

Sindacato di strada: The union's duty is to be wherever migrants gather

Migrants still undergo massive labour exploitation in agriculture. Illegal labour brokering has spread all over Italy. It is not everywhere soiled by labour exploitation, but the challenge is there

Jean-René Bilongo is FLAI-CGIL officer for migrant affairs, inclusiveness, social solidarity and legality. FLAI organises agro-food workers, including fisheries, livestock, beverages and forestries throughout Italy



Right from the time Italy shifted from the position of origin of vast emigration flows to that of destination country as it currently is, incoming immigration has always been closely linked with labour in the agro-food sector. The first historical migrant settlement was that of Mazara del Vallo, in Sicily, with Tunisians workers involved in the fisheries sector. It was towards the end of the '60s. In August 1989, a South African asylum seeker Jerry Masslo was murdered in Villa Literno, then a highly productive district of tomatoes in Southern Italy. Even though he was the apartheid-torn South Africa, Masslo's application for asylum was rejected: at the time, there was the 'geographical reservation' clause on Italy's protection obligations under the 1951 Refugee Convention. It meant that only people from communist Eastern Europe could benefit from asylum protection in Italy.

Villa Literno was very attractive for Masslo and thousands of other migrants: it was a large opportunity for seasonal work. However miserable living conditions, exploitative labour and illegal labour brokering were overwhelming. Oppression awareness was widespread amongst the migrants. The largest Italian union CGIL, backed up by a series of voluntary organisations took up the challenge of organising the migrant workers. Jerry Masslo was the leader and spokesman of the wave. Interviewed by a large audience public TV channel, he raised the issues migrants were facing: 'I thought that I would find a place to live in Italy, a wave of civilisation, a welcome that would allow me to live in peace and to cultivate the dream of a tomorrow without barriers or prejudices. Instead, I am disappointed. Having a black skin in this country is a limit to civil coexistence. Racism is also here: it is made of arrogance, of abuses, of daily violence to those who ask for nothing but solidarity and respect. We in the Third World are contributing to the development of your country, but it does not seem to matter. Sooner or later, some of us will be killed and then we will realise that we exist'. Few days later, he was shot by a group of thugs with faces covered just like Ku Klux Klan. They had staged an overnight robbery attempt in one of informal settlements where they sheltered.

Jerry Masslo's murder raised to point of caesura of immigration in Italy. CGIL requested a State funeral. A few weeks later a huge antiracist demonstration took place in Rome. More than 200,000 people attended. It was in October 1989.

Thirty years later, large proportions of migrants still undergo massive labour exploitation in agriculture. Illegal labour brokering has spread all

over Italy. It would be unfair to state the entire Italian agriculture is soiled by labour exploitation. It's not. But the challenge is there.

Based on estimates of the *Fifth Report on illegal labour brokering* elaborated by Placido Rizzotto Observatory, a FLAI- CGIL in house research institute, there are currently about 180,000 agricultural labourers in severe hardship with very long working time, low wages, no leave, etc. It would be unfair to limit the issue of exploitative labour to Southern Italy only: 'the phenomena of labour exploitation, illegal labour force brokering and the gangmaster system are not exclusively rooted in Southern Italy anymore. They have conquered the whole country and our organisation is very much committed in combating them', says Giovanni Mininni, FLAI- CGIL General Secretary. Furthermore, the phenomenon of exploitative labour in farms is not exclusively Italian: 'the extent of labour exploitation in European agriculture is huge. The European Federation of Food, Agriculture and Tourism Trade Unions estimates that some four million agricultural workers, many of them migrant workers, operate in conditions of illegal employment, precarious working and exploitation, whether as seasonal workers, day labourers or otherwise insecure. Low pay and very poor living standards are endemic, with workers often isolated from the rest of society, living in informal dwellings without running water or power. In a significant number of cases, conditions tip over into gangmaster practices and modern slavery¹ states a paper co-authored by Johan Danielsson, Kristjan Bragason and others posted to the *socialeurope.eu* website.

