

## Obtaining "necessary" agricultural foreign labour: obvious paradoxes of bordering in pandemic times

Emmanuelle Hellio <sup>a</sup>, Béatrice Mesini <sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup> National Autonomous University of Mexico, Instituto de Investigaciones Sociales, México

<sup>b</sup> CNRS, UMR TELEMME, Aix-Marseille University, France

---

**Abstract:** During the Covid-19 crisis, the establishment of spatial and sanitary barriers in Europe and Canada highlighted the invisible and yet indispensable contribution of foreign labour in Western European and North American agriculture. The systematic recourse to foreign seasonal workers, widely documented in the francophone press between March and May 2020, shows the variations and invariants in the employment of foreigners in northern agriculture. The pandemic reminds us that the regulation of the residence of foreigners is a social and political construction, imposing a continuum of precarious statuses "changing according to circumstances, according to the populations concerned" and which "aims to impose on everyone the definition constituted according to the needs of the moment" (Sayad 1991: 64). On the basis of an exhaustive corpus constituted between March and June 2020, we will decrypt the media-political semantics that developed on the issue of agricultural employment during the Covid crisis. Papers collected describe in detail different sequences of mobilization of a "galvanized" agricultural sector trying to avoid any disruption in production and distribution in the food chain. The analysis of the francophone press shows the convergence and divergence concerning the employment of foreign workers in agricultural sector of major interest. Both quantitative and qualitative content analysis make it possible to understand who are the main actors at work, the structure of their relationships and their evolution in space and time. Among the newspaper articles collected, certain themes were common: labour shortage, specific skills of a foreign workforce assigned to different precarious statuses (seasonal or posted workers), contagion by the formation of clusters in the host areas. Although this attention is exceptional, it does however shed light on the way the press takes hold of certain structural dynamics of the employment of foreigners in the agricultural sector. Exacerbated by the pandemic, the degraded living and working conditions that characterise the seasonal employment of foreigners have been denounced massively by trade unions and workers' associations. It implies an awareness of the fact that the migration regime invalidates the "protection of the rights" of workers, even if this protection is a *sine qua non* condition of the "freedom to provide services" promoted in the unified European market.

**Keywords:** Agri-food sector, employment of foreigners, intra and extra-community seasonal and post-workers, political and trade union lobbying, exceptional workers, exemption schemes

---

### Introduction

As soon as the borders closed, as part of the management of the health emergency related to the dissemination of Covid-19, the press widely reported on the mobilization of the agricultural sector to bring in foreign workforce despite the pandemic. This media coverage has highlighted their invisible and yet indispensable contribution to the development of northern country's economy. By depriving farms of labour and reducing agricultural productivity, the appearance of the coronavirus has revealed and increased the human, economic and logistical hazards, causing "unprecedented" disorder in a strategic sector of national and international interest.

On the basis of an exhaustive corpus constituted between March and June 2020, we will decrypt the media-political semantics that developed on the issue of agricultural employment during the Covid crisis. Employment of foreign workers in intensive agriculture is an old fact in Northern countries (Berlan, 2008; Hellio, 2013; Palerm, 2014). In the end, the Covid-19 plays its role here as an indicator of an agro-migration regime where the exemption rules put in place for these exceptional workers sound the death knell for equal treatment between national and foreign workers (Castracani *et al.*, 2020).

For labour intensive crops, the pandemic disturbed the sourcing of one of the most necessary input, qualified as highly addictive drug by Jean-Pierre Berlan. The corpus describes the different sequences

of mobilizations of a "galvanized" agricultural sector trying to avoid any disruption in production and distribution in the food chain. It also shows that these issues are at stake at a European and North American level (France, Spain, Portugal, Italy, Belgium, Canada, United States, etc.). The interference of commercial and financial relations in labour relations has profoundly disembodied the wage relationship as it was constructed during the 20th century, by making subordination links an even more complex (Petit *et al.*, 2006).

In this paper, we will first situate the continuum of foreign worker dependency in northern agriculture and the main characteristics of these segmented employment system, presenting the archetypal examples of Canada and the intensive enclave of French south-eastern agriculture. What have been the changes and adaptations in the agricultural sector: which actors, which places, which regulations on border crossings, which methods of routing (states or private initiative) were implemented to solve the problem?

Then, we will present the methodology used to elaborate and analyse the corpus. Both quantitative and qualitative content analysis will help to understand who are the main actors at work, the structure of their relationships, their evolution in time and their similarities and variability in space. Finally, we will present through press extracts the paradoxes revealed by the (migration) management of recruitment during the crisis. What type of negotiations occurred between public and private actors to ensure the circulation of foreign workers, in a context of spatial discontinuity (closure of borders) and temporal disruption?

## Analytical framework

The concept of dependency used here is seen as a structural and asymmetrical relationship between national economic systems (Magnin *et al.* 2018). The acuity of employer's demand for foreign workers is not in itself a new development.

