

# **Migrant farmworkers in Southern Italy: ghettos, *caporalato* and collective action**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This paper focuses on migrant workers in Southern Italian agriculture. After a brief description of the general background, an analysis will be given of two themes: the state of *seclusion* and segregation in which the workers live; and the organization of recruitment and the labour process through the *caporalato*, an illegal and widespread farm labour gang-master system. Two case-studies will be compared: the “ghetto” of Boreano (in Basilicata region), which exemplifies the central role of seclusion and *caporalato* in the productive process of Southern Italy’s agriculture; and the experience of “Masseria Boncuri” in Nardò (Apulia), where thanks to a strike that involved several hundred African farmworkers in August 2011, the condition of seclusion were broken. The analysis is based on material collected during qualitative research, in particular in-depth interviews and ethnographic observations of the houses, the labour process, and the struggles of foreign labourers conducted from 2010 to 2013.

## **KEYWORDS**

Migrant farmworkers, Southern Italy, Seclusion and caporalato, Strike

# 1 • Introduction

This article discusses the condition of agricultural migrant workers in southern Italy. After a brief description of the general background, we will analyse two key features regarding the current situation: the state of segregation in which the workers live, and the organization of recruitment and work through the *caporalato* (gang-master system). To understand the importance of these aspects two areas will be compared, that of Boreano (Basilicata) and that of Nardò (Apulia), which both exemplify the central role of segregation and the illegal hiring methods of migrant workers. In the case of Nardò, we focus on the strike that involved several hundred African workers in August 2011. The analysis is based on material collected during qualitative research – in particular 54 in-depth interviews, and observations of living and working conditions, and the daily struggle of migrant workers - conducted in 2010, 2011, and 2012 in the two areas.

## 2. Context

The presence of foreign workers in Southern Italy' agriculture is a phenomenon that began in the 1970s, when many Tunisians first found work in Sicily<sup>1</sup> and has increased many fold since then. North African migrants started to arrive in the 1970s, those from sub-Saharan Africa in the 1980s and East Europeans in the 1990s. Consequently, migrants of different nationalities and with different legal statuses are present in Italy, both those from new EU member states and non-EU states: a situation similar to that in France and Spain.<sup>2</sup> The non-EU migrants can be grouped by those who have a residence permit for seasonal work, those who have a work permit for full time employment (who may sometimes also work in other regions of Italy and in other sectors), those who are applying for asylum seekers, and the many who have no documents whatsoever.

The areas most affected by these arrivals are the coastal plains in which an intensive agricultural industry has developed. They require a large labour supply, with features similar to the "California model"<sup>3</sup>: a model that is widespread also in other areas of Europe.<sup>4</sup> According to official statistics, in 2007 almost 76,000 foreign farm workers (both EU and non-EU) were employed with temporary or permanent contracts in

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<sup>1</sup> COLE, J.E. and BOOTH, S.S. *Dirty Work. Immigrants in Domestic Service, Agriculture, and Prostitution in Sicily*. Lanham: Lexington Books, 2007.

<sup>2</sup> POTOT, S. (2010), "La précarité sous toutes ses formes: concurrence entre travailleurs étrangers dans l'agriculture française". In: MORÍCE, A. and POTOT, S. eds. *De l'ouvrier sans-papiers au travailleur détaché: les migrants dans la "modernisation" du salariat*. Paris: Karthala, pp. 201-224;. Cabellero, E.G. and GARCIA, M.R. "Migración femenina de Europa del Est y mercado de trabajo agrícola en la provincia de Huelva, España". *Migraciones Internacionales*. vol. 2, n.4, Julio-Diciembre, 2004, pp. 36-65; HELLIO, E. "Importer des femmes pour exporter des fraises (Huelva)". *Études rurales*. n.182, 2008, pp. 185-200.

<sup>3</sup> BERLAN, J.P. "Agriculture et migrations". *Revue Européenne des Migrations Internationales*. vol. 2, n. 3, décembre, 1986, pp. 9-31; BERLAN, J.P. "La longue histoire du modèle californien". In: *Le goût amer de nos fruits et légumes*. Limans: Forum civique européen, 2002, pp. 15-22; ROTHENBERG, D. *With these Hands: The Hidden World of Migrant Farmworkers Today*. Berkeley, University of California Press, 1998.

<sup>4</sup> MICHALON, B. and MORICE, A. eds. *Travailleurs saisonniers dans l'agriculture européenne. Études rurales*. n. 182, 2008.

Southern Italy.<sup>5</sup> However, this is an underestimate, largely because it does not include the widespread use of work off the book.

Research conducted in recent years<sup>6</sup> has shown that the migrant workers' experience is particularly harsh in rural areas of Southern Italy. Their work situation is characterized by seasonality, long periods of unemployment, irregular employment conditions, hiring through the illegal mediation of gang-masters, wages lower than those established by collective bargaining agreements, piece-rate payment, long working hours, high physical exertion, unhealthy working conditions and exposure to occupational hazards. As for the actual work, several thousand people follow the harvest of different crops. Some of these come from the new EU member states specifically for the harvest and stay for short periods of times. They work alongside those who are relatively stable in the area or who are in fact local residents. In some areas, instances of racism and violence have occurred, such as those that led to the revolt of the Africans in Rosarno (Calabria) in January 2010.

### 3. Segregation

Agricultural labour processes in the south of Italy are directly linked to the daily reproduction of the work force. The segregation of housing is a central factor in the management of the labour market and workforce. The transient farmworkers usually resolve the problem of their reproduction in one of three ways<sup>7</sup>: a) they live in reception centres set up by the local institutions, which are usually open only for a limited number of migrants with documents; b) many workers - especially the Eastern Europeans - find shelter in uninhabited houses in the countryside, which are often without electricity, water and heating, c) many African migrants with and without documents live in large "ghettos" - as the migrants themselves call their living area - i.e. concentrations of several hundred workers living in self-built shacks, abandoned houses, factories and other derelict buildings. These ghettos are often located far away from population centres, such as the "Grand Ghetto" in the countryside of the province of Foggia (Apulia)<sup>8</sup> - the largest

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<sup>5</sup> In Italy in 2007 there was a total of 231,663 migrant agricultural workers. Inps, Idos. *IV Rapporto sui lavoratori di origine immigrate negli archivi Inps. La regolarità del lavoro come fattore di integrazione*. Roma: Inps/Idos, 2011.

