

## ROSARNO – ORANGES, NDRANGETHA, ECONOMIC HARDSHIP AND RACE RIOTS



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*The agricultural sector in Europe depends heavily on undocumented migrant workers who constitute the most vulnerable and cheapest work force. Often escaping economic hardship and human rights abuse in their home countries, these migrant workers arrive in Europe facing once more a striking gap between their de jure and de facto rights. Rosarno is a complex example of how neoliberalism, the EU migration policy and corruption of Italian state officials can cause this gap.*

Rosarno is a small Italian town on the tip of the 'boot', in the region of Calabria, the far south of Italy. The economy of the town and the whole region relies heavily on agriculture. Its soil is one of the most fertile in Italy and it is one of the main producers of oranges in Europe.

Every winter, when the oranges are ripe and waiting to be harvested, the high demand for cheap labour attracts about 2,000-2,500 migrant workers to come to Rosarno. Most of them are migrants from the Ivory Coast, Burkina Faso, Ghana and Liberia, who cross the Mediterranean in search for a better life. According to the Confederazione Generale Italiana del Lavoro (CGIL), an Italian trade union, some 50,000 migrant workers are sup-

porting and maintaining the agricultural sector of Italy. (Martelliano; Andrew 28.02.2012) Some of them have a legal residence status while others are trying to make a living without legal papers. Very few have a working contract and all of them are pushed by their economic hardship to accept the difficult and inhumane working conditions in Rosarno, as the Doctors without Borders describe it. The going wage for a 12-14 hour working day on the plantations is 15-25 Euro per day. Housing is not provided, so abandoned houses are turned into semi-functional shelters and tents are set up by the workers. In winter, they live without heating, electricity and water. Medical care is not provided, even though they are exposed to chemicals that attack the skin, inflame the eyes and lead to other physical harm

### How does the Ndrangetha dominate the business?

*First of all, factories for the processing of oranges and other agricultural products are opened and closed arbitrarily by them in order to get subsidies for the creation of jobs in the Mezzogiorno, the Italian South, from the Italian government and the EU. Furthermore they are involved in organising migrant workers work force through a so-called 'middle man' who is protected by and usually belongs to a criminal organisation which gets a cut from the migrants' hard earned salary for his operating and the transportation to the workplace. According to The Economist this cut is about 5 percent for one working day – this amounts to as much as a fifth or even a third of their daily income. (cf. The Economist 14.01.2010)*

*Apart from that the agricultural sector and much of the municipal administrations in Calabria is dominated by the Ndrangetha that corrupts the political and administrative processes and thus hinders fair and just proceedings. The most recent result of these strong ties between state authorities and the mafia was visible at the beginning of October this year. The government of the provincial capital Reggio Calabria was suspected to be disintegrated to such a high extent by links to the Calabrian mafia that its Mayor Arena as well as all thirty city councillors were replaced preliminary by three commissioners appointed by the Italian central government. (cf. BBC 09.10.2012) □*

that requires treatment. These conditions have long since been rejected by Italian workers.

### Apart from Exploitation: Xenophobia and Organized Crime

Apart from exploitation and undignified working conditions, migrant workers in Rosarno face other problems as well: xenophobia and organized crime. Together, they provide an explosive mix.

In 2008, migrant workers took to the streets in Rosarno after two of their colleagues were shot. They protested against these racist hate crimes and against their working and living conditions on the orange plantations. As a consequence of these protests, three businessmen who exploited migrant workers, were arrested (The Economist 14.01.2010) but the causes for their rage remained.

In 2010, the tensions rose again. This time the situation was different. The working conditions had not changed but the amount of work available decreased. In December 2009 'the Italian farmers' confederation said that the local citrus industry had been made 'unsustainable' by a flood of cheap Spanish oranges and Brazilian orange juice. Imported concentrate could be bought for 1.27 Euro a kilo — 53 cents less than production cost in Italy' (ibid.) Furthermore the EU changed its subsidizing policy. Instead of paying subsidies for the amount of fruits that are produced, farmers are now being paid for the amount of land they farm. Therefore it becomes simply cheaper for them to let the fruits rot on the trees. Migrants still came to Rosarno but spent their days in the town searching for work instead of being employed by orange plantation owners. Their work force was no lon-

ger needed. Two fellow migrant workers were shot by Italian youth and triggered another protest, this time it was louder and left traces in the city, such as smashed shops, burned trash bins and cars. According to Francesco Forgione, a former head of Italy's governmental anti-mafia commission, the migrants for the first time 'rebelled against the local Ndrangheta mafia which dominates the fruit and vegetable businesses. [...] During their protest they even surrounded the house of an old boss in the Pesce clan, which is powerful locally, something the Calabrians have never done.' (The Independent 15.01.2010)

