

The African farm labourers' rebellion

In a village in the poor, neglected region of Basilicata in southern Italy, a small group of people from Darfur in Western Sudan have set up home. These refugees work the tomato fields. They were hired by the caporali, intermediaries employing questionable practices, who offer their services to the landowners. Their working and living conditions border on slavery. Elsewhere in the Mezzogiorno, others, from Tunisia or West Africa, long since suffered a similar fate and then rebelled.

Alessandro Leogrande

Writer

On 3 March 2017, a fire destroyed the shantytown of Rignano Garganico in the Pouilles region, costing the lives of two Malian workers.

Image: © Belga



The town of Metaponto overlooks the sea on the Ionian coast, in Lucania, where the Apennines gradually give way to a vast, fertile plain. This former colony of Magna Graecia is rich in archaeological remains: the columns of a temple from the sixth century BC still rise above a grassy meadow. Otherwise, Metaponto is just another nondescript coastal town catering for the tourist industry that has shaken up the south of Italy. From June to September, a myriad of hotels, campsites and holiday villages fill up with tens of thousands of holidaymakers: a tanned throng that occupies the area for a few weeks, only to abandon the coast, the shores and the discotheques once autumn comes.

For the rest of the year, Metaponto's population is no more than a few hundred. The landscape takes on a ghostly look, like an abandoned television set: tourism disappears, and all that remains is agriculture that depends on work by foreign labourers. When the cold weather sets in, Metaponto turns into a forgotten little African village, inhabited by a settled community of Darfurians who have fled the wartime massacres. They number around 40, members of the Zaghawa people. All of them are young and male. In the hope of better days, they live from one day to the next from their work in the fields.

Tomato-picking under the *caporali*

One of them is Abdullah Aziz, aged 32. He came to Italy seven years ago. He boarded a boat in Libya and landed in Lampedusa, before being taken to Crotona, where he stayed for 20 days. He was granted political asylum for two years. 'When I left the camp,' he explains, 'I went to Naples, where there were other refugees from Darfur. We worked in the countryside for a while. After Naples, we went to Foggia for the tomato harvest. I didn't speak Italian then, so it was difficult to find work. Of all the jobs I have done, tomato picking was the hardest. We were paid by the crate, not by the hour. Some *caporali* pay € 3.50 a crate, others € 5, depending on the variety of tomato and the quality.'

Abdullah Aziz picked as many as 15 cratefuls in a day, on his own. If a crate holds 300 kilograms of tomatoes, this amounts to four-and-a-half tonnes harvested in one day. Of the € 50 he managed so painfully to amass, he had to pay € 5 each morning to the *caporale* for a lift into the countryside by van, and then more money for water and ramshackle

1. In the Mezzogiorno, 'caporali' (singular 'caporale') means the gangmasters who mediate between the employers and the seasonal farm labourers. The system is akin to a mafia operation.

accommodation. 'We did this work for two months, up until the end of the season. In September, I went to Milan. I took a six-month course, but unfortunately I didn't find a job. So I came back down south and ended up in Metaponto, where some distant relatives of mine had moved to.

'Here, they grow oranges, strawberries, grapes, artichokes and fennel. There's work from March to November. There isn't much work in winter, but we stay here anyway. We go to the café, we play cards together. That's how we spend the days and months. We work for several different bosses, not just one. I work three, four or five days for one person, and when it's finished, I try to work for another. To find work, we go to the square, next to the phone box by the pharmacy. Or to the little square in front of the station. You get there at 5 a.m. and wait. Here, it isn't the *caporali* who come, but the bosses themselves. They come and say 'I need three or four people.' And then they choose. We work for seven hours, from 6 a.m. to 1 p.m., and we're paid by the day – € 30 with some, € 35 with others – it depends. Sometimes the police or the tax authorities carry out checks. That's when the boss tells us to scarp and come back the next day to finish the job.'

Abdullah Aziz has a residence permit for political asylum. He has to renew it every two years, but renewal formalities take several months. Each time, the Police Headquarters issues him with a receipt for the application. This happens with all refugees: the receipt is

a kind of substitute document certifying that a person is not 'undocumented' and cannot be expelled.

Each morning, the Metaponto bosses check the farm labourers' permits. They get out of their ATVs in their galoshes and checked shirts and scrutinise the documents. They employ these men in the shadow economy, and would not even dream of setting things straight, but there is a different reason for checking that they are not 'undocumented'. Employing someone in the shadow economy is not particularly serious, whether they be Italian, 'regularised' immigrants or political refugees – the risk is no more than an administrative sanction. But if you are caught employing 'illegals', you can be charged with facilitating unlawful immigration.