<sup>6</sup> BROVIA, C. "Sous la férule des *caporali*. Les saisonniers de la tomate dans les Pouilles". *Études rurales*, n.182, 2008, pp. 153-168; CORRADO A. "Clandestini in the Orange Towns: Migrations and Racisms in Calabria's Agriculture". *Race/Ethnicity*. vol. 4, n. 2, 2011, pp. 191-201.

<sup>7</sup> Reference is not made here to the workers that are established within an area and do not move to follow agricultural work. They usually live within the town and often find work, not only in agriculture, but in other sectors (catering, building, commerce).

<sup>8</sup> This and other ghettos where the subject of a study carried out by the anthropologist Benoit Hazard. HAZARD, B. *L'aventure des Bisa dans les ghettos de «l'Or rouge» (Burkina Faso – Italie)*. Trajectoire historique et recomposition des réseaux migratoires burkinabé dans la région des Pouilles. Thèse de doctorat en anthropologie sociale et ethnologie, Paris, Ehess, 2007; HAZARD, B. "Le costellazioni migratorie burkinabé e la riproduzione del contesto locale". In: RICCIO, B. ed. *Migrazioni transnazionali dall'Africa: etnografie multilocali a confronto*. Torino: UTET, 2008, pp. 132-154; HAZARD, B.

African shanty town in southern Italy – or sometimes close to the villages, as in the case of the abandoned factories in Rosarno (Calabria).

Among the different settlements described, the ghetto seems the most suitable for analysis of the connection between the workplace and the living place in Southern Italian agriculture. These settlement patterns produce a clear separation, in particular between the African farmworkers, and the local population. This division can be described as 1) spatial: migrants live in often difficult to reach settlements far from population centres, 2) economic: public job centres do not provide an efficient mediation between workers and employers, 3) cultural: migrants live in ghettos also in an attempt to rebuild community bonds with their compatriots, while in towns they would be afraid of racism and violence, and 4) political: the migrants are considered as people with no legal rights, neither by employers, who consider that they are granting the workers a favour by hiring them, nor, paradoxically, by local institutions and voluntary associations, which usually intervene only on an “humanitarian” or an “emergency” basis.

These different types of accommodations appear to be extremely important in understanding agricultural production in Southern Italy. The system of agricultural labour in these regions takes the form of *seclusion*, that is, a “spatial arrangement that reinforces the overlap of work, leisure, rest and more generally all aspects of daily reproduction of an individual or a group in one place, from which they are formally free to leave”.<sup>9</sup> It is an organization of everyday life and work, that is, at least formally, different from internment. The workers do not technically lack the right to spatial liberty as they are not prevented from moving away from the ghettos or farmhouses, but effectively they are “trapped”.

The conditions of seclusion in the “green factory” of Southern Italy are caused at least in part by the legislation regarding migration and work. The so-called Bossi-Fini Law (No. 189 of July 30, 2002 and its subsequent amendments) makes it extremely difficult for anyone without documents to obtain a residence permit. And once obtained, it is quite easy to lose, especially in times of economic crisis.

Since 1998, undocumented migrants in Italy have been hosted in reception centres for asylum seekers or imprisoned in detention centres. Reception and detention centre have become commonplace in Italy and they are often located in southern agricultural areas. These structures should function to identify migrants and then if necessary deport them to their country of origin. Actually, many of the farm labourers pass through these centres before ending up in the ghettos and in the black labour market where official checks, during harvest time, are rare. In fact, once the migrant leaves the reception and detention centres, s/he often looks for work in the surrounding areas, either through friends and relatives or by contacting a gang-master or *caporale*. Therefore these centres serve also as an interface and a filter for the labour market and to provide migrants a

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“Réinventer les ruralités. La diaspora burkinabé en Italie dans la reconfiguration des territoires ruraux : l'exemple de Beguedo”. *Cahiers d'études africaines*. n.198-199-200, 2010, pp. 507-528.

<sup>9</sup> GAMBINO, F. *Migranti nella tempesta. Avvistamenti per l'inizio del nuovo millennio*. Verona: Ombre Corte, 2003, pp.104-105.

temporary accommodation, according to the needs of the labour market. The centres fulfil an important role in regulating the just-in-time supply of a workforce according to the needs of the local or regional job market. Detention centres act as a 'lung' for the black labour market and also a 'training centre' where migrants 'learn' to accept appalling working conditions and low wages even before finding a job. This is the case of Diawara from Senegal:

When I arrived in Lampedusa, I was with other people from Gambia; all people said "Gambia, Gambia," then I also said "Gambia", thinking that in this way it was possible to have political asylum. In Gambia people speak English, but all of us speak also Wolof. Then they took me to [the Centre for asylum seekers] Borgo Mezzanone for asylum application. [...] But I failed. I applied again, but failed again. Now I'm waiting for the answer to another application. I still have a few months' time. If I have a negative answer again, I will go back to Africa. [...] I stayed eight months at the centre of Borgo Mezzanone, and then I came out, I had no place to go and I went to the Grand Ghetto (of Rignano Garganico, Foggia). I stayed there for many months. For a long time I was unemployed. Then I came to Nardò to look for a job. But I have not yet found a job. I returned to the Ghetto. I did not have a penny. A "capo nero" (black boss) who spoke Wolof like me because he was Senegalese, asked me if I wanted to work for him. I accepted.<sup>10</sup>

A large proportion of the farmworkers in ghettos are undocumented or may rely upon a humanitarian aid permit. Therefore, on the one hand they are vulnerable and subject to blackmail because they are "deportable"<sup>11</sup> but on the other hand they are "stuck" in these areas because they are waiting for a response to their application for the residence permit.

The migrant farmworkers end up in ghettos for both social and economic reasons. Renting a house in a village or town is complicated because of the low wages earned and the inbred racism of the local population. While the ghetto, as well as ensuring greater protection for undocumented migrants, allows the construction of a kind of African (or, sometimes, more specifically Burkinabe, Ghanaian, Ivorian, Sudanese, Moroccan) "community", as they can find themselves with friends, family and compatriots. It is also easier to find a job in the ghetto, and this arrangement makes it easier to organize work and transportation to the field by the gang-master.

