

Rocco and his brothers

The writer Angelo Ferracuti takes us across the Gioia Tauro plain in Italy in the company of "roving" trade unionists, seeking out itinerant workers who harvest citrus fruits for derisory wages. These are mostly African migrants who have fled from desperate situations in their own countries, only to find that living and working conditions in Italy often fall well short of what they had hoped for.

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Rocco Borgese and his brothers, the "roving trade unionists" Dumbia Mohamed and Jacob Atta Kwabena, at Contrada Russo, Taurianova (Italy).



The white van sets off at dawn, when the weak beam of the streetlights scarcely illuminates the districts' deserted buildings, houses, fields, endless industrial zones, and abandoned factory buildings. Rocco Borgese, General Secretary of FLAI-CGIL¹ for the Gioia Tauro plain, with his neatly trimmed moustache and goatee and wide-awake eyes, drives slowly, talking animatedly to me about someone who shared his forename, Rocco Pizzarulli. He was the region's very own Giuseppe Di Vittorio², who worked as a *caporale* (overseer) for the Duca Sforza, but later embraced the cause of the peasants and set up the Polistena Chamber of Labour. In the back of the van are Dumbia Mohamed, from Côte d'Ivoire, and Jacob Atta Kwabena, from Ghana: "roving" trade unionists, still sleepy and taciturn. Three times a week, they drive around the plain together to talk to the workers picking oranges and mandarins in the countryside, two thirds of them without a proper contract. Fifty cents a box for oranges; one euro for mandarins: starvation wages that might amount to twenty-five euros a day, working from dawn to dusk, minus the three euro commission for the foreman and another three euros for a sandwich and some water. A lot of them do not even pause to eat, so that they can pick more fruit. The roving trade unionists distribute gloves, socks and scarves, and ask them if they need help. On other days, they hand these items over to the Chamber of Labour to help asylum seekers, unemployed people and the needy. "In the morning, I go to the office where foreigners, like me, come to renew their residence permits, and I take the guys to the police station, check contracts and appeals and contact lawyers," says Dumbia.

"Cases of exploitation are the order of the day," explains Jacob. "I know a Gambian guy who worked for eight months trimming trees and driving tractors, and he wasn't paid. I called Rocco, and we suggested that he should lodge a complaint to request an inspection, but right after that he disappeared."

Itinerant labourers

When the harvest period arrives, these itinerant labourers return here in search of work from Trentino, Piedmont or elsewhere in the

1. FLAI – Federazione Lavoratori Agroindustria (Federation of Agro-Industrial Workers) – is part of the main Italian trade union confederation, the CGIL – Confederazione Generale Italiana del Lavoro (Italian General Confederation of Labour).
2. Giuseppe Di Vittorio (1892-1957) was a legendary figure of the Italian trade union movement.

Moussa, Ivorian agricultural labourer and rabbit keeper, poses behind the container where he lives in Rosarno (Italy).



south, such as Naples and Foggia, or from the Sicilian greenhouses. Sometimes entire families with little children arrive, dazed after hours on the road, their luggage piled up on old cars, or travelling for days by train. Before them, in the 1960s, it used to be Italians working in agriculture here, then came the Moroccans, the Poles and the Albanians – people whose story was told by Alessandro Leogrande³ in a book that has now become a classic of reportage: *Uomini e caporali (Men and Corporals)* (Feltrinelli).

Five thousand people – who had come to Italy from Ghana, Mali, Togo, Côte d'Ivoire, Burkina Faso, Nigeria, Senegal and Niger – were living in the shantytown of San Ferdinando when it was evacuated two weeks ago due to a fire. A mother of six, Lisa Potter, had, it appears, set fire to her shack in a fit of jealousy. Surawa Jaithe, a 17-year-old Gambian, 29-year-old Moussa Ba from Senegal and the young Nigerian Becky Moses, aged 26, all died. Soumaila Sacko from Mali had lived there too. He was a trade unionist with the USB,⁴ shot dead in June in San Calogero, where he was collecting old sheet metal to build a shelter in an abandoned factory. "In 2018 alone, there were seven fires," recalls Rocco. "When I went there, it was like a hell of broken glass. Three of these fires caused fatalities." FLAI paid for Moussa Ba's remains to be repatriated to Senegal. "For me, dignity is fundamental," he continues in a serious voice. "He came here

3. Alessandro Leogrande (1977-2017), writer and journalist, published an article about the revolt of African day labourers in *HesaMag* # 15. All articles are available at www.etui.org > Publications > Periodicals.

