



A worker-driven way out of the crisis in Mediterranean agriculture

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SOS Rosarno, an association of farmworkers, farmers and activists in Calabria, Italy, represents an innovative response from below to the extreme exploitation and precarity of migrant farmworkers in the Mediterranean region, as well as to the retailer-driven crisis of small-scale farming.

The crisis of farmwork

Agriculture is a major employer in Rosarno, an enclave of intensive citrus fruit production in southwestern Calabria. Here, each year, growers employ about 5 000 farmworkers. Since the late 1980s, foreign migrant labourers gradually became essential within this workforce, now totalling approximately 2 500 migrants. While indispensable to value addition in the regional citrus fruit sector, they endure extremely harsh conditions.

Migrant farmworkers receive only about two thirds of the minimum wages established by local labour contracts, while commonly working longer than the stipulated limit. For specific tasks, piece-rate payment further increases the incidence of overtime. Farmworkers also experience extreme precarity in employment relations: discontinuous daily employment, informal contracts without social security entitlements, and indirect hiring through intermediaries. The latter's fees further reduce already meagre wages. Appalling working conditions are compounded by extremely precarious living conditions. Within a highly stratified workforce, West African workers – the reserve army of seasonal farm labour – experience the worst conditions. The vast majority live either in an over-crowded tent town or in abandoned buildings where they have no or very limited access to electricity, hygienic services like clean water. Their legal precarity prevents them from exercising basic civic and human rights. Owing to the lack of adequate action by unions, this isolation further increases their vulnerability vis-à-vis labour intermediaries and employers (Garrapa 2016, MEDU 2017).

Their conditions are the outcome of fundamental reorganisation of the citrus fruit supply chain. Since the 1990s, increasing concentration in the retail sector shifted power relations and profit margins in favour of retailers and, to a lesser extent, traders. Consequently, farm-gate prices have dropped while production costs have grown. The ensuing squeeze on producers' income has been deeply felt in Rosarno, where citrus fruit production historically relied on small-scale commercial farming

(Mostaccio 2012: 67). Many small-scale farms have restructured or disappeared. Farmers responded to these changes by employing migrant workers to minimise their labour costs (Garrapa 2016). For small farmers, lowering migrant farmworkers' wages became a question of survival owing to their inability to strike better deals with the more powerful actors in the value chain (Mostaccio 2012: 82).

Every harvest, this situation generates profound tensions

between impoverished farmers and over-exploited workers. In January 2010, these exploded in open conflict. The umpteenth violent intimidation of African migrants precipitated spontaneous riots. Armed local citizens reacted to this unexpected revolt by chasing and beating African migrants in the streets and 85 migrants were wounded (MEDU 2015: 14). The state deported more than 800 African migrants from the area. Many others fled Rosarno (Mostaccio 2012: 71).

SOS Rosarno: emergence and challenges

Responding to these crises of livelihood and dignity, a group of African farmworkers and local small-scale farmers joined hands in 2011 to launch the solidarity economic project SOS Rosarno. The project aimed to meet the most immediate and concrete needs of migrant farmworkers: a regular contract, a fair wage, and dignified working conditions. Simultaneously, it aimed to address the crisis of small-scale farming and producers' need for a fairer income. SOS Rosarno's broader political objective was to become a living example of how collaboration between farmworkers and small-scale farmers, currently pitted against each other, could foster alternative organisation of agricultural production to meet their respective interests, and lay the foundations for a cross-class social movement promoting radical change.

Initially, six small-scale citrus fruit growers, members of an organic farmers' cooperative in financial difficulties, decided to regularly employ four African farmworkers for their harvest. A team of activists set out to directly link producers with critical consumers in the burgeoning Italian civic food networks (Fonte and Cucco 2015). Independent from the conventional market, such an alternative food chain could sustain this experiment by guaranteeing higher farm-gate prices to producers.

Promoters of SOS Rosarno have since successfully run six additional citrus fruit harvests, expanded the scheme to the production of other crops and founded an association of the same name that now manages the project. Every year, the association democratically decides which producers to include, whom to employ and how to organise their labour. Then producers employ the workers who harvest and process the food to be sold to solidarity purchase groups and fair trade shops across Italy. Product prices are also set in a democratic manner. A just price is understood as the one guaranteeing fair remuneration to both farmers and workers. Consumers are informed about how prices are formed and what share is allocated to different stages and actors involved in production. SOS Rosarno cultivates a common vision with its 'consumers', organising joint events and encouraging visits to producers and farmworkers in Rosarno. The sale of food products becomes a vehicle of movement building, revealing the deeply political nature of SOS Rosarno. Moreover, a share of the revenue funds

initiatives to promote more dignified inclusion of migrant farmworkers in local society and to support their self-organisation.

Italian civic food networks have responded enthusiastically, with the number of groups buying from SOS Rosarno growing continuously, leading to an increase in the number of participating farmers and the amount of produce harvested and distributed through the association's alternative chain. Nowadays, the project employs six workers. Moreover, while it was initially only able to guarantee a limited number of working days to workers, farmworkers now enjoy increasing employment continuity throughout the harvest season, as well as a regular contract, a wage in line with legally stipulated levels, safety at work, and self-managed working rhythms. This has allowed the African workers to rent a flat collectively in the town centre, dignifying their living conditions, and to be active in the life of the association and in local politics.

Despite these achievements, challenges remain. In Rosarno, outside the citrus fruit harvesting season, migrant workers experience high unemployment. Therefore, SOS Rosarno has only partially addressed the needs of its African members. Regular employment allows access to unemployment benefits at the end of the season, enabling them to afford their rent and survive in Rosarno throughout the year. However, the lower income in these months does not allow them to send home remittances – an important sacrifice in the context of their migratory projects.

Mani & Terra: A worker-driven way out of the crisis?

Members of SOS Rosarno have become increasingly aware of the challenges that workers' un- and underemployment pose to a long-term engagement of African workers in the association. It also endangers their political objective of becoming a living and sustainable example of an alternative economic model. The launch of the cooperative Mani e Terra (Hands and Land) in January 2016 is a response, which unites SOS Rosarno's African members and its more militant local activists. In spring 2016, the cooperative rented five hectares of land abandoned by a local small-scale farmer to inaugurate collective farming. By producing and processing a variety of summer vegetables sold via SOS Rosarno's alternative food chain, the cooperative has further diversified its agricultural production to deseasonalise employment.

The co-operative's launch signals an important evolution in SOS Rosarno's experience. It re-asserts its members' belief that a revitalised agricultural sector can be at the centre of an emancipatory strategy for workers. However, it also reflects a growing awareness that this objective requires a more radical transformation of inherited agrarian structures centred on commercial monocultures, as well as strategies for democratic and sustainable diversification of agricultural production. At the same time, it emphasises the role of workers and their self-organisation in this process. Mani e Terra – effectively a worker cooperative – plans to gradually take over the economic management of SOS Rosarno's project. It aims to become a

living example of how collaboration among workers in production and their self-management can open up a collective way out of the current crisis of precarity and underemployment.

SOS Rosarno and Mani e Terra are still small realities. Yet their experience holds lessons for a more dignified and sustainable future for agricultural labour beyond southern Italy. The cooperation between small-scale farmers and farmworkers, with the crucial support of critical consumers, can indeed provide decent work – and achieve what other strategies in Italy have failed to do. However, such a strategy might only partially achieve its objectives unless a challenge to mainstream structures is taken to another level.

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