Undoubtedly those loosing are the victims of exploitative labour whereas few take advantage of the system. Victims are deprived from their dignity and that's the worst aspect of the issue. We are all born equal in dignity and rights. The chain of exploitative labour is a wide one. Farm owners take advantage of the 'needy state' of workers, most especially migrants. There are cases of massive abuses against female migrant workers who happen to be victims of exploitative conditions twice: exploited in the farms and sexually abused as well by the farms owners. Last but not the least, these unlawful 'agriculture entrepreneurs' unfairly compete in the market with those who duly respect workers rights. The State is as well amongst the losers in terms of both tax evasion and social insurance elusion.

Our union started raising alarm on the issue of exploitative labour almost thirteen years. At dawn of

the awareness raising mobilisation that later turned to be a permanent campaign led in loneliness by FLAI, there was no political will to tackle exploitative labour. A series of dramatic events occurred and they echoed in public opinion, like the long obituary series of agricultural workers in 2015 summer and most especially late Paola Clemente's death on 13 June 2015. Aged 49, Paola Clemente was a native vineyard worker in Apulia Region. Her working days normally started at 3am. Like hundreds of other women, at that early hour she normally boarded a bus that would take her 190 miles away. Paola was paid 27-30 euros on a daily basis. It should have been thrice higher. That day, while performing her duty in a field of grapes, Paola requested a short break which was denied. No choice did she have other than continuing the job under the unbearable sun. Later she collapsed and died. Her story caused public outrage and was made notorious thanks to FLAI's determination and perseverance. *The New York Times* wrote that Paola Clemente's death originated from an 'elaborate system of modern-day slavery — involving more than 40,000 Italian women, as well as migrant and seasonal labourers — that remains at the core of Italy's agricultural economy'. Sixteen months later, the Parliament adopted bill 199 against exploitative labour and illegal labour force brokering which far better known in Italy as 'caporalato'.

The least one can say about the new Italian legal framework is surely that it's trenchant indeed. It provides some exploitative labour indicators such as:

- the systematic payment of wages beneath the level fixed by applicable collective labour agreements,
- the systematic violation of the rules on working time, weekly breaks, compulsory leave and holidays,
- the violations of the legal framework on occupational safety and health,
- the exposition of workers to degrading working and leaving conditions.

The previous law before bill 199 aimed at targeting the illegal labour brokers. The provision clearly targets both the 'caporale' and the exploiting employer, regardless of any brokering activity. Furthermore, the intermediation of the caporale must not be necessarily stable and organised.

In the *annus horribilis* 2020 caused by the coronavirus outbreak, the drama of exploitative labour came up in its worst picture ever. Unexpectedly, it was realised that agro-food migrant workers had to play a key role in keeping the citizenry's well-being in terms of fresh products supply. At the same time, their working and living conditions turned worse than ever before. First of all, the pandemic safety measures adopted by the Government just ignored the tens of thousand of migrants sheltering in informal dwellings and



Italy: Sikh agricultural workers strike, 18 April 2016.

ghettos. Relevant numbers amongst them are asylum seekers rejected by the commissions in charge.

In 2018, the populist and right-wing-oriented Northern League party's leader Matteo Salvini, at the time Interior Minister, adopted an executive order that nullified thousand of stay permits for 'humanitarian purpose' released to political asylum seekers. They were consequently sacked from the reception centres, with no choice other than heading for ghettos close to intensive agricultural basins. They are a permanent low cost labour force army to be hired by the employers and the illegal labour brokers. Ghettos are synonyms of huge shacks, with no water, no power nor toilets. Far away from the local communities. Here migrants survive in incredibly miserable conditions. One would see them riding their rusty bicycles towards the farms or being loaded by gangmasters in vans and trucks at dawn. In 2020, the coronavirus outbreak compelled labour inspectors to smart working. Zero site inspection for exploiters and illegal labour brokers meant no breaks nor deterrent against abuses. FLAI therefore launched a large sensitisation campaign, sustained by a vast range of opinion leaders, NGOs, civil society, intellectuals, clergymen, human rights activists, grass-roots communities and common citizens asking the Government to take urgent action aimed at safeguarding the health of migrants confined in informal rural dwellings and ghettos. Such pressure forced the Government to adopt further anti-Covid social measures, including a mass legalisation bill for migrants. About 250,000 non-EU migrant workers applied for a permit of stay.