4. USB: Unione Sindacale di Base. On the murder of Soumaila Sacko, see *HesaMag* # 18.

5. The Calabrian mafia.

"The security decree has placed almost all the workers on the wrong side of the law, so now they are much more vulnerable to blackmail."



Gordon, 23-year-old footballer and barber, has come over from Belgium.

wanting to improve his life, and he met with death. We want to give him a dignified burial in Africa, where he was born."

I saw a woman's badly burned body in a shocking photo taken on a mobile phone, stretched out on a sheet and covered in mud, with just a few areas of flesh that could still be distinguished: dark, scorched flesh with cracks like craters.

Exploited by Coca Cola, Fanta and San Pellegrino

"Here, it's the multinationals that dictate the rules of the market," affirms Rocco. "Coca Cola, Fanta, San Pellegrino. The big land-owners prioritise quantity when they sell the product, and this reduces the value of the citrus fruits, and hence the wages: it's the market that gives rise to exploitation. The rest is down to the Ndrangheta.⁵ The security decree has placed almost all the workers on the wrong side of the law, so now they are much more vulnerable to blackmail. If they don't comply with their bosses' rules, they get the sack."

The basic pay packet of an agricultural worker should be 45 euros, and can be as high as 60. However, legal workers are very rare; the others are all undeclared, or working in the "grey" economy, according to the jargon: they have a bogus contract, a letter of appointment for a long period – four to six months – then, when the employer "calculates" the days worked on a quarterly basis, there may be only six or seven out of the three months. "The real problem here is that there's no respect for workers' rights; these new

slaves are a convenience for many people, particularly the criminal underworld, which is, de facto, in charge of the organisation of work in the countryside," explains Borgese. "Where there's more fruit, they pay 25 euros a day, but where production is lower, they pay piece rates."

At the first light of day, this underground population of young African crop pickers is already on the move. On the almost empty main roads of Rosarno, a town in the Gioia Tauro plain, we see them, like ghosts, pedalling laboriously along on their bikes with their beanies pulled down over their faces and gloves protecting their hands that grip the handlebars. They emerge from all over the place, tirelessly, after spending the night in makeshift shelters, abandoned farmsteads with no drinking water, rat-infested ruins or the tent camp, set up a few hundred metres away from the old Gioia Tauro shantytown to house the migrants after the fires. Before the clearance, 3 500 people lived in these shacks, including Maicol, the butcher, and Issa, the hairdresser. There was also a bicycle repair shop, ethnic restaurants, a discotheque, a mosque (which was just a shack with mats to kneel down and pray on) and an evangelical church.hovels like something from the film *Miracle in Milan*, lined with cardboard and supported by wooden pillars; makeshift shelters put up by these new oppressed people of the world, made of waste materials picked up on the street, with metal sheeting and plastic on the roofs. Inside, there are braziers and tin cans where fires used to be lit for heating, alongside worn-out mattresses recovered from waste dumps. "Whenever there was a

problem, the police would let me and the boys know before they brought out the handcuffs. They used to call us from the countryside too, if there were disturbances or brawls," recalls Rocco. "On 31 December, the rumour spread that three people had died in a fire, but fortunately it wasn't true. We were there from eleven o'clock at night until five in the morning." The men are the only ones who have a truly human relationship with these people; they know and trust them. The roving trade union has rediscovered a human gesture that was there at its origin: mutual aid.

Dumbia and Jacob

Before they became trade unionists, Dumbia and Jacob were two of these people. Their journey, as for so many others, involved crossing the desert, reaching Libya and then sailing over the treacherous sea to the island of Lampedusa. Both Christians, they had fled for religious reasons, to escape from authoritarian fathers and Islamist fundamentalists. "I used to play football. Then, when I was 17, I fled to Burkina Faso, a desperately poor country," recalls tall, slender Dumbia, with his soft, regular facial features, as we continue our journey in the van. "Later, I got to Tripoli, and I stayed there for five months, working as a labourer." His epic tale continues with a kidnapping, a ransom demand, a period of captivity in the warehouses, a first voyage that ended before it started, arrest and detention in Libyan prisons, and six days of sailing on the open seas. "I didn't even know I was going to Italy. I didn't know where we were heading. The main thing was to get out of Africa," he says. He landed on Lampedusa and was transferred to a refugee camp in Turin, until he "discovered on Facebook that there was a team of Africans playing in the amateur football league at Bosco di Rosarno, and I decided to come down here." Every day, he worked in the fields, and at least three times a week, after crop picking, he trained. On Sundays he was on the football field, exploited there too, paid on a "performance" basis – if the team won, he earned more. At that time, he was playing football and living in the shantytown with his wife Hpy, who sold ethnic products in her shop. Rocco used to come around with Jacob and hold meetings to raise the workers' awareness. "I wanted the union to belong to them, I was trying to get other guys to join the union, and he spoke French, so at first we used him as a cultural mediator. But before I took him on," he adds, with an amused expression, "I did give him an interview. I asked him to repeat sentences out loud in Italian, like in a meeting, and he was able to do it." For others, like the weary-looking Ghanaian Nana Boakye Josa, with curly hair and a beard, another FLAI-CGIL volunteer, the journey was