But it was not just them who took to the streets. The local Italian population protested — angry about the destroyed cars and shops — against the actions of the migrant workers. During their protest they attacked migrants. Some were beaten up by Ndrangheta thugs, their property was damaged and torched. The fights continued for three days, with five migrants shot and 53 injured people, comprising 18 police, 14 local people and 21 migrants. (Kington 10.01.2010) These events can be characterized as race riots. The government intervened and the solution they found was to evacuate all remaining migrant workers and bring them out of Rosarno. Luigi Manconi, a former minister of the centre-left government, called Rosarno 'the only wholly white

town in the world. Not even South African apartheid obtained such a result' (Hooper 11.01.2010). The interior minister at that time, Roberto Maroni from the far-right Lega Nord Party, saw the reason in these exploding tensions in the tolerance from local authorities of the undocumented migrant workers. They, according to him, were the reason behind the riots.

### Do undocumented migrant workers have rights in Europe?

Existing labour unions do not include undocumented workers since the national labour legislation is not applicable on their cases but even though the assumption is diffused that undocumented workers do not have rights in Europe, several conventions, declarations and resolutions signed by the Italian government actually do guarantee them rights. Among them are the International Convention on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), the Resolution of the UN Commission on Human Rights on the Human Rights of Migrants (2005) and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. (cf. Platform for International Cooperation and Undocumented Migrants 2007)

The ICESCR says in Article 2 that it is to be applied to everyone 'without discrimination of any kind as to race,

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colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status'(ibid.).

A resolution was issued by the UN Commission on Human Rights specifically on the Human Rights of Migrants in 2005, that stresses explicitly the rights of undocumented migrants by requiring 'States effectively to promote and protect the human rights and fundamental freedoms of all migrants, especially those of women and children, regardless of their immigration status, in conformity with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the international instruments to which they are party' (ibid.).

Furthermore, undocumented migrants have a powerful human rights instrument: the

## THE ICESCR, ARTICLE 7 STATES:

*The States Parties to the present Covenant recognize the right of everyone to the enjoyment of just and favourable conditions of work which ensure, in particular:*

*(a) Remuneration which provides all workers, as a minimum, with:*

*(i) Fair wages and equal remuneration for work of equal value without distinction of any kind, in particular women being guaranteed conditions of work not inferior to those enjoyed by men, with equal pay for equal work;*

*(ii) A decent living for themselves and their families in accordance with the provisions of the present Covenant;*

*(b) Safe and healthy working conditions;*

*(c) Equal opportunity for everyone to be promoted in his employment to an appropriate higher level, subject to no considerations other than those of seniority and competence;*

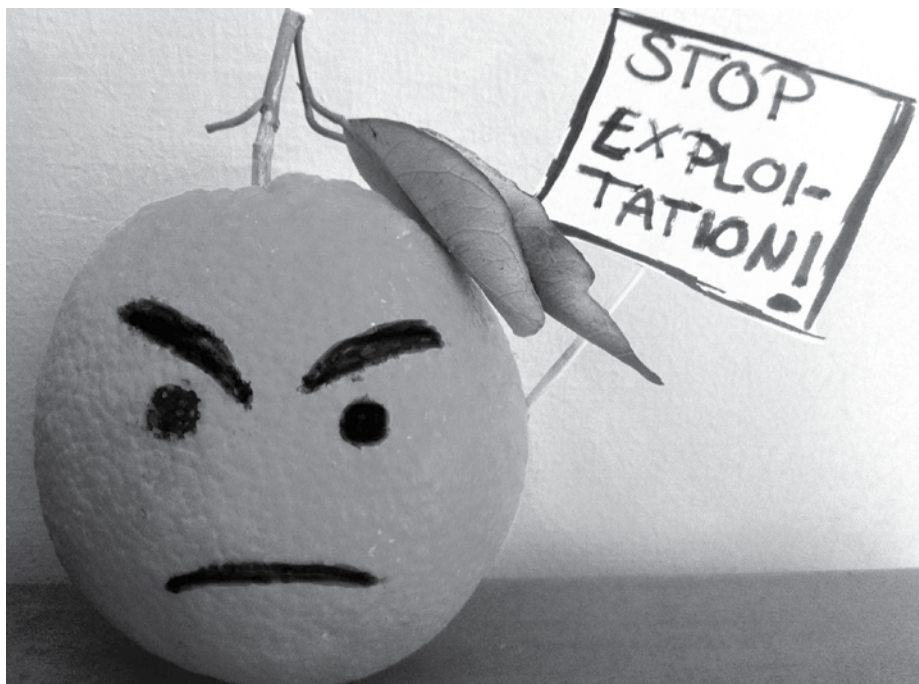
*(d) Rest, leisure and reasonable limitation of working hours and periodic holidays with pay, as well as remuneration for public holidays. ▣*