These spatial politics of the labour process greatly influence working and social relationships among the workers.<sup>12</sup> The presence of both large and small ghettos for the migrant workforce facilitates brokers and entrepreneurs in accessing new reserves of workers and at the same time limits wage demands and the workers' bargaining power.

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<sup>10</sup> Interview with Diawara, Senegalese farm labourer, Foggia, August 2011.

<sup>11</sup> DE GENOVA, N. "Migrant 'Illegality' and Deportability in Everyday Life". *Annual Review of Anthropology*. V. 31, 2002, pp. 419-47.

<sup>12</sup> For an analysis about the importance of space in the labour process, see PUN, Ngai and SMITH, C. "Putting transnational labour process in its place: the dormitory labour regime in post-socialist China". *Work, Employment and Society*, vo. 21, n. 1, March 2007, pp. 27-45.

Also, farmers are not obliged either to consider workers' daily reproduction or to improve their working conditions. As the farmworkers are employed mainly for short periods, the accommodation in the shantytowns does not constitute any sort of link between the worker and the company. Socialization in their daily reproduction takes place in the realm of co-habitation with co-workers; farm labourers do not have personal space and personal effects are usually kept in a bag next to the bed. Often, the gang-masters actually live in the ghettos, thus enabling them also to continue to manage their workforce even when they are not working.

As we shall see, even a partial breakup in the system of seclusion undermines the efficiency of the workforce management itself and allows the propagation of forms of self-organization among the workers. However, it is necessary to first describe the people who hold the most power in the ghettos: the gang-master or *caporale*.

#### **4. The gang-master system**

*Caporale* is a term that has been used for decades in Italy, and can be translated as gang-master. It means a person who is engaged in the illegal intermediation of labour, especially in agriculture, but also in other sectors such as construction. The caporali were present not only in the South, but also in the North of Italy (e.g. in organizing the work of women rice pickers in the Po Valley, the so called *mondine*). In the rural South, the Italian gang-master used to transport teams of farmworkers, mostly impoverished women from the mountain areas, to work in the farms on the coastal plains. The Italian Agrarian Reform in the 1950s pushed for a reorganization both of the large farms, and of the role of the land agent or the "man of respect". The land agent organized the team of workers for the farmers, but after Land Reform he progressively became replaced by the more dynamic gang-master. Since the 1990s, the gradual replacement of Italians by foreign farm workers went hand in hand with that of Italians by migrant gang-masters. Nevertheless, in many cases the Italian gang-master remains at the head of more structured organizations, managing in turn the foreign gang-master.

Migrant farmworkers use the word *caporale* only after they have learned it from Italian people, more often they use the terms "capo" or "capo nero" that means "boss" or "black boss" (or, in other cases, captain). Farmworkers refer to any African migrant who takes a portion of their wages as a black boss: labour contractors, drivers, foremen and supervisors. In the countryside of Southern Italy anyone who has a car or a van can take on the role of *caporale*. On the other hand, the words "white boss," are used to label Italian farmers and brokers.

In the more structured ghettos a "grey area" develops between farmworkers and the black boss. This "grey area" is made up of people who are engaged in informal economic activities, taking advantage of the presence of a large number of farmworkers living in places far from town. In the ghettos it is possible to find restaurants, bars, clothing and grocery stores, hairdressers, mechanics for cars and vans, disco clubs and brothels. These informal activities are not carried out directly by the black bosses, but

rather by fellow migrants who are explicitly entrusted by them, or even by those who enjoy a good relationship with the black (or white) bosses.

In the realm of seclusion, the figure of the gang-master is central to both the production and reproduction processes. The caporali are often described by the press as slave drivers ready to use violence to force labourers to work for low wages and for long hours. In fact, there are several different types of gang-masters, depending on nationality and on the area in which they operate, and the slave-driving gang-master is in fact an exception.<sup>13</sup>

In some cases, the gang-master completely controls the worker's lives, from housing and food, to transport to the fields and the supervision of the harvest. In other cases, however, they merely negotiate with the employer and transport the workers. Many Central and Eastern European gang-masters (especially Romanians, but also Bulgarians and, in recent years, Poles) organize the migrant's transport from the country of origin and their stay over the entire period of employment. Generally, he or she provides other services, such as transportation to hospitals, railway stations and supermarkets etc., the supply of food and water and the provision of credit for the workers' needs.

The gang-master draws power and profit from seclusion: he acts as social mediator or *social broker* who provides a "communication channel" between migrant farmworkers and local farmers, resulting in trust, respect and friendship developing on both sides. He is in fact an intermediary, a "friend of friends",<sup>14</sup> providing paid services and holding a monopoly over such services. He generally hires workers illegally, following a tradition that characterizes the political, social, and economic structure of Southern Italy. This has caused some authors to speak of "broker capitalism".<sup>15</sup>

The gang-master contributes actively to segregation between the workers and the local population. He exercises control not only over production, but also over all aspects of his teams' daily lives – it is not by chance that the workers do not find accommodation in towns. He also attempts to monopolize all communication with the local population, as well as with voluntary associations, journalists and, of course, social researchers. Usually, these social brokers do not base their power on violence, but rather through establishing a sense of a community. They form their own teams of farmworkers in the first place with relatives and friends, in the second place with neighbours or countrymen and only on days of high labour demand with other workers from the ghettos. They also manipulate community codes, manifesting their relationship with workers through the language of friendship, family ties and trust, as in the case of this gang-master from Burkina Faso operating in Boreano:

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<sup>13</sup> The Anti-Mafia Directorate of Bari conducted an investigation that traced an organisation of Polish, Ukraine and Algerian gang-masters between 2006 and 2008, leading to numerous convictions for slavery. The District Anti-Mafia Directorate of Lecce is currently engaged in a similar investigation.

<sup>14</sup> BOISSEVAIN, J. *Friends of friends*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1974.

<sup>15</sup> SCHNEIDER, J. and P. *Culture and Political Economy in Western Sicily*. New York: Academic Press, 1976.