### Northern agriculture and foreign workers: a continuum of dependency disrupted by the pandemic

The establishment of spatial and health barriers in Europe has overshadowed the indispensable contribution of foreign labour in globalized agriculture, revealing the sector's dependence on intra- and extra-EU flows of workers. In this perspective, the agricultural sector in south-eastern France is very illustrative of the role of migration policies in the segmentation of labour market and in the creation of a captive and precarious workforce. Since decades and in some cases centuries, northern intensive agriculture depends on a foreign workforce obtained through different channels. In 1924 the General Agricultural and Industrial Immigration Society was formed, helping to make France the leading European country of immigration in the inter-war period. In 1945, the National Immigration Office obtained and retained until 2005 a monopoly on all operations to recruit foreigners (Morice, 2008). After the closure of the borders to immigration in 1974, French farmers hired annually some 7,000 Moroccan and Tunisian farm workers introduced by the French Office for Immigration and Integration (created 2009), on contracts of two to eight months until 2006 (Mésini, 2015).

Then the Directive of the European Parliament and of the Council of 16 December 1996 established the possibility to post workers in the framework of the provision of services, finally the further opening of the European market to the free movement of services in 2006 led to a diversification of the recruitment of foreign workers via European Temporary Work Companies (ETT) (Décosse *et al.*, 2017). Consequently, in the Bouches-du-Rhône department, the statutory and temporal segmentation between "seasonal contracts" issued by the French Office of Immigration and Integration, and temporary "mission contracts" concluded by spanish temporary employment agencies, favours internal and functional managerial

flexibility of the workforce, in a logic of work intensification. This segmentation is increased by other dividing lines, mainly residence status (papers), nationality and gender (Décosse *et al.*, 2018). In 2018, in the Bouches-du-Rhône, the 4,000 North African seasonal workers traditionally introduced by the OFII since 1974 were reduced to 2,057<sup>1</sup>, supported by 4,219 Moroccan, Latin American and West African workers posted by 33 ETTs registered in Spain, Italy and, to a lesser extent, Romania.

In Canada, the notion of the "indispensability" of the foreign worker for the profitability of agriculture was already present in the 1940s, when the first immigrants were hired in this employment sector (Satzewich cited by Bélanger *et al.*, 2014: 47). Similarly, in this country, the work on the institutional framework for temporary migrant workers also illustrates the precariousness generated by nominative subordination to a single employer and the multiplication of residence statuses. Workers admitted under the Temporary Foreign Worker Programme for positions not filled by the labour Canadian market, have individual statuses defined by work permits, "which refer to more than 16 categories, which are themselves subdivided" (Soussi, 2019: 302).

During the first Covid crisis, the utilitarian function of the border that is introduction of seasonal workers, entered firstly in contradiction with sanitary objectives. Everybody being confined at home, introducing foreigners was a sensitive topic. Under normal circumstances, the agricultural sector and States justify the fact that they maintain farmworkers in an infra-right (infra-law) because this workforce is subsidiary and not qualified. In Covid times, they had to recognize that these "accessory" workers were in fact indispensable, very specifically qualified and not replaceable.

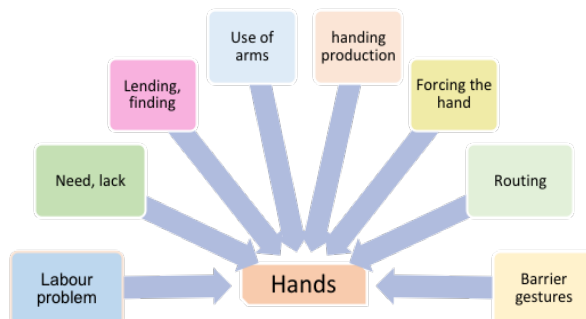
Gradually, it became clear how the juridical border implemented an assignation of precarious and differentiated status that divided foreign workers into a segmented labour market. The pandemic is a reminder that the regulation of the residence of foreigners is a social and political construction, imposing a continuum of precarious statuses "changing according to circumstances, according to the populations concerned" and which "aims to impose on everyone the definition constituted according to the needs of the moment" (Sayad, 1991).

### Feeding and reading the press corpus, a graphic exploration of quantitative

Since mid-March 2020, to improve this assertion, we have set up a boolean search on internet for "seasonal + agriculture", "foreigner + agriculture", "posted worker + agriculture", "migrant + agriculture", on a daily basis. This collection was a response to the emergence of a "discursive moment" (Moirand, 2004), a suddenly intense and prolific media production on a normally fairly marginal theme. Francophone sources, from the written press and radio, cover the local, national and international press. The corpus analysed includes three sequences: border closures and shortage of foreign labour (15-30 March 2020, 34 articles), border controls and derogations to broaden the recruitment of nationals and foreigners on the spot (1-30 April 2020, 166 articles), mobilization of employers to let foreign seasonal workers enter and emergence of clusters (1-30 May 2020, 263 articles). The great heterogeneity of factual data is treated as a complexity that the reviewer must appropriate for a research purpose (Garric and Longhi, 2012).