200 euro to rent 20 m²

Back in Darfur, Abdullah Aziz had never worked the land. Before he fled the country, he had been a trader. He came here alone. Now he hears from his family only occasionally.

For more than a year, Abdullah Aziz and the other refugees lived in tin shacks under a bridge. But it was cold at night: the air is always damp near the sea, and he hates the sea. He has never been for a swim in his whole life, and the thought terrifies him. Now he and two others live in a one-room flat owned by an Italian, paying him € 200 a month in rent.

The four-by-five metre room is on the ground floor of a low-cost block of flats, far away from the holiday villages. The entrance is through a small door covered with a fly screen, with a small window above. The wall opposite is half covered by a lowered shutter, in front of which stands a cupboard used as a pantry. Next to it is a camping stove and a fridge. To the left, a small bathroom has been carved out, and the three camp beds are flattened against the walls. To complete the picture, there is a small table with a black-and-white TV set standing on it, a wardrobe containing the men's few items of clothing,

For years, the seasonal workers in their hundreds literally slept under olive trees, even when it rained.

The power of the *caporali* derives from the vulnerability and solitude of the farm labourers.

slippers scattered here and there. The middle of the room is occupied by Abdullah Aziz's pride and joy: a large, brightly coloured carpet. He tells me it was a gift from a friend.

Apart from in summer, life here is cut off from the world outside. Abdullah Aziz does not seem to mix with anyone except his compatriots. Not with any association, nor with the local community, nor with the trade union, nor with a lawyer. His only external contacts are with other Darfurians, better integrated than they are, who live in Rome. And so, unknown to them, around their little village, invisible walls, growing ever higher and more impenetrable, have been constructed.

Here in the flatlands of southern Italy, time seems to pass without anything changing. There are no ups and downs. But, from time to time, farm labourers revolt, as happened in the summer of 2011 in Nardò, in the province of Lecce (Puglia region), 140 kilometres from Abdullah Aziz's one-room flat.

The farm labourers' rebellion

It was all captured on video. There is a rapid succession of images. In one corner is a pile of crates, in another the workers are in a huddle. The crates are empty – no one is picking tomatoes any more. A few metres away, lording it over them, a *caporale* is sitting on an upturned crate, yelling. He orders the workers to get moving, get back to work, not to let things go to their heads. But the pickers do not move. No, actually, two or three of them do go over to where the *caporale* is sitting. They say no, no one will be working today, and fold their arms. They have had enough of being treated like slaves.

The strike of the African farm labourers in Nardò, at the heart of the Salento region, started spontaneously one morning at the end of July 2011. A worker, who had filmed it all, showed me the video. He told me what

the images meant, in a mixture of Italian and French. The man received threats for capturing these moments for posterity on his mobile phone. 'We'll slit your throat,' threatened the *caporale's* henchmen.

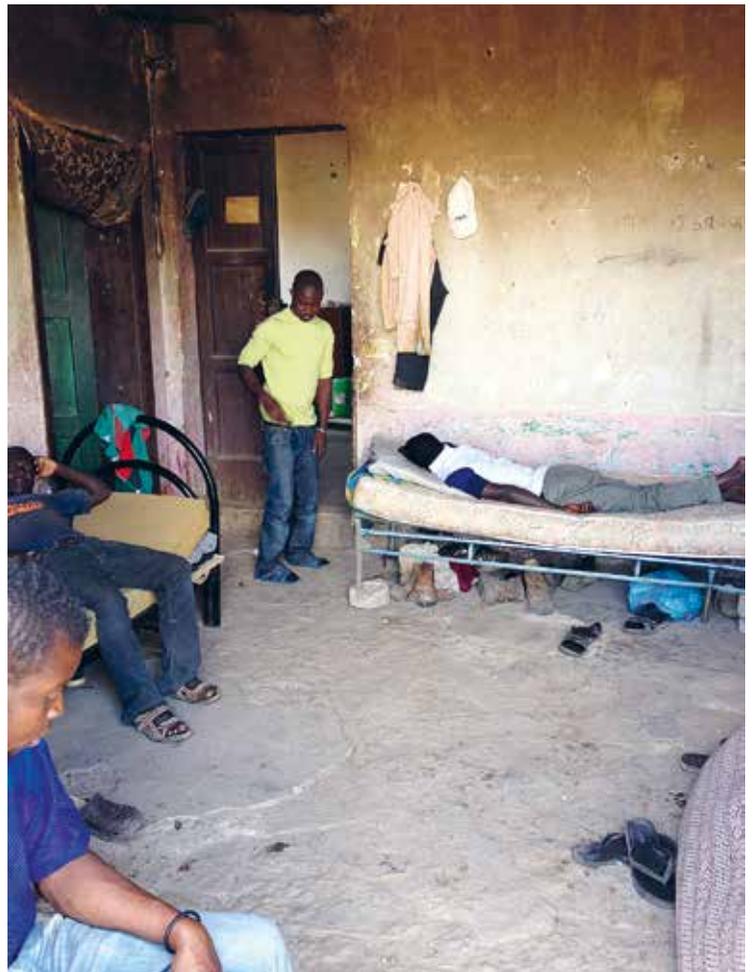
But, as he told me proudly before stopping the video and slipping the phone into his trouser pocket, the threats meant nothing to him. That was when I realised that a mental barrier had finally been broken down.