[The owner] *trusts me*. Assan, since you're here, I can relax, I know the job will be done well." So then I must make sure that the job is done well. [...] I must give a little attention to everyone, and *convince my friends*, "we have to work well, because this year is like this and so on." And for someone who understands, one word is enough. He does not need a thousand words. And *as we are all friends and family*, in fact all the people I work with are my relatives, we speak the same language and we make ourselves understood. [...] *All my friends are people you can trust*, even if am not actually with them in the fields they work well. The owner is happy and we too are happy, and the work goes on.<sup>16</sup>

The gang-master often takes on the role of protecting the migrant workers who live in unfavourable conditions. These community dynamics cover potential conflicts regarding wage levels and, more generally, working conditions. Many workers, especially those without documents, are aware that the gang-master is the only person that can grant them access to a scarce resource (i.e. employment), and so they often feel the need for the "protection" that he can provide.

The gang-master's power, on the other hand, is rarely indisputable. Even if his inner circle pays him "respect", the many individually operating workers see him as a "monopolistic mediator", stripping him of the words 'honour and community'. The power of the gang-master is not "absolute" and may be taken away if the degree of seclusion slackens, as was clearly shown during the strike of African farmworkers in Nardò in the summer of 2011 which will be described shortly.

## 5. Some typologies of caporale

In this section, different specific categories of *caporalato* (gang-master systems) are described which relate to specific areas (Foggia province and the north of Lucania) characterized by the cultivation of tomatoes for the canning industry and the associated need for a large workforce especially for the summer harvest. These typologies were identified during our field research, conducted through informal conversations and in-depth interviews with farmworkers, gang-masters and experts. These types can be compared when different key features are considered:

- working period of the gang-master - seasonal or annual,
- the relationship between the worker and the gang-master – economic or community based,
- the working pattern – monopolistic or competitive – of the role of the gang-master

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<sup>16</sup> Interview with gang-master Assan, August 2010.

- the reproduction pattern – the influence of the gang-master on the labourer's life outside the workplace.

The degree of influence of these features depends on many factors, such as 1) the type of agricultural sector; 2) the characteristics of migratory patterns; 3) the change in the migrants' settlement; 4) the individual choices made by the gang-master and his business acumen (his establishment in a specific area, if he works exclusively as a gang-master or does other additional jobs, and if he chooses, or not, to develop relationships with other local brokers or other migrants).

The various forms of gang-master systems overlap and coexist in the largest and more structured ghettos; at the same time in the big ghettos it is likely that such organizations develop contacts with local criminals. In other Southern Italian areas, similar forms of exploitation can be found.

Firstly, the role of a Romanian woman gang-master who works all year round in a town in the Northern part of the province of Foggia will be described. Secondly, the three types of seasonal illegal hiring systems used by Burkina Faso and other African gang-masters operating in the Northern part of Lucania and in some of the southern areas of the Foggia province will be discussed.

### **5.1. Full time gang-masters**

In many towns in the province of Foggia, where the demand for farm labourers is high, not only during the summer, the gang-masters – mostly from Eastern Europe - intermediate illegal hiring throughout the year. Irina and Paul, two gang-masters from Romania, were interviewed in September 2010 in a small town in the north of Foggia province. Irina, about 50 years old, had already transported three teams to the field by 7 in the morning: one to pick tomatoes, another to pick aubergines, and finally one to sow fennels.

In this town, the labour market for gang-masters is highly competitive: there are five Romanian gang-masters active throughout the year; three of them collaborate actively with each other. Others work only in the summer, during the tomato harvest. In the same area other "colleagues" of different nationalities operate, on which, however, Irina and Paul do not provide any information. It seems that the Romanian gang-masters are not answerable to any Italian brokers.

Irina stated that the labour turnover of farmworkers in her team is quite high: the migrants often leave her team for purely economic reasons or due to arguments regarding wages. These workers, however, usually do not change only the gang-master, but also leave the town, moving to another area or returning to Romania. Irina is upset about the high labour turnover because some farmers ask for the same workers each day. The service provided by Irina involves transport to the workplace and some kind of control over the "reliability" of the workers.

The organization of production is based on a core of Irina's employees who are in fact related to her, some of which drive the cars and vans to transport the teams to work.

Irina also provides her services to many other Romanians with whom she has no community ties. Paul says that he has even three Moroccan farmworkers in his team.

Irina provides accommodation - in the town or in abandoned houses in the countryside – for many Romanian workers and also lends them money. Irina does not seem to be very concerned about their reproductive life.

## **5.2. The coexistence of “communal” black bosses within the Boreano ghetto**

In the ghetto of Boreano, there is a situation of coexistence, competition, and more or less peaceful collaboration between six or seven gang-masters that work between August and October, exclusively for the tomato harvest. They control no more than two or three teams of workers each. Each black boss sets up camp in an abandoned house, where he also “hosts” the workers of his team. Often his wife is in charge of the cooking for everyone. In one case, a mobile canteen was observed, organized by a gang-master to serve his farmworkers who were actually living in another house. The teams are usually made up of more or less the same people each year, who may even be related to the gang master, so a strong feeling of community develops. On the other hand, a black boss can also hire workers that live in other houses and, conversely, those that live in his house can work for other gang-masters. In some cases, two or three black bosses live in the same building and work in partnership. However, it is not uncommon for farmworkers to change teams, even during the harvest season, if they are not satisfied with the treatment received.

The Boreano labour market seems to be open to any aspiring black boss. According to a farmworker, "anyone who comes here for two years and has a car, can become gang-master".<sup>17</sup> Other black bosses that work in neighbouring areas may also recruit farmworkers in Boreano itself and compete against the Boreano gang masters.

## **5.3. The monopoly of the mediation of farmworkers in the Borgo San Nicola area**

Fifteen kilometres from Boreano, in Borgo San Nicola, the organization of the gang-master system is strongly hierarchical. In 2010 and 2011, the farmworkers lived in abandoned houses very far away from each other. But in 2012 a new "ghetto" was established just a few kilometres from the town, concentrating the African workers, thus facilitating this new kind of organization. At the head of the organization there was a white gang-master – Michele, a resident in the town, known as a local "gangster", who deals with the farmers and supplies them with workers – and Idris, a Sudanese black boss, who managed the workers themselves. Idris directly controlled two or three teams, but recruited and managed many other workers from different countries (Sudan, Ghana,

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<sup>17</sup> Field notes, August 16, 2011.