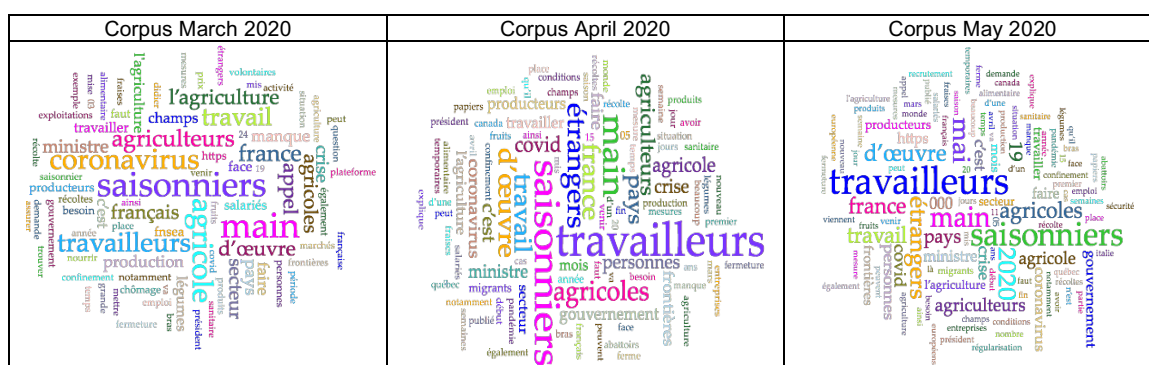
The quantitative analysis of the corpus with semantic analysis software has just begun and we can only present here exploratory results and explain the objectives of the project. Based on the qualitative analysis of the corpus, the graph below shows the terms associated with the terms hands" (Figure 1).

<sup>1</sup> This diminution is partly due to the fact that at least 1300 seasonal workers forming this contingent obtained in the 2010 an annual residency right linked to the recognising by the High Authority for the Fight against Discrimination and for Equality (Halde) of their structural role in the local labour market.

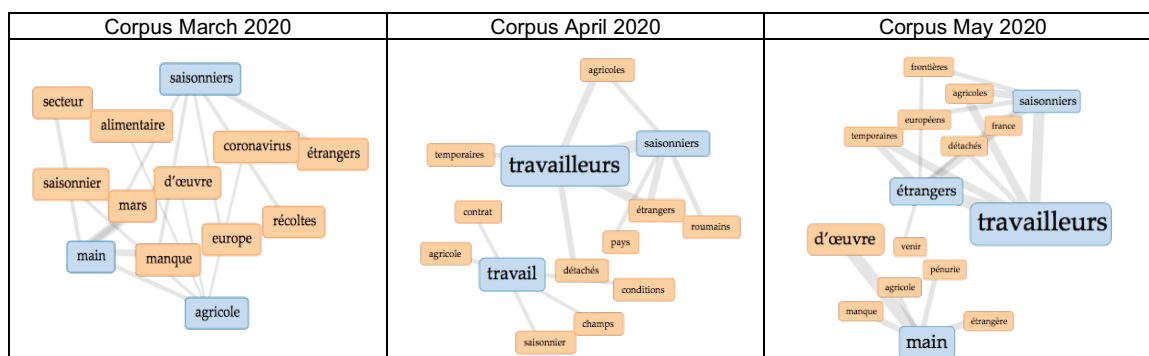


**Figure 1. Hands as workforce.** Source: Mésini B., media corpus March-May 2020, Voyant tools.

Used for the lexicometric study of the media corpus, Voyant Tools is a text reading and analysis environment complemented with visualisation tools. It is hosted on the Huma-Num platform, a very large research infrastructure (TGIR) in digital humanity that offers services and tools for data processing. The Cirrus tool visualises the word frequency of a corpus in a word cloud (Figure 2).



**Figure 2. High frequency in the media corpus March-May 2020.** Source: Mésini B., media corpus March-May 2020. Voyant tools.



**Figure 3. Visualisation of co-occurrences between keywords in media corpus March-May 2020.** Mésini B., media corpus March-May 2020. Vovant tools.

In March, the most frequently cited words in local and national press were seasonal workers (107), labour force (101), agricultural (87), coronavirus (81); in April: workers (521) seasonal workers (405), labour (314), labour force (298), agricultural (287); in May, workers (928), seasonal workers (666), labour force (493), foreigners (437). The Links tool is a graph which provides a visualization of the most cited occurrences in its corpus and the keywords (co-occurrences) with which they are most often associated. In particular, we will study the terms used, the descriptors, the argumentation blocks, the relations and connections between actors and regional spaces. Keywords appear in blue and related terms in orange (Graphic 3).

The corpus, which now includes more than 1,300 press articles, will be processed with word processing software as part of the FINCA's project, in order to question the links between "Borders, (Im)mobilisations and Neoliberalism during the Covid crisis in the agricultural sector"<sup>2</sup>.

### **Border management and foreign workers dependency in Covid-19 times, chronological sequences of events**

The establishment of spatial and health barriers in Europe and North America has revealed the sector's dependence on intra and extra flows of workers in the European context and on extra flows in North America. Confronted with the privation of migrant manpower, the actors at stake (farmers, and States, requested by trade unions and professional organisations) developed six synchronic sequences: to recruit local workers, use digital tools, to obtain derogations, to seek skilled workers, to manage the risk, to fight against contradictions of this model of employment of foreigners.

### **Lobbying and co-management between states and organizations**

The total closure of France's borders with third countries and those of the Schengen area took place on 16 March 2020. Then, the government launched a solemn "call to the shadow army of men and women" who had lost their activity because of the crisis, to join the great army of French agriculture. From then on, government communication developed a rhetoric based on food patriotism: *de la fourche à la fourchette* "from fork to fork", *des bras pour nos assiettes* "arms for our plates", *nos emplois sont vos emplettes* "our jobs are your purchases", while economic negotiations, trade union pressure and political transactions unfold.

