

A seasonal workforce absent and an army of broke "volunteers" to save agricultural, arboricultural and horticultural production, to ensure local logistics distribution, to stock supermarket's fresh food aisle and to feed confined populations.

"Keep shopping, we'll take care of the rest... »

From the very beginning of the pandemic, food supply issues took on a rare political and media dimension. Images of empty supermarket shelves soon gave way to the watchwords of restocking and maintaining supply. Supermarkets hammered home the message that there would be no stock shortages.

However, in France as in other countries, the closing of borders and the halt in migratory flows revealed the surplus value of the work of foreign seasonal workers in the productive chain of working the land: from pruning to sowing, to packaging and shipping the harvest. For several weeks now, the government has been calling on the unemployed, students, refugees and other precarious people to replace these seasonal immigrant workers via the digital platform "*arms for your plate*"¹, widely relayed by the National Federation of Farmers' Unions (FNSEA).

The health crisis linked to Covid-19 has put the "agro-industrial" model, which guarantees consumers a year-round supply of fruit and vegetables in abundance and at low prices, into difficulty. This model is based on intensive production in greenhouses and open fields, distribution based on a "just-in-time" logic and, at the base of this sector, on a precarious migrant workforce that usually maintains labour intensity and the constitution of food stocks, thus ensuring the economic performance of the agricultural and agri-food sectors. The closure of borders has made clear the dependence of society as a whole in all European countries on these workers from Morocco, Spain, Poland, Romania and Ecuador.

The work of this immigrant agricultural labour force takes different forms: from undeclared work by undocumented migrants, to contracts from the National Immigration Office in 1945 (Morocco, Poland, Italy), then to labour introduction contracts from the Office for International Migrations, up to contracts for work on farms, via international temporary employment agencies based in Europe (ETT).

Supposed to meet the need for "temporary" labour on French farms, the annual presence of these foreign workers is in fact an invariable basis for intensive, predatory and exporting agribusiness. Indeed, this status of "seasonal worker" does not describe a reality linked to the cycle of the seasons but the capitalist need to reduce costs in the context of intensive production in greenhouses and open fields. This fiction of a natural seasonal temporality, on the other hand, allows the sector to justify a flexible workforce, revocable at any time, cheaper and uninformed of its rights. Non-payment of overtime, substandard housing and moral, physical and sexual harassment of female workers are commonplace.

The current crisis has highlighted the invisibility of these workers in the public space and their division in the private spaces of exploitation. The law and the dominant political imaginary make them a peripheral and marginalized category, whereas they occupy the heart of the production and reproduction of our society. This social exclusion is also a spatial segregation, since they are often housed

1 <https://desbraspourtonassiette.wizi.farm/>

directly on farms or in campsites, far from sight but always available to the employer. This distances and complicates the organisation of solidarity networks between and with these shadowy workers.

Their absence has created a void in the logistics and agro-industrial sector, leading initially agricultural employers and public authorities to ensure the availability of other categories of the population to meet consumer demand and continue to keep the intensive farming machine running: the unemployed, students, asylum seekers, solidarity workers, etc. have been "voluntarily" recruited.

Similarly, at a time when many European countries are setting up airlifts to transport workers to agricultural areas under pressure, the crisis is revealing just how crucial the health issue is. In spite of the health hazards usually encountered in the sector (overexposure to plant protection products, overwork, non-compliance with safety rules, lack of provision of protective equipment), "temporary" foreign workers have no prevention, no foresight, no insurance against the risks of illness, accident, danger, etc. in the countries of assignment. Moreover, the risks of contracting Covid-19 are exacerbated by the promiscuity of workspaces and the narrowness of residential areas that do not guarantee safe spatial distances. The emergency linked to the health and economic crisis cannot supplant respect for the living, reception and decent working conditions of these workers.

Monitoring the composition of agricultural work in the coming months and its effects beyond the pandemic will make it possible to understand, at the crossroads of social, economic and geopolitical issues, the requirements for the "free" movement of workers to ensure the "free movement" of goods in the single market. While the crisis has highlighted the structural centrality and the performance in European agriculture of those intra and extra European Union workers, how can we ensure to open up a field of struggle that brings together those primarily concerned, solidarity networks and actors from the farming world?

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