Burkina Faso and Sierra Leone) and dealt with other black bosses and drivers. The two bosses shared the profit of the harvest equally: 25 cents each for every harvested box. The income from the transport (between 3.50 and 5 Euros) was kept by the driver. In some cases, they also paid some supervisors. The farmworkers estimated that Idris and Michele – at the peak of harvest – managed at least 15 teams simultaneously (i.e. several hundred farmworkers) with a considerable profit (in a day they can earn more than 1,000 Euros each). Anyone who owned a car could act as a driver for Idris. In this context, Idris did not get involved with the worker's daily life. They made their purchases informally in restaurants and shops in the ghettos or did their shopping in the local town. There were no community ties between Idris and the farmworkers; in a few cases drivers or black bosses organized teams with friends and parents, who then sold their “services” to Idris.

Idris and Michele attempted to maintain a monopoly on the labour market, even if some farmworkers tried to work freely both individually and as a team. In 2012, for example, some migrants from different parts of Africa organized a team of 15 harvesters. They harvested tomatoes for several weeks without paying anything to a broker and paid only the cost of transport to a driver, even though they and the farmers that employed them were threatened by the two gang-masters.

#### **5.4. The “father-master” black boss**

A Burkina Faso gang-master nicknamed “Berlusconi” worked in the Southern part of the province of Foggia during the summer. He housed his team – in 2012 made up of about sixty workers, all from Burkina Faso and almost all young people – in an old house, lacking any utilities, located on a farm. From this farm “Berlusconi” controlled the labour market for harvesting tomatoes in a wide area, and his labourers worked almost every day. His wife and children also lived in this house and she cooked for all the workers, who paid for this service.

As in the case of the Boreano, “Berlusconi” has built a sort of “community” and provides food and accommodation to his team. However, his house is not located near to other houses or to other gang-masters. “Berlusconi”, like Idris, controlled and monopolized the workforce supply in a wide area, due to a special relationship he had with a large local farmer. Farmworkers say “Berlusconi” was an unfair gang-master, as he lowered the price of the box. In the summer of 2012 he was one of the few gang-master paying €3 instead of €3.50 per box. His strategy was to compete with other gang-masters in the neighbouring areas, looking to take over other markets.

### **6. How the African farmworkers view the black bosses**

The relationship between African farmworkers and black bosses can be varied. Here are some common beliefs held by farmworkers towards the black bosses and more generally towards the system of illegal hiring which were highlighted from the interviews:

1. “We are all together” (We are a community). One of the most important pillars of the system of illegal hiring is the construction of a sense of

"community" that binds the black boss with "his" workers. It is a "community" made up by bonds of kinship, friendship, respect and trust. The workers closer to the black boss (brothers, children, grandchildren, childhood friends) do not question his role and profits, or the organization of his home and daily life. Farmworkers are bound to him by ties that go beyond mere economic considerations.

2. "The black boss is indispensable but you should find the best one". Some farmworkers consider that the black boss is crucial in finding a job, as it is difficult to have a direct relationship with the farmers or the white bosses. They affirm that as the black boss guarantees constant work, he is entitled to be paid, and only the white boss is guilty of exploitation. They often have a comparative approach to the black bosses and say that the best ones are those that keep their promises and respect their obligations. An aspect positively valued is that of ensuring the transparency of the bargaining with the white bosses.

3. "A black boss will never be any good. We have to take collective action". Many labourers, however, do not agree with the black bosses deducting their wages for whatever reason and even consider it as an unacceptable abuse of power. They fully understand the situation and for them the gang-master system is the most important issue in relation to agricultural work. Some of these migrants expressed themselves in more moralistic terms, explaining that the money earned by the black bosses, through the exploitation of African "brothers", is immoral. This "moral reprobation" is also expressed by some Romanian farmworkers toward the Romanian gang-masters. At the same time, farm labourers, especially the document migrants try (individually or collectively) to find alternative methods to get a job, or they engage in direct action: as was the case of the strikers in Nardò in the summer of 2011 who wanted to abolish the role of the gang-master.

Even though the labourers' situation is very disadvantageous (housing segregation and difficulties with residence permits), they have a certain freedom in choosing whether and with whom to work. Some farmworkers change teams several times during the year, and can decide on which black boss they want to work for. They are also able to speak out and organise direct action and protest against this gang-master system.

## **7. The ghetto of Boreano**

The Boreano ghetto, located in Basilicata<sup>18</sup> consists of a handful of buildings and a church with about twenty isolated houses in the surrounding fields. Most were built in the 1950s as a result of Agrarian Reform and were abandoned and dilapidated. However,

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<sup>18</sup> See WASLEY, A. "Scandal of the 'tomato slaves' harvesting crop exported to UK". *Ecologist*. Sept.1, 2001. [http://www.theecologist.org/News/news\\_analysis/1033179/scandal\\_of\\_the\\_tomato\\_slaves\\_harvesting\\_crop\\_exported\\_to\\_uk.html](http://www.theecologist.org/News/news_analysis/1033179/scandal_of_the_tomato_slaves_harvesting_crop_exported_to_uk.html)

since the early 1990s, between July and October, they have been used as dwellings - in conditions of severe overcrowding - for about 400-500 African workers, mainly from Burkina Faso, who arrive from various parts of Italy (the Naples and Rosarno areas and some cities in northern Italy) to work on the tomato harvest. The houses are immersed in the countryside, about six kilometres from the nearest town (Venosa), but are close to the tomato fields. The inhabitants are almost all male, and mostly young. The few women present do not work in the fields, contrary to the situation of the large number of Romanian women who also work in this area, and often come to Italy with their husbands over a short migratory route.

The topography of the ghetto is unstable. Every year, some houses are knocked down or walled-up by the owners and migrants will "open up" new ones. They gradually move into less visible houses further from the road. Between 1999 and 2009, a reception centre was run by the local institutions in the nearby city of Palazzo San Gervasio, but since its closure many of the workers who were housed there now go to Boreano or other more isolated houses. African workers have been assisted by voluntary organizations, coordinated since 2011 by the provincial administration, in the provision of basic needs (such as drinking water, health care and legal aid). This humanitarian aid, however, does not change the substance of the condition of seclusion in which the migrants live.