In parallel, the National Federation of Farmers' Unions (FNSEA) asked the government for temporary relaxations to ensure the management of the workforce, including "adaptations" in terms of working hours, tax exemption for overtime, easier recourse to fixed-term contracts, and authorization for pupils and students from agricultural establishments who wish to come and work on farms on an occasional basis. This discourse is an old refrain. "We can't find anyone to do the job"; "we don't have the right labour force" is the leitmotiv of those seeking unskilled (or so-called) labour, anytime, anywhere (Morice *et al.*, 2008).

The president of the Departmental Federation of Farmers' Unions (FDSEA) of the Bouches-du-Rhône, is alarmed by a deficit of 6,000 people, usually employed directly or via the French Office for Immigration and Integration (OFII). On his side, the leader of the Movement for the Defence of Family Exploiters (MODEF), Raymond Girardi, estimates that 50% of the foreign seasonal workers have remained stuck in their countries, those already in France "accumulating overtime"<sup>3</sup>.

<sup>2</sup> Research Project 2020, Institute "Societies in Transition in the Mediterranean", October 2020 – March 2021.

<sup>3</sup> Bonnefoy C., La pénurie de main-d'œuvre menace la récolte des fruits d'été, *La Croix*, 4 mai 2020.



Within the framework of the emergency law of 23 March in France, the Ministries of Economy, Labour and Agriculture, presented a "specific support plan" to facilitate hiring in the "agricultural and agro-food sector". The main measure offered the possibility of combining partial unemployment benefit with a salary from the agro-food sector.<sup>4</sup> President of the Interprofessional French Technical Centre of Fruit and Vegetables (branch of the FNSEA) feels reassured: "After an exchange with the Minister of Agriculture, it is confirmed that agricultural activities are not concerned by the restrictions of activities"<sup>5</sup>. Finally, on 20 May 2020, the French Prime Minister published a circular which stipulates that workers who are nationals of a European Union Member State "may enter and work in the national territory under the exceptions set out in the instruction of 12 May"<sup>6</sup>: employers must make a declaration prior to hiring, seasonal workers must have the latter or a contract of employment or provision of services as well as a derogatory international travel certificate. In the case of posted workers, proof must be provided that the assignment cannot be postponed<sup>7</sup>.

### Using digital technology to recruit locally

In addition to the revaluation of local economy, it is the digital economy that has been used to encourage contacts, as illustrated by the initiative of Jean-Baptiste Vervy, a farmer from the Marne and founder of the start-up WiziFarm, who launched the platform "*Des bras pour ton assiette*" ("Arms for your plate") to enable meetings between available people (students, unemployed, partially unemployed) and farmers. In order to recruit "45,000 seasonal workers in March, 75,000 in April and as many in May", president of the FNSEA Christiane Lambert invites agricultural professionals to visit the platform, presented "as a Blablacar or Meetic of employment"<sup>8</sup>.

"Today there is the possibility of having 200,000 direct jobs in the agricultural tasks, deprived of the manpower, especially foreign manpower, that it usually employed in the fields"<sup>9</sup>. In charge of "country's food security and independence", French Minister of Agriculture Didier Guillaume is pleased that 5,000 farms are running, thanks in part to the 250,000 people who registered after his appeal to the shadow army. They "live less than 10 kilometers from the farms they joined and have "made it possible to hold the country's second line of defense after health"<sup>10</sup>.

Nevertheless, if the platform accounted for 300,000 registrations between mid-March and the beginning of May, only 15,000 seasonal workers obtained a work contract. Indeed, the pilots of the "Agriculture and Food" monitoring unit conclude that the general mobilization of the French is not likely to solve the labour problems "on this type of work, which is knowingly difficult"<sup>11</sup>.

Enthusiasm for agricultural work has its setbacks confirms the president of the Rural Coordination Bernard Lannes: "It didn't work at all. We had 100,000 jobs filled. The farmers said: I'll hire 50 workers on Monday, and on Friday I only have two left. They were neither profitable nor trained for it. The coronavirus has highlighted the fact that if we close the border, it doesn't work anymore"<sup>12</sup>.

<sup>4</sup> Magnard A., *Pénurie de main-d'œuvre : utilisez WiziFarm, le Meetic de l'emploi agricole*, Plein Champ.com, 24 mars 2020.

<sup>5</sup> Dubon G., [Coronavirus Covid-19], Les producteurs de légumes face au manque de travailleurs saisonniers étrangers, *FLD et Réussir Fruits & Légumes*, 18 mars 2020.

<sup>6</sup> [http://circulaires.legifrance.gouv.fr/pdf/2020/05/cir\\_44977.pdf](http://circulaires.legifrance.gouv.fr/pdf/2020/05/cir_44977.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> Nossant J.M., Les saisonniers étrangers reviennent sous conditions, *La France agricole*, 26 mai 2020.

<sup>8</sup> Magnard A., *op. cit.*

<sup>9</sup> AFP, *Guillaume appelle ceux "qui n'ont plus d'activité" à aider les agriculteurs*, *Terre-net.fr*, mars 2020.

