Soumaila Sacko was assassinated in San Calogero on Saturday evening, 2 June 2018. 29 years old, born in Mali and working on a farm in Southern Italy, he lived together with some 5,000 other day labourers from Africa in one of the ramshackle settlements dotted around the plain of Gioia Tauro, an agricultural region in Calabria. Together with two of his mates, he'd gone packing and setting up a factory building in San Calogero, where his friends were looking for corrugated iron sheeting to patch up their "homes". Soumaila wanted to give them a hand. He was in the bad books of the region’s farm-owners and their henchmen, the "caporali" tasked with hiring the day labourers and often with links to criminal organisations. Why was he in their bad books? Because he was a trade union activist. He had thrown himself into organising the African day labourers, all of them subject to terrible exploitation. Exhausting days spent picking what the fields produced for 2 Euros an hour. Camped out in primitive accommodation, often without even the most basic sanitary facilities. Daily humiliation and violence.

Three days before his murder, a new Italian government had just been formed after lengthy negotiations, a coalition between the extreme right Lega party and the Five Star Movement. Its programme took the unusual form of a notarial contract signed by the respective two leaders, Matteo Salvini and Luigi Di Maio. Mimicking how things are done in the private or commercial sector, to a large extent this "contract" reflects the xenophobic and racist obsessions nourishing extreme right parties nearly everywhere in Europe. For example, it provides for the establishment of detention centres for migrants without papers in all regions of Italy. It even quantifies who is to be targeted by the new government: 500,000 migrants considered to be illegal. It announces the elimination of Roma encampments (“illegal”) on account of the simple fact that no municipality is prepared to regularise their status. It takes up the idea of a “citizenship income”, an abusive term referring to a minimum income for people living in poverty due to unemployment or retirement. An income conditional (except for the retired) on accepting employment offers. This income is explicitly reserved solely for Italian citizens. Without the least feeling for history, those drafting the contract seem to have been unaware of the coincidental fact that 2018 marks the 80th anniversary of the adoption of Mussolini’s racial laws.

The spectacular surge of the extreme right in Italy has loosened tongues and stoked up open racism. The verbal violence of demagogues at election rallies and in the social media has engendered many different forms of viscous day-to-day violence, aimed at getting the migrants to resign themselves to their fate, to get on with their work and to keep their mouths shut.

The assassination of Soumaila Sacko was followed by protest rallies and strikes by Southern Italy’s African farm labourers. The silence of the members of the new government was deafening. For several days, neither the Minister of the Interior, Salvini, nor the Minister of Work, Di Maio – the two signatories of the “contract” – were to issue any statement. The day after the assassination, Salvini was to be heard triumphantly addressing a meeting in Sicily: “The party is over for all illegal immigrants. They’ll have to pack their bags, without haste, but their time is up.” Even the repatriation of the corpse to Mali was only possible through a collection organised by the union. The writer Roberto Saviano has replied to the new Italian leaders: “For someone who landed at night in Italy and gained a residence permit, the party was over on a Saturday evening when helping his mates get hold of some corrugated iron sheeting to build a fire-resistant shelter. The end came quickly – a bullet in his head. Soumaila Sacko died, in Calabria, just a few kilometres away from Rosarno, the small district where Salvini was elected senator. Soumaila had a valid residence permit. I can’t dare imagine what the end of the party is going to be like for those without papers.” Indeed, for several years now, various NGOs have been reporting the murders of migrant day labourers who have dared to stand up against their bosses. In many cases, the corpses have disappeared without trace.

In the weeks following the assassination of Soumaila Sacko, the Italian press focused on the scene of the crime. Inaptly named, the fornaise tranquilla, (the “quaint furnace”), a former construction material factory, is probably the most dangerous site for illegal dumping in Europe. Some 130,000 tonnes of carcinogenic materials are buried there, enabling the companies concerned to save the cost of more effective treatment. Even though the scandal was unearthed in 2011, legal proceedings have been bogged down for years. Among the companies responsible for this crime against public health is the Italian electricity company ENEL, a former state enterprise privatised in 1999. This helps explain the complacency with regard to certain forms of illegality. Between 2000 and 2007, no less than 4,500 lorries loaded with waste arrived at the site, right in front of the (closed) eyes of the authorities.

The person behind the assassination, Antonio Pontoriero, is one of the region’s farm-owners. His uncle is cited in the toxic waste lawsuit as a go-between between the owners of the fornaise tranquilla and the companies sending their waste there.

As in a Greek tragedy, San Calogero possesses all the ingredients of two possible destinies for Europe. The inhuman working conditions of migrants made possible by government refusals to grant papers to most of them, racist hate, the quest for profit as a value shared by organised crime and multinational companies, the dramatic rise of xenophobic parties in many countries and their inclusion in governments in a number of them. Soumaila Sacko symbolises the possibility of a different future, that of humanity without borders, of solidarity and the collective fight for emancipation.

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