The Boreano farmworkers work mainly in the harvest of tomatoes for the canning industry. They are paid on piece rate: before work begins, the gang-master bargains the rate for each box of 300kg of tomatoes, both with the owner of the land and with the workers. A "standard" rate is from €3.50 to €4 per box, from which the gang-master deducts 50 cents to €1. However, this can vary depending on the quality of the product, the weather conditions (when it rains the piece rate increases), the ground conditions, the use of competing harvesting machines or other teams of farmworkers, and the farmer's requirements. The gang-master also takes €5 per farmworker for transportation.

A portion of the ghetto inhabitants does not work in the fields, but offer a range of services, contributing to a thriving informal economy. A place like Boreano is not without conflicts. In our interviews we collected stories of short spontaneous strikes held in order to force the gang-master or farmer for the payment of wage arrears and conducted small acts of sabotage affecting the quality of the harvest.

If I have to work well and remove waste, I go slower and it is much harder and I earn less. If I want to earn 50 euro I need to do 15 boxes and I need to work faster, but the quality of work worsens. Usually the quality of my work is better if I am well paid [...] [But] if I want, in three minutes I am able to fill a box. Even 60 boxes per day I can do! [...] It is easy: I fill the box in three minutes and then I take off the green tomatoes only from above, so that nobody sees.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Interview with Amidou, Congolese laborer, Boreano, August 2011.

However, the situation of seclusion facilitates the gang-master to maintain control and makes it extremely difficult for these conflicts to develop into a wider mobilization for better working and living conditions.

## **8. The strike of African farmworkers at Nardò**

About 400 kilometres to the south of Boreano, the area around Nardò in Salento (in the southern part of Puglia) is a common destination for African migrants. Every year, from June to August, about 600-700 seasonal farmworkers arrive in Nardò for the harvest of watermelons and tomatoes. This number is similar to that of Boreano, but much lower than that of the province of Foggia, which has an estimated 15 to 18,000 migrant farmworkers for the tomato harvest.

Nardò is known by social scientists because of one of the most important studies of the most influential Italian anthropologist, Ernesto de Martino, whose research was conducted in the 1950s, regarding the folk religion of "tarantism" which manifested itself through the "crisis of presence", whose victims were mostly poor and landless farmworkers who lived in Salento in that period.<sup>20</sup> In August 2011, when the "tarantella" had become a phenomenon of dance, costumes and consequently marketing and the Salento area had developed into one of the busiest tourist areas in Italy. Other farmworkers in Nardò, this time with black skin, gained the attention of public opinion and social researchers.<sup>21</sup>

In Nardò, there are six or seven big farms, each covering an area of 600 to 700 hectare; some of these enterprises often lease out the harvest to other companies. These farms have little incentive to mechanise the harvest, and they try to reduce labour costs. In the summer 2011, the farmworkers initially arrived, as usual, to harvest watermelons, but they were disappointed that due to low market prices some farmers refused to pick up the fruit. After one month of few job opportunities, they hoped that with the tomato harvest, starting one month after that of watermelons, they would be able to find an employment. Their hope was dashed because the piece-rate wages in tomato harvest dropped to below that of the previous year.

The strike began at dawn on July 30, 2011, when a group of about forty workers of various nationalities refused to continue harvesting tomatoes: they opposed the demand made by a gang-master to perform the additional task of separating and discarding the green tomatoes for the same piece rate of €3.50 per box of 300 kg. The workers knew that they should receive a higher piece rate for the job requested, and as the gang-master did not grant the increase, they left the field and returned to the reception centre. Here, with the help of other farmworkers, they organized the first roadblock.

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<sup>20</sup> The text, published in Italy in 1961, has recently been translated into English with a foreword by Vincent Crapanzano. DE MARTINO, E. *The Land of Remorse: A Study of Southern Italian Tarantism*. London: Free Association Books, 2005.

<sup>21</sup> SACCHETTO, D. and PERROTTA, M. "Tomato Harvest in Nardò, Apulia – The First Self-Organised Strike of the Day Labourers". *Wildcat*, no. 91, Autumn 2011, [http://www.wildcat-www.de/en/wildcat/91/e\\_w91\\_nardo.html](http://www.wildcat-www.de/en/wildcat/91/e_w91_nardo.html)

Even if the conflict that turned into a large-scale strike developed in the workplace, it is in the area where farm labourers lived that we must look to understand what made the long strike possible and how the migrants gained such a powerful voice. Migrants lived in a tent city set up in the area of "Masseria Boncuri", an old rural building not far from the town. It was neither an isolated ghetto in the countryside nor one of the controlled reception centres run by local institutions to organize the reception of migrant farmworkers as often found in other areas of Southern Italy. Rather, it was a place open also to undocumented migrants that had been operated since 2010 by two associations, Finis Terrae and the Brigade di Solidarietà attiva (Active Solidarity Brigade), with small contributions from the local council. The construction of the reception centre close to the town broke, at least in part, the segregation of the African migrants and enabled them to move away from the state of seclusion. The spatial separation from the native population was weakened, as the farmworkers lived near to the town, where they could move independently, and were in daily contact with supportive volunteers. The two associations sustained the "rights of migrants" facilitating their access to legal assistance, medical care and Italian language courses, and running a campaign "Hire me (officially)! Against illegal employment!". The political separation was broken, as in the camp migrants workers were treated as people with rights. The Masseria Boncuri weakened the power of the gang-masters (at Nardò, they were Tunisians, Sudanese and Ghanaians) because it broke down the segregation on which the farmers and gang-masters relied for the exploitation of migrant workers.

Yet even the activists of those associations were surprised by the strike in terms of its organization and dimension. In this corner of Italy, conditions of the farmworkers had not seemed to have changed much during the last 20 years and were comparable to the conditions in other regions of the South.

The 400-500 worker migrants in Nardò were of full working age, mostly between the ages of 18 and 40. They all emigrated from an African country and the three principal nationalities that accounted for 70% of the workers were Tunisians, Sudanese and Ghanaians. Others came from Algeria, Benin, Burkina Faso, Ghana, Mali, Senegal and Togo. About half of the migrants had a permit for protection reasons (on humanitarian grounds, subsidiary protection, asylum seekers); one out of three had a work permit while just under 10% were undocumented. Finally, at the Masseria Boncuri centre, there were another dozen people, including a couple of women who ran the small "restaurants" adapted from shacks built at the rear of the property.