<sup>10</sup> Marcoul C.M., « Coronavirus : pour le ministre de l'Agriculture Didier Guillaume », l'indépendance alimentaire, c'est l'horizon, *La Provence*, 20 avril 2020.

<sup>11</sup> Sénat, Commission des Affaires économiques, L. Duplomb F. Montaugé, B. Buis, F. Menonville, Note de la Cellule de veille « Agriculture et Alimentation », 4 juin 2020, 40 pages, p. 6.

<sup>12</sup> Oxana, *Le Nouveau Monde agricole n'aura pas lieu : la France ouvre ses frontières aux saisonniers*, *Sputniknews.com*, 15 mai 2020.

In the European and North American states, the same measures for local recruitment via digital technology have also been implemented. In Belgium, the College of Producers has developed online platform "Jobs Easy-Agri" to cope with labour shortage. In neighbouring Britain, Prince Charles is promoting a "Pick for Britain" campaign and calling on British citizens to fill the shortage of migrant workers: "I have no doubt that the work will be low-key and sometimes difficult... but you will make a vital contribution to national effort"<sup>13</sup>.

### Extensions of permit and derogation for foreign workers

The Emergency Law of 23 March 2020 (art.16) provides by ordinance for the extension of the period of validity of residence permits for foreign nationals. This law derogates from the rules applicable to seasonal workers, in particular French Office of Immigration and Integration (OFII) seasonal workers present in France on 16 March 2020, "by allowing their residence to be extended from 6 to 9 months"<sup>14</sup>. Another, palliative measure, on 30 March, is the Prefect of Seine-et-Marne's choice to "mobilize refugees" who are normally prohibited from working before 6 months in France, asking the persons in charge of emergency accommodation to facilitate contact between them.<sup>15</sup>

The alternative approach of unconditional regularization of foreigners has been widely demanded by associations and collectives mobilized in Portugal, Italy and Spain for equal rights between nationals and foreigners (work, housing, care). Due to the closure of Morocco borders on 13 March 2020, preventing the departure of more than 11,000 Moroccan women to pick strawberries in Huelva, the Spanish government has proposed "to extend the contracts of 6,600 workers who entered before the crisis"<sup>16</sup>, and to authorize the hiring as field workers of "the unemployed and immigrants without a work permit"<sup>17</sup>.

With regard to external entries, seasonal agricultural workers, "nationals of the European area", were granted a derogation on May 7 to "cross the border between France and a country of the European Union" for "compelling economic reasons". Workers had to have: a prior employment certificate stating the start and end dates of the contract, as well as an accommodation certificate stating an address of legal residence on the territory.

Finally, in Canada, the Minister of Agriculture and Agri-Food said she was stepping up efforts to welcome "as many" foreign workers as possible<sup>18</sup> and has begun to work closely with Mexico, Jamaica and Guatemala, where the vast majority of workers come from. To this end, a pilot program was established in mid-May providing a three-year pathway to permanent residency for 2,750 temporary foreign workers.<sup>19</sup>

### Nationals do not fit the bill

Despite these efforts made in an exceptional context, the hiring of national workers is not unanimous. Farmers interviewed in the press praised the autonomy, skills and performance of foreign workers whose sudden centrality contrasts with their continued existence under derogatory status, socio-economic precariousness and systemic discrimination. The President of the Vegetable Producers of France anticipate the critics: "It's not because we no longer have access to foreign workforce that we're

<sup>13</sup> Togoh I. (trad.), Le Prince Charles soutien ses agriculteurs et producteurs, *Forbes*, 21 mai 2020.

<sup>14</sup> Extraits projet de loi mesures urgentes Covid-19, présenté par M. Édouard Philippe, Premier ministre, le 7 mai 2020.

<sup>15</sup> Cabinet du préfet, communiqué *Main-d'œuvre saisonnière, les réfugiés en renfort !*, Melun, 30 mars 2020.

<sup>16</sup> Jaabouk M., *Coronavirus : Les immigrés marocains pour sauver la saison agricole en Espagne ?*, Yabiladi, 8 avril 2020.

<sup>17</sup> « Espagne : une loi pour faciliter le travail des immigrés dans les champs », AgriMaroc.ma, 7 avril 2020.

<sup>18</sup> Perron L.S., *Agroalimentaire : une aide fédérale de 252 millions*, *La Presse*, 5 mai 2020.

<sup>19</sup> Martinez P., *Le Canada offre la résidence permanente à des travailleurs étrangers*, Radio Canada International, 19 mai 2020.

very happy to find the French!" Working in the fields "requires know-how and experience" confirms farmer and Senator Daniel Grémillet.<sup>20</sup>

In Corsica, the president of the market gardening sector considers that people sent by Pôle Emploi are not qualified: "A large part of these people come from restaurants and have no skills in horticulture, so we can't afford to hire them"<sup>21</sup>. In Saint-Martin-de-Crau (Bouches-du-Rhône), farmer Patrice Vulpien insists on the skills needed to carry out certain tasks: "Thinning is a fairly simple job. Harvesting is something else: we ask our employees to recognize the caliber of a peach just by touching it. You can't learn this in half a day"<sup>22</sup>.