Over the last dozen years, the fight against exploitative labour and illegal labour brokering has been a top priority for FLAI. We have theorised and achieved an innovative operational scheme in favour of vulnerable workers. Our *modus operandi* is that

To organise these workers means going back at the roots of working-class movement, leaving our offices and desks and going to where migrant workers gather, take leisure or find work, whether at dawn or at sunset

To help migrants access labour rights FLAI has opened migrant desks in Romania, Tunisia and Senegal

of being a 'sindacato di strada' (English: 'union of the street')

By (re)turning into a sindacato di strada, FLAI means going back at the roots of working-class movement. It is the duty of the union to leave our offices and desks and go round to meet up with workers wherever they shelter, where they gather, leisure or head for occasional jobs. Being a sindacato di strada for FLAI means permanently standing by the workers' side, at dawn or at sunset, in such a way they wouldn't be lonely nor desperate in their daily struggles and to have a way out of exploitative labour, as well as being guaranteed individual and collective protection in terms of labour rights. Sindacato di strada means promptness in dealing with vulnerable workers problems – such as migrants- by intervening in short and urgent situations. It means a 360-degree horizon that makes the workers feel he's not left neither alone nor behind. Such a systematic approach led to the April 2016 strike of the Indian agricultural workers in Latina district, a milestone from Rome. A historic day that saw FLAI and migrants' rights grassroots organisation In Migrazione fostering 2000 Sikh workers to take the streets and protest against their working conditions and to request a minimum hourly wage of 5 euro, still far from the legal minimum of 9 euro.

FLAI has designed its own masterplan for migrant workers protection. For instance, we do carry out permanent sensitisation campaigns on the field, most especially during some great harvest seasons like tomatoes picking in Apulia, peaches and apples in Piedmont, grapes in Lombardy, olives and potatoes in Sicily. We normally involve colleagues from foreign unions FLAI partners with, based on the migrant communities we target in terms of labour rights awareness and exit strategy from exploitative labour or gangmastering. Our joint campaigns have involved for instance CNLSR Fratia (Romania), FNSZ (Bulgaria), UGTT (Tunisia), UMT (Morocco), Carism (Senegal). At the same, FLAI has set down a comprehensive follow-up policy right from the country of origin. We believe migrant workers should be able to get every labour right before moving to Italy or even once they return home after a working period in Italy. That's the reason why FLAI has opened migrant desks and info- points in Romania, Tunisia and Senegal.

Since 2011, every summer FLAI has been holding an international summer academy on migration on Goree Island, two miles off Dakar coast, longtime slave-trading depot and hub. For a week, our union activists and delegates and colleagues from Senegal partake a brainstorming on migration, its causes, etc.

In FLAI's migrant workers 'masterplan', Jerry Masslo continues to play a keyrole from the cultural pantheon we have to acknowledge him. Every two years, we normally organise a three-days programme dedicated to him, with the involvement of administrative authorities, local councils, schools, migrant communities, journalists, writers and foreign unions leaders. We believe migrant workers play a pre-eminent role and deserve respect, instead of fuelling hatred as populists and right-wing oriented parties have been doing across Europe. FLAI believes that there's no product quality without labour qualify.

That's why we back up the 'social conditionality' in EU Common Agricultural Policy. It means CAP funding should be closely tied to labour rights observance. FLAI General Secretary Giovanni Mininni comes out swinging: 'we should be aware that it's necessary to redesign a social model that puts the person in its centre, together with the environmental sustainability challenge because everything is kept together in the new world we wish to build'.

1 Johan Danielsson, Paolo De Castro, Agnes Jongerius, Per Hilmersson and Kristjan Bragason, *Stop EU money for labour exploitation in agriculture*, June 9th, 2020.



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Over 60 million jobs have been lost since the beginning of the financial crisis in 2008. With the addition of new labour market entrants over the next five years, 280 million more jobs need to be created by 2019. Half the world's workforce are employed in precarious work and one and three jobs pay less than \$1.25 per day. To just maintain the status quo 1.8 billion jobs must be created by 2030.

We are seeing levels of inequality in income distribution back to the scale of the 1920s. We are living through a boom period but only for the one percent.

There is a word missing in the world of tomorrow debate – 'solidarity'. UNI Global Union and its 20 million members stands for solidarity in action.

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UNI global union, 8-10 Av. Reverdil,
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