Amongst the African workers, there were people with very different work and life experiences. The majority of them were modern precarious workers, who know "the journey through hell" well enough, meaning that they were accustomed to move from one area to another in South Italy, following the different harvests throughout Southern Italy in Foggia, Palazzo, San Gervasio, Rosarno and Castelvoturno. At times, they combined work in agriculture with other jobs in industry, construction or logistics. They were "precarious" workers in the truest sense of the word.

Hassan, a 26 year old Sudanese, was one of the first supporters of the strike. He had a beautiful smile and during the strike was often seen with his laptop in the Massera Boncuri office browsing the Arabic version of Facebook.

I arrived in Lampedusa in 2009, but I left Sudan six years ago. I lived four years in Libya, working in construction and as welder in a small factory ... When I arrived in Italy I didn't work for four or five months. Then I worked in Sicily, in agriculture picking up strawberries, I had 42 Euros [per day] ... with the labour contract. I obtained the residence permit and I moved to Rome, where I worked in a small factory, making meat for kebabs. I am here for the first time... I worked in Palazzo San Gervasio for two weeks last year, but here the conditions are better. They pay you four Euros for a box [of 300 kilos], in Palazzo three Euros and fifty cents, and also in Palazzo there are the black bosses... When the harvest finishes here I will go to Foggia, Palazzo, then I will go back to Caltanissetta. I lived there with three other Sudanese boys... I have not yet returned to Sudan, I have no money.<sup>22</sup>

A small but important part of the migrants were former factory workers who had been fired from factories in Northern Italy and who were looking for a wage during the summer; they contributed with their industrial and sometimes trade union experiences to the struggle. Fouad is a 44-year-old Tunisian who arrived in Italy in 1988. He worked in a lot of factories in the North of Italy, but with the economic crisis he was unemployed at the time.

I came here to find a job, because I was unemployed. I wanted to work in the watermelon harvest. It is hard, very hard work. Thirty kilos of watermelon to throw on the truck, it is not easy, but you can earn something, 80, 90, 100 Euros [per day], it depends. One might work for twenty days and earn 2,000 Euros. I came just for that, but I didn't find a job... and I have also some debts now, I am still in a shitty situation ... now we were trying to work in the tomato harvest... I hope that the situation can go better. We are fighting to change this system. I went to work and I collected 12 boxes for € 4 Euros each... a pack of cigarettes costs 4 Euros, a sandwich in the field costs 3 Euros and an orange drink costs 4 Euros. At the end of the working day I found myself with 36 Euros... and maybe the black boss earned € 264... What did he do more than me, to earn € 264?

Also the “wind” of the revolts in Northern Africa helped the migrants because in Nardò there were young Tunisians who had arrived in Italy only a few months before, and asylum seekers from sub-Saharan countries, who escaped from the conflict in Libya. They affirmed that you can enforce change by struggle. Finally, some of the strikers were young students or people who had just finished technical college in Italy and were looking for a temporary job.

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<sup>22</sup> Interview with Hassan, farm labourer, Nardò, August 2011.

Migrant strikers had experienced the different economic policies in their countries of origin, and in other countries. By leaving the country of origin the migrants tried to escape from the precariousness that they were subjected to in their “home-countries”. For many farmworkers the main way to improve their conditions in Italy was not struggle, but individual emancipation from the agro-sector in the South, e.g. by finding better jobs in other sectors or other regions. But the economic crisis was pushing them back, so they understood that a mere “escape” (to vote with one's feet) would not be enough.

At the same time, we also have to consider that the struggles and demands of recent years slowly left their traces in the memory of this workforce: the mobilizations of the Maghreb farmworkers in the ghetto of San Nicola Varco (Salerno) in autumn 2006; the two revolts of African citrus pickers in Rosarno in December 2008 and January 2010; the blockading of the roundabouts in Castelvoturno and the surrounding villages (the places where the gang-masters picked up migrants to take them to work) in October 2010.

At least for the first week of the uprising, all 400-500 migrant workers housed in Masseria Boncuri participated in the strike. The most determined farmworkers, a group of about 30 people, mounted street blockades with piled-up stones from 3 am onwards for six consecutive days. These blockades were erected around the camp in order to prevent gang-masters' vans from coming and pick up workers. Every evening meetings were held with the participation of migrants of many nationalities, thus illustrating a weakening of the difference between workers of different nationalities and "communities" who now had shared objectives in the cause of the uprising.

Both during and after the strike, there were many individual and collective cases filed against the gang-masters: “I was the first to file a case and bring a gang-master to the police station”, relates Monchef from Tunisia. This aspect of the struggle touches a central issue: as we have seen, many gang-masters, most of all those from Africa, try to disguise their role in the chain of exploitation behind a network of family and community relations with the farmworkers, who are often their “fellow countrymen” or “friends”. But many migrants hate the figure of the gang-masters: “You pay 3 Euros for transport and on the fields, they want you to pay for sandwiches, water or cigarettes”, says Abdellah, from Tunisia; but the gang-master is able to find a job for many migrants, and therefore it remains a difficult undertaking to break with this relation.

Initially, the strikers demanded an increase of the price of a box of picked tomatoes and the stipulation of work contracts. Almost immediately they asked also to remove the black bosses and they demanded a public job centre in the camp. From the beginning, therefore, the migrants fought for a complex range of issues regarding general working conditions: the wage and contract systems, the organization of work and management of the labour market. A problematic element was the request to increase the piece rate. Even though it is an illegal payment method, the strikers, at least initially, did not ask to receive an hourly wage, but an increase in piece rates.<sup>23</sup> However, the strike did not affect housing

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<sup>23</sup> In May 2012 the main trade unions (CGIL-CISL-UIL) signed a new local collective bargaining which provides piecework, hitherto illegal: 1 cent per kilo for watermelons, 2 cents per kilo for large tomatoes (i.e. 6 per box of 300 pounds) and not more than three cents a kilo for small tomatoes (that is, 10 per box).

or the reproductive sphere. Not that complaints regarding accommodation in the camp were lacking (in fact, many workers sleep outdoors), but it seemed to be less of a problem: “better together here than in the abandoned and isolated farms in Foggia”, Salim from Tunisia said.