A strawberry grower confirms that attempts to recruit local labour in Wallonia have ended in failure: "We put 80 of them to work and we have 7 left"<sup>23</sup>. In England, the attempt to replace Romanians and Bulgarians has also shown its limits: "British citizens no longer want to work in agriculture or occupy unskilled jobs, even during a major crisis. The same is true for other Westerners"<sup>24</sup>.

The owner of FraiseBec, which produces 3,500,000 pounds of strawberries annually in Canada also praises the productivity of foreigners: "If the Mexican makes three boxes per hour and the Quebecer makes one box per hour, my production cost has just risen. For example, in Acadia: "150 Canadians to replace our 40 Jamaican workers" who work 65 to 75 hours a week and are specialized"<sup>25</sup>. In the same vein, the owner of a little farm in Canada believes that Quebec City dwellers are not reliable. In addition, Guatemalans, you pay them the plane, you feed and house them, but they are always there and ready to work"<sup>26</sup>.

### Labour force entry and risks

In order to ensure the arrival of foreign seasonal workers, Provençal farmers began a power struggle by demonstrating on 20 May 2020 at 2 pm in front of the prefectures and sub-prefectures of the PACA region under the banner "Our harvests are getting lost, we need seasonal workers"<sup>27</sup>. In the United Kingdom, two of the six planned flights were "ordered by G's Fresh, one of the country's largest farmers which brought in foreign workers through the private company Air Charter Service, anxious to have "a percentage of experienced workers to train its new workforce"<sup>28</sup>.

Thus, whereas it had forbidden the entry of seasonal workers from outside and within the EU on 25 March, Germany reversed its position, authorizing the arrival of 80,000 seasonal workers at the beginning of April<sup>29</sup>, including 13 flights from Romania to transport 18,740 workers to the countryside.<sup>30</sup> Mandated by the German bosses, agencies recruited in Romania, with the approval of Prime Minister Ludovic Orban "who doesn't consider preventing seasonal workers from looking for work". A special military decree authorizing "the transport of seasonal workers from Romania to other states" was therefore issued to bypass the state of emergency introduced on 16 March.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Cerqueira S., *Coronavirus : travailler dans les champs ne s'invente pas*, Public Sénat, le 30 mars 2020.

<sup>21</sup> Quilichini T., *Corse : pas de main d'oeuvre qualifiée pour l'agriculture*, France Bleu RCFM, 16 avril 2020.

<sup>22</sup> Rof G., À Saint-Martin-de-Crau, la crise sanitaire menace la récolte de pêches, *Le Monde*, 7 mai 2020.

<sup>23</sup> *Covid-19 : en Belgique, les producteurs de fraises font face au manque de main-d'œuvre*, RFI-Europe, 12 mai 2020.

<sup>24</sup> Tapalaga D., Et l'Europe s'est mise à aimer les travailleurs roumains, *Le courrier International*, 23 avril 2020.

<sup>25</sup> Delattre S., Refus des travailleurs étrangers : "Des fermes ne passeront pas au travers", *Acadie Nouvelle*, 29 avril 2020.

<sup>26</sup> Tremblay S., *Travailleurs étrangers : la pandémie cause tout un casse-tête*, NouvellesHebdo.com, 15 mai 2020.

<sup>27</sup> Sarrazin C., Des manifestations pour faire venir les saisonniers agricoles, *La France agricole*, 22 mai 2020.

<sup>28</sup> Guianvarc'h P., *Un pont aérien pour faire venir de la main-d'œuvre étrangère*, Lepetitjournal.com, 24 avril 2020.

<sup>29</sup> Rédaction, *Coronavirus : l'Allemagne autorise finalement l'entrée de saisonniers étrangers*, *Le Sillon Belge*, 3 avril 2020.

<sup>30</sup> Alcoy P., *Nos vis, pas leurs profits*, Révolution permanente, 17 avril 2020.

<sup>31</sup> Rico S., Cassonnet F., En Allemagne, les saisonniers roumains risquent leur santé pour des asperges, *Médiapart*, 3 mai 2020.



In mid-April, the Italian authorities began discussions with the Romanian embassy to organize "green corridors" by ensuring that once there, health safety would be maximum. In addition, the Minister of Agriculture declared "in favour of a massive regularization of illegal immigrants in Italy, in order to get the economy moving again"<sup>32</sup>. Even if they are aware of the risks, most seasonal workers don't really have a choice, explains Mihai Valean who picks asparagus in Germany: "I earn €3,500 net in ten weeks, which is as much as the rest of the year in Romania!" Emigrants are an unavoidable source of money transfers: "last year they sent their families 7.2 billion dollars (6.6 billion euros), that is to say almost a third more than direct foreign investments"<sup>33</sup>.

In the state of exception, the law does not have "force of law" (Agamben 2003). Following the death of a Romanian worker infected with the coronavirus on a German farm the 11 April, the IG Bauen-Agrar-Umwelt union demanded a full investigation<sup>34</sup>. Then, after the deaths of a Romanian seasonal in Germany and of two Mexicans, aged 24 and 31 contaminated by the virus, the report of the Migrant Workers Alliance for Change denounced the deplorable living and working conditions but also the ill-treatment on the farms: racism, overwork, lack of equipment"<sup>35</sup>. "We treat these workers like heroes. But we have to question how they are treated during the pandemic" denounced the spokesperson for the Immigrant Workers Centre of Montreal during the International Workers' Day<sup>36</sup>.