The Nardò strike was a turning point in the recent history of the Mezzogiorno region. For the first time, foreign farm labourers, working on the backbreaking task of tomato harvesting, rebelled against the people exploiting them. It all started on the morning of 28 July, but tension had started mounting in the preceding days. To understand how such a sweeping rebellion movement, which no one had foreseen right up to the preceding day, was able to come about, it would be useful to run through the timeline from the

start. Most of all, it would be good to know what several hundred immigrants were doing in Nardò, deep in the Salento region (Puglia).

Seasonal workers have been coming to Nardò to pick watermelons, the region's main agricultural crop, for at least 20 years. Initially, it was Tunisians who came to work in the region, joined later by men from Sub-Saharan Africa. For years, the seasonal workers in their hundreds literally slept under olive trees, even when it rained. Every day they worked in the fields for 8 to 10 hours, supervised by the *caporali*. At night, they were left under the trees, until a new harvesting day began.

Then, in the summer of 2010, something changed. An anti-racist association, Finis Terrae, persuaded the local authorities in Nardò to set up a reception camp for immigrants employed in agriculture during the summer months. The association took over a farm a few kilometres away from the outermost dwellings, the Masseria Boncuri. In the



Images p. 37, 38:
© Alessandro Leogrande

internal courtyard, it set up blue tents, like the ones used in civil protection operations.

Even in its first year, the camp housed several hundred workers. But that is not all: the campaign *'Ingaggiati contro il lavoro nero'* ('Defy the shadow economy and hire me') was also launched. The people from Finis Terrae, together with some volunteers from the Active Solidarity Brigades, informed the labourers about their rights, and as a result around one hundred of them succeeded in obtaining a proper contract, even if only for a few days.

A strike captured on a mobile phone

In 2011, there were further developments. The Masseria Boncuri camp was again fitted out with blue tents. Several hundred Tunisian, Ghanaian, Ivorian, Sudanese and Burkinabe labourers arrived. But it was a bad season. The watermelons stayed in the fields. This was partly because of a drop in Italian consumption (since, at that very time, there was a scare story that watermelons were carrying *Escherichia coli* bacteria) and partly because of increased competition from the other countries of the Mediterranean Basin. As work was rare, few labourers were employed. And those who were gathered little more than scraps. At the end of July, when the watermelon season was in jeopardy, the tomato season started.

Tomatoes are not a very big crop in Nardò: 300 hectares, as opposed to 3 000 hectares for watermelons. However, because of the crisis, all the labourers at Boncuri preferred to stay on, to earn at least something. And this is where a gulf opened up, since, as we know, the conditions prevailing in tomato-picking are even more deplorable than those in watermelon-picking. In Nardò and elsewhere, the people harvesting the 'red gold' are paid € 3.50 for a crate. They are not paid

by the hour but per crateful. In Nardò too, a crate contains approximately 300 kilograms of fruit, and in a 10-12-hour day, an untrained man can fill six or seven. That's all: Abdullah Aziz's 15 crates are an unbroken record.