even more dramatic. He crossed the Niger desert along with some others. "There were ten of us," he recounts, looking distressed, "but eight of them died. They were Christians, and the Libyan police decapitated them before my eyes." He lied to save his skin, claiming that he was a Muslim and asking them where the mosque was. He came across the trade union in the old tent city. He says that when he is picking fruit in the cold and in the rain, he feels angry about how hard he works without earning anything. He regrets coming here, but asks in dismay: "Where am I supposed to go now? I come from Africa, I escaped death in search of a better life, and I sleep in a disgusting place where fires break out every night, and they have already cost three lives." Jacob, too, lost a friend in the course of his journey: "I don't want to talk about it any more," he begins, as we head into the countryside. "It was a terrible journey. We walked for four days without food or water. I had never imagined that, one day, I would be crossing the desert on foot." When his friend died, they stopped. "We prayed, then we buried him in the sand." Others, like Paco, another volunteer roving trade unionist, have yet other stories to tell.

Very tall and with a distinguished air, wearing a pair of mirror Ray-Bans and a black leather jacket, with a shiny silver ring on his ring finger, Paco used to be a surveyor. He once designed a multi-ethnic kindergarten in Sweden. When he came to Italy, he worked for a building firm in Schio, but with the crisis in the construction sector he lost his job and found himself out on the street. Then, like so many, he turned up on the Gioia Tauro plain, and he now lives in the porter's lodge of a factory. On the night Moussa Ba died, Paco's shack was burned down too. "Before he went to bed, he told me he was really tired because he'd had a long day's work. A Ghanaian guy knocked at my door. I went out, and the fire was spreading. All I managed to save was the television and my bicycle. You could smell burning flesh. I cried all night; I couldn't get back to sleep," he confided.

Even though it is the end of the season, we still find the last labourers at the roundabouts and at the arched bridge in south Rosarno. So Dumbia and Jacob, and Rocco too, get out of the van; they hand out information sheets, protective gloves and woollen socks. A car with a foreman at the wheel takes off

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Dumbia and Jacob in front of the tent camp, San Ferdinando, Gioia Tauro (Italy).



at speed, tyres squealing, as soon as he sees them. Jacob stops to listen to Frank, a large Nigerian with a melancholy expression, who used to live in the shantytown but has now moved into an abandoned house in the country with his wife and small daughter. "The house is unsafe and it's really cold...", he breaks off, unable to finish the sentence. At the Scattareggia crossroads, meanwhile, there is no one, although at the height of the harvest this was where you could find the highest concentration of people in the area. In the mornings, they would get as many as 200 here.

At Contrada Testa dell'Acqua, we come to the container camp where Jacob used to live. His old plot is still there, and behind it the chicken run and kitchen garden, which he still tends. Meanwhile, Gordon is outside the entrance, trimming another young man's beard. He is 23 and has a shock of black hair that cascades down his neck. He came here from Belgium, where he plays football as a centre-forward in the Third Division, to renew his residence permit. A footballer and barber, he is attending a bee-keeping course in order to obtain his documents. He is one of the few who has managed to free himself from slavery. Moussa, on the other hand, with his bald, oval-shaped head, wearing Ray-Bans, raises rabbits behind the container where he lives. Back in Côte d'Ivoire, he used to raise rabbits too, he tells me, but he also kept sheep. "There's no more work here," he continues calmly. "I'll be off to Turin soon. I'm going to pick apples and peaches in Saluzzo." There is no guarantee that, when he comes back in October for the season, he will get his lodging back. Another African like him could get there first and take it.