### A weakened and dependent agricultural model

The wine industry is also demanding the entry of posted workers to supplement local workforce: "29,000 recurrent workers coming mainly from Poland, Romania, Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Portugal and Spain" were introduced in 2019. The president of the Sancerre Wine Union admits that "No one is happy to resort to it, but it is a necessity!"<sup>37</sup>, while the president of the FNSEA regrets this generalized model of foreign-employment: "We cannot operate indefinitely with a workforce from elsewhere, bringing in poorer people than us, for very low wages, because consumers want to buy cheap products"<sup>38</sup>.

French seasonal workers who came to pick asparagus stayed at Noyau's farm, but "he is aware that this solution of appealing to goodwill cannot be perennial and considers that France has a reflection to lead: "It is a debate of society. We must be able to pay more for our employees who are in France, and that everyone wins, including the boss". For this, "the consumer must agree to pay a little more for his fruit and vegetables"<sup>39</sup>.

The confluence of the health and socio-economic crises exudes a deep dissent on the model of intensive production and agricultural "development". The President's address to the French on 12 March 2020 suggests a desire for national reappropriation of the strategic sectors of food and health: "What this pandemic reveals is that there are goods and services that must be placed outside the laws of the market. Delegating our food, our protection, our ability to care, our living environment, basically, to others, is madness". Examining how Covid-19 is reshaping the economy, Robert Boyer infers that

<sup>32</sup> AFP, *Pas de main-d'œuvre pour cause de coronavirus, pas d'eau pour cause de sécheresse... C'est compliqué aussi chez nos voisins transalpins*, Entraid.com, 22 avril 2020.

<sup>33</sup> AFP, *Les "capsunari", ces travailleurs roumains que l'Europe s'arrache*, *Le Point International*, 30 avril 2020.

<sup>34</sup> Rico S., Florentin Cassonnet, *op.cit.*

<sup>35</sup> Haddad N., *Covid-19 : un rapport accablant sur la situation des travailleurs agricoles étrangers*, Radio-Canada, 8 juin 2020.

<sup>36</sup> Vézina, *Relance économique : des travailleurs migrants veulent une régularisation de leur statut*, *journal.metro.com*, 1<sup>er</sup> mai 2020.

<sup>37</sup> Durchon C., *Coronavirus : un député du Cher fait des propositions pour soutenir la filière viticole*, France 3-Centre Val de Loire, 28 avril 2020.

<sup>38</sup> Agriculture : entre récoltes perdues et manque de main-d'œuvre locale, *Le Dauphiné*, 22 mai 2020.

<sup>39</sup> Gaven G., *Je pense que c'est une bonne solution : les saisonniers étrangers sont attendus par les agriculteurs pour pallier le manque de main-d'œuvre*, France Info, 20 mai 2020.

"international mobility of people has been durably hampered and global value chains will not emerge unscathed from efforts to regain some national sovereignty over the production of strategic goods"<sup>40</sup> (Boyer, 2020).

Several hundred agricultural seasonal workers have been tested positive in the Bouches-du-Rhône. Twenty associative and trade union organisations united around the "The Day After" initiative, have published a crisis exit plan that includes 34 measures to respond to the health, social, economic and ecological challenges facing our societies, accompanied by a petition that has collected more than 180,000 signatures.<sup>41</sup>

## Conclusion

Sociologist Antoine Pécoud evokes through the press "the usually not very visible stakes that this crisis has suddenly revealed". His first observation is that "labour is in some respects a commodity like any other" that circulates intensely from one country to another in a globalised economy. The second is that at a time when Western states are reforming their policies for admitting foreigners to attract "chosen" and skilled immigration, unskilled labour remains absolutely essential but also largely invisible, seemingly "completely under the radar"<sup>42</sup>.

The pandemic has shown the consubstantial links between themes that had been compartmentalized until then: agricultural production, food distribution, seasonal or posted work and migration policies. It has revealed the porous nature of borders, which can be modulated according to the risk of food shortages and employers' demands for access to just-in-time labour to meet the harvest calendar. The vocabulary of migration control and logistics has spread through political, economic and media language (lockdown, hotspots, clusters, corridors) to guarantee the dual circulation of products and arms, in an agricultural sector of vital interest for food security and sovereignty, while the main part of the population was immobilized.

To put it another way, the use of the term "corridor" used in logistics offers "a transit route with a special administrative regime facilitating the passage of goods when geopolitical conditions are unfavourable, when territories are landlocked". Included in the framework of the 1999 European Spatial Development Perspective, the corridor offers a geographical, political and economic space for the transport of agricultural labour quotas, in which the regions are perfectly interconnected by land, air and sea links, according to a spatial matrix and distribution software.

This synchronic and sequential approach refers us to the Marxist theory of "circulating variable capital", by shedding light on how the temporary mobilities of foreign workers provide employers with the greatest possible "extraction of surplus value", "exploitation of labour-power" and ultimately of "the productive force of capital, which employees deploy by functioning as collective workers". The increase in over-labour obtained by increasing labour intensity is equivalent to less "variable capital" for the same amount of labour (Marx, 1985, 23). The unveiling effect of the Covid-19 crisis makes intelligible the human and financial stakes of this globalized model of extroversion of the variable capital. In the countries under consideration, the owners of the means of production buy foreign workers at a social and economic cost below the market value of perfectly executed skilled work.