The farm labourers gradually came to realise that these jobs were a fraud. It was only a short step from there to breaking point. The rest was achieved through the close living conditions at the farm. The power of the *caporali* derives from the vulnerability and solitude of the farm labourers. It becomes absolute when they succeed in controlling even the labourers' living quarters. By contrast, if the accommodation (however insecure it may be) eludes the grasp of the *caporali* and is shared by hundreds of labourers, the situation changes. To coin a well-worn phrase, unity is strength. For the rest, there were the surreal images that I saw on that proud man's mobile phone. An atavistic strike, like those at the very beginnings of the workers' movement that shook the countryside of Apulia

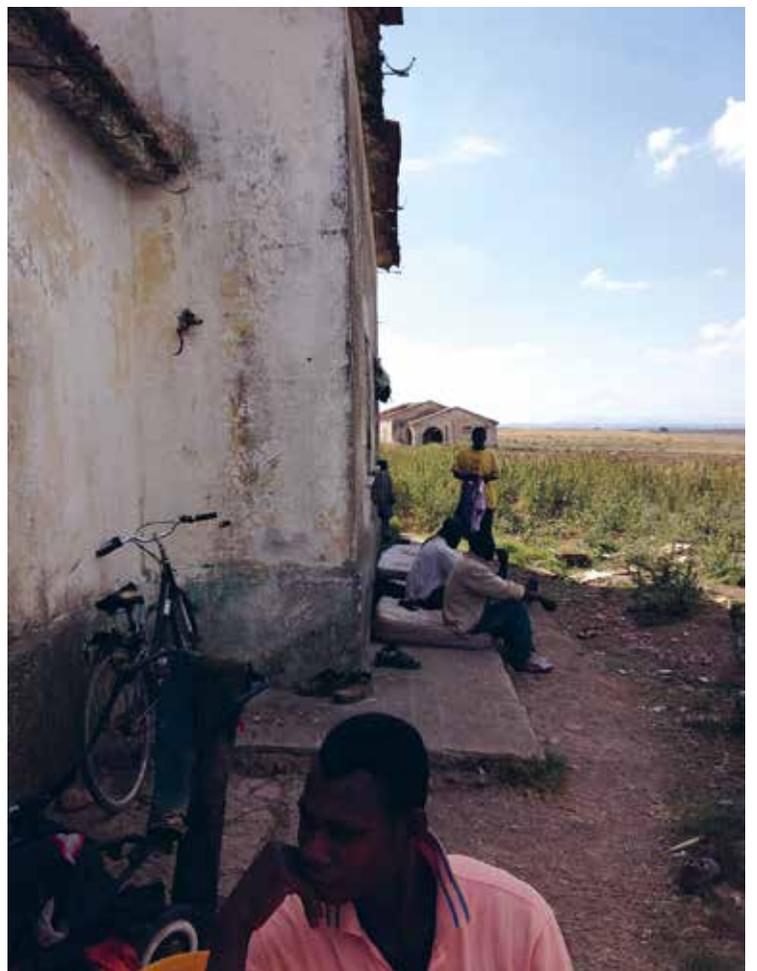
and Emilia over a century ago, but played out on the screen of a mobile phone.

A life ruined by the crisis

The strike threw up several spokesmen for the protest. First, Yvan, a 27-year old from Cameroon. His story is quite unusual. Yvan is a student at the Turin Polytechnic who wants to finance his studies. He speaks fluent Italian, and his speeches stir up the farm labourers while, at the same time, he responds cogently to the journalists' questions. He came here by chance, after one of his friends told him about 'fabulous wages' from agricultural harvests in the Mezzogiorno region.

He pointed out something to me that I was able to confirm straight away from people in the camp: 'A lot of the labourers are former factory workers from the north who were laid off.' They are not newly arrived in Italy. They were already employed in factories, including

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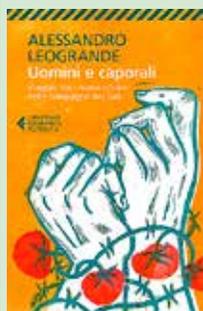


Immigrant exploitation: three books to explain the issue

People fleeing the wars and dictatorships that have given rise to a bloodbath in Africa, in the hope of building a new life in Europe, often end up falling victim to serious forms of labour exploitation. The case of the *caporalato* system in the southern Italian countryside is, admittedly, an extreme manifestation, but it is only the tip of the iceberg of a much broader system. The dramatic Mediterranean crossings, and their corollary of deaths and missing persons, and the highly precarious working conditions which survivors are often forced to endure, are two sides of the same coin.

It is impossible to grasp that nature of these journeys if one does not take the trouble to analyse the political, economic and social causes that impel hundreds of thousands of men and women to leave Africa and the Middle East (and the exodus prompted in recent years by the Syrian conflict is merely the most striking example). But, at the same time, there can be no talk of integration without an investigation of the new forms of labour exploitation.