The strike was largely self-organized by the migrants themselves. The associations that managed the camp decided to influence as little as possible the demands and practices of the migrant’s fight, but supported them through a "strike fund". However, the local CGIL, the main Italian trade union, which had initially opposed the reception centre, intervened more firmly in the strike, attempting to involve, that is to take on board, the emerging leaders and to focus on an institutional resolution with the Prefect of Lecce and the Apulian Regional administration office. The employers' associations, both those that sat at the negotiation table and those that were not present, simply denied that their associations were in any way responsible for the irregular exploitation, referring solely to the responsibility of the gang-masters. At the negotiation table, guidelines were signed for the operation of public job centres, but they had no particular effect. Institutional negotiations, on the other hand, partially distracted attention from the strike "in the field", which was gradually fading.

Meanwhile, after the initial surprise, the gang-masters tried to break-up the protest, while the farmers remained in the background. The gang-masters employed several strategies: they directly or indirectly threatened the more active strikers; they recruited a few dozen scabs from the Foggia ghettos; and they exerted strong pressure against their fellow countrymen to make them return to work since they were trusted men from within the camp. They also moved some workers into abandoned houses in the countryside to get around the pickets at Masseria. The gang-masters found fertile ground especially among undocumented migrants, as they were easier to blackmail and had less hope of achieving anything from the strike. On the other hand, the gang-masters hired some workers with a legal contract and in some cases even the piece rate was increased. Farmers and gang-masters, who in the end continued to control work organisation, managed to re-orientate themselves after the initial confusion, but they also understood that something had changed and that at least for that harvest season they were compelled to accept this fact.

A critical element of the strike was the isolation of a dozen or so migrants, the spokesmen, into the farmhouse itself, away from the other workers who lived in the tents, in order to protect them from the threats of the gang-masters. In the long run, this physical separation between the leaders and other migrants became an element of weakness since the separation insinuated doubts regarding possible privileges given to the strike leaders.

The camp was a space of socialization, exchange and support during the strike and it operated as a driving force, but the camp was also a limit, when the gang-masters managed to undermine the protest “from within”, by using some of “their men” inside the tent city. Nevertheless, the possibility of permanent social relationships in the camp brought people closer together. An interesting impact of the strike was the overcoming of the separation into different ethnic groups, given that spokesperson were not elected

according to nationality, but according to their language skills - in order for them to be able to communicate with as many migrant groups as possible. The common struggle then encouraged further exchange between people, as Mohamed from Sudan said: “usually people just went to work and then to sleep, without knowing what was happening in the camp. Since the beginning of the strike there is more communication and discussion taking place.”

After the first week, a hundred or so farmworkers started working again and the strike essentially ended in mid-August, even though some workers declared that they would abstain from work until the beginning of September, after the official closure of the camp. From the legislative point of view, the main result of the strike was the approval by the Government of a Law Decree (No. 138 of August 13, 2011) that makes illegal hiring through the gang-master system a criminal offense and not merely an administrative offense.

Not unusually, after the strike ended, envy and suspicion amongst people again entered the foreground, partly instigated by the gang-master and their entourage in the reception centre – conflicts which were less important during the protest.

In any case, this struggle made the migrants involved increasingly aware of their power, although this was a work force “that immediately thinks about the present, and not the future”, as affirmed by Yvan Sagnet, the student from Cameroons that became the spokesman for the uprising. The strike changed social relationships and allowed the development of forms of subjectivity that were also expressed on questions that went beyond the object of the uprising. At the same time, the protagonists of the strike were able to present and to stand up for their mobilization in front of various social groups: during the “Night of Taranta” concert in Melpignano, during various assemblies and in the Grand Ghetto in Rignano. The leader of the strike, Yvan Sagnet, started to work with the trade union (Cgil), participated in some television programs and wrote a book entitled in English, *Love your dream. Life and rebellion in the land of the red gold*.<sup>24</sup>

But we also believe that there were other results: migrant workers who were used to hard labour, miserable pay and poor living conditions tried to change their conditions. They created levels of communication which were unthinkable only a few weeks before and they showed that they were more than “arms”, just good enough to bring in the harvest. After the events in Rosarno in January 2010, the strike in Nardo confirmed that a latent conflict permeated the rural areas of southern Italy. The economic crisis, which is a burden on both migrants and Italians, aggravated the conflict. With their strike the farmworkers questioned the consensus that the worst working and living conditions were predestined for the migrants, particularly those from Africa. The struggle seems to have resulted in a clearer consciousness about their own power.

## Conclusions

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<sup>24</sup> SAGNET, Yvan. *Ama il tuo sogno. Vita e rivolta nella terra dell'oro rosso*. Fandango, 2012.

In this article some of the main features of migrant labour in southern Italian agriculture have been highlighted. With reference to two case studies, that of the Boreano ghetto and that of Masseria Boncuri in Nardo, we sustained that the “caporalato” system and the condition of seclusion in which the seasonal migrant farmworkers, especially Africans, find themselves during the harvest of agricultural products, represented the key factors in the functioning of this productive sector, the management of the workforce and the labour market.

The gang-master draws his lifeblood from the isolation of the workforce. In fact, both the living and working conditions worsen when the workers are placed in isolated ghettos in the countryside and away from a town, as we learned from the Boreano experience. In the reception centre at Masseria Boncuri in Nardò, the situation of seclusion was broken: new social relationships and groupings have developed among migrants themselves and between them and the volunteers, as has a reciprocal trend in recognizing a common objective. In fact, Masseria Boncuri became a public space for discussion, with its open structure form, and thanks to the presence of volunteers and activists, has allowed the emergence of new subjectivities.

In August 2012, the situation in Nardo changed again. After two years of experimentation in Masseria Boncuri and after the strike of 2011, local institutions no longer allowed the two above-mentioned organizations to open the reception centre. The farmworkers in search of day work in the watermelon and tomato harvest have returned to live in the olive groves and the many abandoned houses in the countryside, a long way from the city. In the area around Nardò, migrant farmworkers were again segregated in ghettos, the gang-master’s vans could move unhindered and the harvesting of agricultural products progressed smoothly. However, the experience of the strike remains as a symbol of the ability of the self-organization of migrant workers in Italy, something that seemed to become more common throughout 2012, fielding articulated and stronger forms of struggle for the improvement of their working conditions.