<sup>40</sup> R. Boyer, Comment le Covid-19 remodèle l'économie. Une pandémie, deux avenir, *Le Monde Diplomatique*, novembre 2020.

<sup>41</sup> Communiqué de presse commun des 20 organisations, *Des associations proposent 34 mesures pour une relance écologique et sociale*, Reporterre. Le quotidien de l'écologie, 26 mai 2020.

<sup>42</sup> Pécoud A., *Agriculture : les migrants saisonniers récoltent ce que le Covid-19 a semé*, theconversation.com, 10 juin 2020.

## References

- Agemben G. (Eds), 2003. *État d'exception. Homo sacer*, II, 1, Paris, Éditions du Seuil.
- Boyer R. (Eds), 2020. *Les capitalismes à l'épreuve de la pandémie*, Paris, La découverte.
- Castracani L., Décosse F., Hellio E., Mésini B., Moreno Nieto J., 2020. Salariés agricoles détachés : quelques leçons de la crise sanitaire, *Plein droit* 127, 9-15.
- Bélanger D., Candiz G., 2014. Essentiels, fiables et invisibles : Les travailleurs agricoles migrants latino-américains au Québec vus par la population locale, *Canadian Ethnic Studies* 46, 1, 45-66.
- Bélanger D., Candiz G., 2015. Fraises douces amères : territoire et précarité chez les travailleurs agricoles migrants de la région de Québec, *Cahiers de géographie du Québec* 59, 166, 7-28.
- Berlan J.P., 2008. L'immigré agricole comme modèle sociétal ?, *Études rurales*, Travailleurs saisonniers dans l'agriculture européenne, 182, Éditions de l'EHESS, 219-226.
- Boyer R. (Eds), 2015. *Économie politique des capitalismes. Théorie de la régulation et des crises*, Paris, La Découverte.
- Décosse F., Desalvo A., 2017. Les détachés de l'agriculture intensive, *Plein droit* 113, 7-10.
- Décosse F., Mésini B., 2018. Trabajadores temporales y desplazados extracomunitarios en la agricultura provenzal: movilidad laboral, externalización y dumping social, In Sánchez Gómez M.D., Torres Pérez F., Serra Yoldi I. (Eds), *Zonas vitivinícolas, trabajadores inmigrantes y transformaciones sociales*, México, UNAM, 245-275.
- Garric N., Longhi J., 2012. L'analyse de corpus face à l'hétérogénéité des données : d'une difficulté méthodologique à une nécessité épistémologique, *Langages* 3, 187, 3-11.
- Gautié J., 2012. Le marché du travail vu d'en bas : quelques enseignements d'une recherche comparative sur le travail à bas salaire en Europe et aux États-Unis, In Mendez A. (Eds), *Travail, compétences et mondialisation. Les dynamiques sociétales en question*, Paris, Armand Colin, 187-198.
- Hellio E., 2013. Futur simple et futur compliqué. Travailleurs étrangers en transit dans la roue saisonnière espagnole, *Hommes et migrations* 1301, 1, 19- 27.
- Hellio E., 2014. *Importer des femmes pour exporter des fraises ?*, Thèse de doctorat, URMIS, Nice.
- Marx K. (Eds), 1985. *Le Capital*, Livre I, tome 1, Paris, Flammarion.
- Magnin É., Delteil É., Vercueil J., 2018. La dépendance dans les relations entre capitalismes nationaux : quelle portée analytique ?, *Revue de la régulation*, Capitalismes dépendants, 24. <http://journals.openedition.org/regulation/14340>.
- Mésini B., 2015. Le détachement transnational dans l'agriculture provençale : concurrentielles des marchés productifs et optimisation sociale des marchés du travail en Europe, In Labarthe P., Ridier A. (Eds), *Économie Rurale, Agricultures, alimentations, territoires*, Société française d'économie rurale, Paris, 349-350, 171-173.
- Moirand S., 2004. L'impossible clôture des corpus médiatiques. La mise au jour des observables entre catégorisation et contextualisation, *Travaux neuchâtelois de linguistique*, 71-92.
- Morice A., 2008. Quelques repères sur les contrats OMI et ANAEM, *Études rurales*, Travailleurs saisonniers dans l'agriculture européenne, 182, Éditions de l'EHESS, 61-68.
- Morice A., Michalon B., 2008. Les migrants dans l'agriculture : vers une crise de main-d'œuvre ?, *Études rurales*, Travailleurs saisonniers dans l'agriculture européenne, 182, Éditions de l'EHESS, 9-28.
- Palerm J.V., 2014. An Inconvenient Persistence: Agribusiness and Awkward Workers in the United States and California, In Lorentzen L.A. (Coord.), *Hidden Lives and Human Rights in the United States: Understanding the Controversies and Tragedies of Undocumented Immigration*, Oxford: Prager, 55-119.
- Petit H., Thevenot N. (Eds), 2006. *Les nouvelles frontières du travail subordonné*, Paris, La Découverte.
- Soussi S.A., 2019. Le travail migrant temporaire et les effets sociaux pervers de son encadrement institutionnel, *Lien social et Politiques* 83, 295-316.