I have devoted three of my recent works, all published in Italy by Feltrinelli, *Uomini e caporali* (2008, latest edition 2016), *Il naufragio* (2011), and *La frontiera* (2015), to this issue, and to the way in which absence of analysis is leading to a lack of understanding and xenophobic impulses.



2. The legislation was finally adopted only in autumn 2016.

in major companies, in Piedmont, Lombardy and the Veneto region, and lost their jobs because of the economic crisis. They then started travelling around the Salento, northern Apulia, Basilicata and Calabria regions, looking for a job in agriculture, and coming up against a very different world.

Habib and Ben Salem are two other spokesmen. Both Tunisian, they have been familiar with Nardò since the start of the 1990s. At that time, they were already coming to the region for the watermelon harvest. Ben Salem lived in Orta Nova for several years, until a *caporale* set fire to his home as the result of a dispute. In his view, the south is still synonymous with lawlessness, violence and the bullying, by a minority of people, of many Italians and foreigners alike. He then found a better life 'up north'. For 10 years, he worked in Belluno (Veneto), in a solar panel factory. In the end, he was laid off.

As for Habib, after his first years of watermelon picking, he moved to Empoli in Tuscany, where he was joined by his wife and children. For him too, things went well for 10 years. He had a house and a proper contract in the construction industry. Then, with the crisis, it all fell apart. After he lost his job, he could no longer afford his rent. His wife and children went back to Tunisia, and he returned to Nardò in an attempt, like all the others, to scrape together a few hundred euros by picking watermelons and tomatoes. Habib is one of those who observe Ramadan. He does not eat or drink anything before sunset, even on days when the temperature climbs well above 40 degrees.

Yvan is more laid back, but Habib and Ben Salem are driven by a mute rage: sometimes disconsolate, sometimes more furious. It is the rage of lives ruined by the crisis, an apparently never-ending reversal.

Of the many I heard, I was particularly struck by the story of a certain Ghanaian man. He had lived in Libya for a long time, earning 30 dollars a day as an oil well worker. When war broke out, he decided to come to Italy. He told me he had made the right choice: if he had stayed, he would probably have been lynched as a suspected Gadhafi mercenary. But when he arrived in Nardò, he realised that pay was far lower than in Africa.

Cracks in the system

The total blockade of the camps lasted two weeks. At first, no one was working. The

buses of the *caporali* returned empty. Then, hunger, and the fear that the strike would not produce immediate results, gained the upper hand, and, as the death threats of the *caporali* against the spokesmen grew more frequent, many labourers began to give in, and went back to working in the same conditions as before the strike, even sometimes for a significantly lower wage of € 2.50 a crate.

After two weeks, a good half of the occupants of the Masseria Boncuri had fallen back into the clutches of the *caporali*, contributing to the early completion of the tomato harvest, while the other 150 or 200 continued the protest, calling for an institutional round-table discussion. That summer, the Nardò farm labourers secured three meetings with Apulia regional authority leaders, partly thanks to the CGIL trade union's mediation. Discussions then began on the initial measures to be taken against the *caporalato* system, and the need to adopt a national law penalising and outlawing it².

But that is not all. Thanks to the whistleblowing by the labourers who had stood up to their *caporali*, the local Anti-Mafia Directorate in Lecce was able to carry out an enquiry named after the most powerful *caporale* in local farming: Saber Jelassi, also known as 'Giuseppe the Tunisian'.

As a result of this enquiry, several *caporali* and some major farm operators in the area have been sent for trial (the case, which has seen an impressive number of witnesses take the stand, is still in progress). From the court proceedings, it appears that planning the organisation of exploitation is a bureaucratic exercise. The surprising thing is not only the close network set up between the *caporali* and certain farm operators, but also the close connections between the *caporali* in the main regions of the Mezzogiorno. A veritable circuit of exploitation exists: from the south to the north of Apulia, from Calabria to Sicily, from Campania to Basilicata. The labourers who move on from the watermelon harvest in Nardò to the tomato harvest in Cerignola, then to orange- and mandarin-picking in Calabria, to set out again on the same circuit, are always the same.

And then the images of the Nardò strike spring back to mind. Today, as in the past, exploitation in agriculture feeds on the vulnerability and invisibility of the farm labourers. In the summer of 2011, cracks started appearing in both. Viewed closely, this sequence of events marked the start of the long march towards a new state of awareness. ●