to consider involves forms of mobility. Paradoxically, it is because of their greater freedom that Romanians are able to accept meagre wages. These are in line with pay and the cost of living in Romania, where wages are still lower than in western Europe. In addition to this, Romanians also often travel with other members of their family unit (for example a husband and a wife), which means that a family can “bring home” more income, whereas it is only Burkinabe men who travel to find agricultural work. If Romanians ever feel that the wages they can earn in this area are too low, they move elsewhere to look for other work. Their most profitable form of resistance is their mobility, their ability to “escape” because of their freedom of movement within Europe. As a result, they rarely get involved in disputes about wage levels and labour management. Burkinabes, on the other hand, are often “trapped” in this area, partly because of the economic crisis. In a way their precarious legal position actually provides a bigger incentive for them to take part in collective action.

## **5. Forms of conflict**

During my research I observed four types of conflict, which were mainly initiated by African day

labourers. News about the first two types doesn't often travel beyond the workplaces and ghettos, though.

First there are “spontaneous” conflicts in the workplace. These include small-scale sabotage (putting green tomatoes and stones into containers of ripe tomatoes) or unplanned strikes to demand outstanding pay from employers and *caporali*. Meetings are also sometimes held in the ghettos, where groups of day labourers challenge the *caporali* over wages and the amount of money that they deduct.

The second type of conflict involves management of the labour market. Some day labourers, either individually or in groups, ask business owners to hire them without using intermediaries. In 2012 and 2013 I followed the story of a group of 20 African day labourers who moved independently around the region, challenging the authority of the *caporali* controlling migrant labour.

The third type of conflict is of an “ethnic” nature. The most notorious example of this was the January 2010 “Rosarno revolt” in Calabria (Corrado 2011). In some areas of southern Italy, migrants are victims of racially motivated intimidation and violence. During the citrus harvest in Rosarno, after three of their countrymen were wounded by local residents, the African day labourers took to the streets to vent their anger. Three days of violence by the locals followed, only stopping when the police intervened and “deported” hundreds of Africans.

Lastly there are conflicts in the form of strikes and union mobilisation. This is what happened in Nardò in the summer of 2011 (Perrotta, Sacchetto 2013). The strike actually began like the first kind of conflict described above. The business owner and the *caporale* had ordered the day labourers to perform an additional task and remove any green tomatoes from the containers that they had filled. The labourers had asked for an increase in their piece rate, but the *caporale* had refused. The team of day labourers, who came from various countries, decided to stop working and go back to the tent city where they were staying. After an evening meeting, the 400 or so labourers in the tent city called for a strike, which was to last for two weeks.

Why did the first type of conflict (in the workplace) turn into much larger-scale mobilisation on this occasion? One reason is the fact that the day labourers didn't live in “ghettos”. They were in a tent city managed by two associations which provide support for migrants. Medical and legal assistance was available to them and an ongoing information campaign against working in the black economy was in progress. This played a part in breaking the segregation imposed upon the day labourers and reduced their dependence on the *caporali*, paving the way for action on wages and labour

management. Day labourers from numerous African countries, particularly Tunisia, Sudan, Burkina Faso and Ghana, took part in the strike. They organised the mobilisation during open meetings, overcoming language barriers and competition between groups of different nationalities in the local labour market.

Following the strike, the government declared the *caporalato* system a punishable offence and the region of Puglia began restructuring its system of posting workers within the agricultural sector. However, the tent city wasn't reopened in 2012 or 2013, no more strikes took place and the situation remained more or less the same as in previous seasons. The continuing segregation of day labourers makes it difficult for them to use these legislative measures to bring about any real improvement in their conditions.

## 6. Conclusions

This article has explored some of the connections between mobility, willingness to work for low wages and forms of conflict in the workplace based on an analysis of the agricultural sector in Puglia and Basilicata in southern Italy. The case study shows how *deportability* is not the only reason why migrants are willing to accept low wages, since there are also non-*deportable* migrants, such as Romanians, in the area. Other factors that appear to be equally important are the competition between migrants from different countries, the segregation of seasonal workers through their accommodation and the *caporalato* system of labour management. Since the Romanians have greater freedom of movement than the Africans, they are less inclined to engineer collective action to demand better wages and working conditions. By contrast, the Africans' more precarious legal position "traps" them in the area and somehow makes them get organised to improve their working conditions. In most cases, however, conflicts are confined to the workplace and the opportunity to engineer larger-scale mobilisation only arises when the migrants' segregation from local residents is broken.

As in the Cerignola episode in the early 20th century, creating a bond between locals and *forestieri* is a key factor in engineering conflict and improving working conditions in the agricultural sector. But creating this bond seems more difficult than it was a century ago. This is partly because of the more precarious legal situation of today's migrants, but also because they come from so many different places and exhibit significantly different forms of mobility.



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