European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR). The European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) created and regulates this supranational institutional system whose decisions are legally binding for the states concerned. Apart from states, it is possible for non-governmental organizations, groups and individuals to sue for their rights and file cases against human rights abuse. Certain planned deportations of undocumented migrants have been successfully stopped by the ECtHR, such as in the Saadi v. Italy case in 2008. A Tunisian citizen, Nassim Saadi, was to be deported to Tunisia where he would have faced torture (ECtHR 2010) but since Article 3 states 'No one shall be subjected to torture or to inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment'(ECtHR 28.02.2008), the ECtHR found in favour of the applicant Saadi that an expulsion to Tunisia would constitute a violation of his human rights.

A more significant ECtHR decision regarding Italy took place in the Hirsi Jamaa and Others v. Italy case in February 2012. The court condemned the Italian government for having violated several articles of the ECHR when the Italian coastguard rescued 24 Somalians and Eritreans from drowning in the Mediterranean and brought them - on board of military vessels - to Libya without informing them of their destination and forcing them to leave the ships after the arrival in Tripolis. (ECtHR 23.01.2012) This court decision made it more difficult for state authorities to abdicate from their human rights responsibilities. Therefore the decision in the Hirsi and Others v. Italy case made it harder to defend state attempts of pushing back irregular migration on sea juridically. Yet only a few particular cases have reached the ECtHR so far and the situation of undocumented migrants in Europe has not yet witnessed any profound improvement.

## De jure and de facto rights for migrant workers – A big gap between them?

Even though Rosarno drew national and international attention to itself, not much has improved for the migrant workers. Some willingness to change and improve the situation was demonstrated from state institutions as well as from international organizations. But



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these steps are rather symbolic and cosmetic than bringing a systemic and sustainable change. One of them was the setting up of a few tents and sanitary provisions that enable a few hundred of the returned migrants in Rosarno to have a humane standard of living.

Yet major problems remain why migrants cannot demand their rights. First of all, undocumented migrants risk detention with a following potential deportation if they complain to the police about their working conditions. They do not have access to information nor do they have the financial means to fight cases in court. Migration policies criminalize migrants rather than protecting them from exploitation, abuse and violence. Having politicians using racist propaganda against them further decreases the courage of migrants to stand up for their rights. De jure they have the rights, but de facto it is too risky for them to demand them. Furthermore, in order to protect the rights of migrants and its own citizens, the government has to enable them to make use of the legal tools

they have. This does not work in an atmosphere of fear in which the mafia can terrorize everyone and prevent them from filing cases against mafia structures and where migrants do not dare to go to the police because of their immigration status. Apart from that the Italian government should be seeking to help farmers who cannot compete with the cheap oranges from Brazil and Spain. These low prices can only be accepted by the farmer if the working costs are extremely low – too low for the fruit pickers to afford a dignified life. Italy's agricultural sector is shouldered by migrants and would be shattered into pieces without their cheap work force. A structural and radical change in the economic system seems to be necessary to bring forward a true change and improvement of the situation. Amnesty International calls on the Italian government to protect the migrants from racist hate crimes, from exploitation and to 'ensure all migrants are able effectively to access the right to adequate housing and living conditions, a right the UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights has indicated applies

to everyone, regardless of status and includes the 'right to live somewhere in security, peace and dignity' (Amnesty International 12.01.2010).

A civil society led initiative by 'Equosud', shows a possible path to a de facto solution of the problem. They are a support network for fair traded and produced food. Their initiative 'SOS Rosarno' promotes and organises the selling of oranges produced in Rosarno in a fair manner within Italy. At the end, solidarity of the people makes these bitter oranges taste sweet. ■

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