Leaving Rosarno, we pass through the Bosco area, a landscape full of citrus groves, until we turn off onto a dirt road that disappears into the fields towards Contrada Russo in Taurianova. Here, since the evacuation, 200 labourers have been living in crumbling old farmhouses, where the collapsed roofs have been covered with plastic sheets. There are abandoned gas cylinders all over the place, old mattresses, laundry hanging out to dry and lots of bicycles in a shed. Many of these labourers have already left. There is just a young man jiggling around, clutching his mobile phone, which is playing reggae music, talking to himself and saying "no work today"



After the fire, two hundred day labourers came to live in abandoned farms.

to no one in particular. There are two men sitting opposite each other on two sagging sofas, who have lit a fire with a tree trunk. One of them, from Mali, wild-eyed and with a bushy beard, fled from the civil war. He is an asylum seeker, and he shows Jacob his papers. Another Ivorian boy at the back is listening to music from a loudspeaker attached to his mobile phone. His name is Baffo, and he is singing the anthem of his country's national team.

Gioia Tauro: abandoned industrial zone

By the time we reach the second industrial area of San Ferdinando, it is late afternoon. Along the deserted main streets, the migrants are cycling back from work. Beyond them is the port of Gioia Tauro and the sea, hidden behind the clumps of cherry laurel; the cranes stretch upwards towards the sky. "This industrial area never took off," explains Rocco at the wheel. "It's completely abandoned, the factories decommissioned... There are just a few agri-food firms processing oranges." The area where the shantytown used to be is a shocking sight: there are piles of rubble like after an earthquake, mud, tangled metal and dust. In the tents on the other side of the road, which

look as though they could become a new shantytown, a Maremma sheepdog on the hunt for food is nosing around in the rubbish strewn about outdoors; some men are checking their bicycle chains. Bazoma, a young man with very black, frizzy hair, is selling whisky for one euro a glass; another is complaining because you cannot use gas cylinders for cooking any more; yet another is showing Dumbia some documents – his asylum application has been rejected, and he will have to appeal; all over the place people call out to Rocco, each wanting something different.

A little further along, at the end of a long road, is the new tent camp: 50 tents with accommodation for 700 people, patrolled by the *carabinieri* and the police, monitored by a security guard and with entry controlled by card. Alongside is the Hospitality School, which runs Italian classes and also has a legal guidance counter run by FLAI. At the entrance, the young people are returning from work, athletic and agile, wheeling their bicycles, and disappearing down the path. Ester Momo is a young Nigerian woman of no fixed abode, with short hair and a dark green parka, who looks sad and resigned. Her parents, both Christians, were killed by Boko Haram; she fled because she was being harassed; she applied for political asylum and is looking for somewhere to stay here. For women, things are even tougher, something confirmed by Yasmine, a stout woman with a broad face. "The work is too hard," she says. "Women earn less, 10 euros, because they can't pick more than 10 crates a day." In the tent, she

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sometimes feels desperate: she thinks it is a ridiculous place to live, wonders why she ever came here and feels homesick for her country. When she speaks to her daughter on the phone, her daughter implores her: "When are you coming back?" Ibrahim tells us that she fled Ghana in the company of Asuma, who had married two women, but then they quarrelled. She says that, now, where she works as a crop picker, they give her 30 euros a day. "It's not much, but I have to accept it to survive." There is a bed in one corner of the tent, to the side there are bags containing clothes and shoes, and opposite there are pots and pans, overhead sheets hanging on a wire and little, sparkling, coloured lights, of the sort that are used to decorate a Christmas tree, hanging from the ceiling. The work is hard for everyone – all the young people I meet confirm this, like Omar from Senegal, who does all sorts of odd jobs. "Right now, I'm going to be a barman, and in May I'm going to work as a dishwasher in Tropea." Crop picking is particularly tough: getting up at dawn, cycling

for miles and miles, wearing light clothing so you can work well, suffering from the cold, the rain, the wind, the water that soaks your clothes, continually bending down and standing up throughout the day, and then cleaning the pesticide-filled greenhouses. "Sometimes you have to take off your gloves, light a fire and warm up," explains Jacob, who has worked in the fields. "If it rains, the water gets in everywhere."

On the return journey, Dumbia gets out at Gioia Tauro with Jacob, takes his leave and says he has to go home. "Madame" (as Rocco has nicknamed his wife) is expecting him – she has been alone all day. When she arrived in Italy, still a minor, she was destined to end up on the street. The woman who had paid for her passage from Nigeria was blackmailing her family, saying that she would kill the girl unless they gave her money. "I took her into care in Riace. She was just a little girl," he had confided to me that afternoon in little more than a whisper, his eyes brimming with tears. "I married her to rescue her." ●

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This new camp has 50 tents to accommodate 700 people.

