

Pakistani migrant fruit pickers in Greece strike over inhuman conditions

John Vassilopoulos
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Around 800 foreign farm workers of mainly Pakistani descent struck last week in the Greek town of Skala. The strike began on July 3 and lasted nearly a week. Skala is the local capital of the Evrotas municipality in the region of Lakonia, which is located in the southern part of the Peloponnese. The strike was called in protest against delays in payment, poor living conditions and racist treatment at the hands of the Greek police.

According to reports, migrant workers marched through the streets of Skala from the town hall to the police station where a protest was staged. Local paper *Lakonikos* reported that “the police authorities met with a delegation of the strikers along with [Pakistani Community leader] Javed Aslam as well as lawyer L. Fotakou.... The representatives of the migrants made specific allegations of ill-treatment and they will press charges in respect of these.”

Migrant farm workers are among the most oppressed sections of the working class in Greece. Last year, 30 or more workers were wounded in a shooting incident at a strawberry farm in Nea Manolada where 200 or so Bangladeshi workers gathered to demand the payment of wages they were owed. Four men are currently on trial for the incident—the owner of the farm, Nikos Vaggelatos, and the three gunmen accused of opening fire on the workers.

Pakistani workers in Skala had also struck in September 2010 after they returned from work and found the doors of their homes and shacks had been shut by their owners and employers and their possessions thrown into the street.

On July 1, a joint press conference was held by the Pakistani Community of Greece, the Immigrant Workers League, and the anti-racist campaign group KEERFA, on the Skala strike. Victims of police brutality in the town were also present. Statements from

the press conference reported in the Greek media painted a picture that would not have seemed out of place in the American South during the Jim Crow era.

Ejaz Ahmed, a translator working with Doctors Without Borders, said, “They forbid them from sitting in the town square and at cafes, they forbid them from going to the beach to swim, to go to a barber shop or to rent houses. The very same people that call them ‘filthy’ force them to live in their dozens in chicken coups, in warehouses and in derelict buildings, while at the same time they ask them to pay 50 euros a month rent for these miserable living conditions.”

One migrant worker, Mohamed Asif, alleged he was assaulted 18 months ago by the mayor of Evrotas, Ioannis Grypiotis, and was then sent to a detention camp in Corinth: “After I got released and I returned to Skala, the mayor saw me again and ran towards me to hit me and started to threaten me. With this strike we feel bolder and I want to sue the mayor to find justice.”

Another worker, Nadim Asif, stated that he was assaulted by police three weeks ago after he had forgotten his keys and papers at home: “The policemen started to hit me and they broke my hand”. Asif is reportedly still in bandages and finds it difficult to work.

Ibrar Hussein who is married with one child said: “I went to the police station to have my signature verified. [A police officer] Fotis Manolakos or Babis was there and started to swear at me and told me to get out and he kicked me. No one dares to go there whether they have papers or not because they know that Babis will hit them, swear at them and maybe even send them to a detention camp”.

Rozuan Ahmed accused a policeman who goes by the pseudonym of “Mitsos” of assault: “He handcuffed me and took me to the station despite the fact that I have

had legal papers for many years. After a while he let me go after kicking me and told me he did not want to see me again. You can only be at the farm, he told me. He has done this to many others during the last year.”

Zet Awla, an immigrant living in Skala since 1998, spoke about the extreme exploitation of migrants in Skala at the hands of local employers. He alleged that “Antonis Kyriakakos and Co. and the company owned by Giorgos Birakos owe over three years’ of wages, in excess of 50,000 euros, and they hand out cheques that bounce.”

In their treatment of Skala’s migrants, the local police are in fact playing a direct role in silencing opposition to the non-payment of wages. According to *I Efimerida Ton Syntakton* “ police carry out raids in [migrants’] houses at the crack of dawn every Friday, which is pay-day, breaking doors, kicking and punching and hitting with truncheons.”

The brutality against migrant workers in Skala and the non-payment of their wages is intimately tied up with the collapse of the price of agricultural products in recent years with the workers being forced to bear the brunt of this. Speaking to agricultural journal *Agrotypos.gr* last week, Petros Bletas, president of the Agricultural Cooperative in Skala, said: “The reduction in the [orange] produce price this year was beyond the 30 percent mark in relation to the year before, which is the proportion required to break even. Last year, the average price was 40-50 cents per kilo on average and this year it’s 4-5 cents per kilo.”

With the strike reportedly having a negative impact on the local economy and with police brutality failing to effectively silence the workers, there are some among the local business community calling for calm. In a separate interview Bletas gave to *Lakonikos*, he stated: The police with its raids every Wednesday and Friday turn many workers away, who are necessary for the cultivation of the land.” He then called on the government to act and “grant working permits to Pakistanis so they can work legally and pay their state contributions like all other workers.”

Even if the migrant workers of Skala were given work permits, this would do nothing to improve their living standards. Speaking to *I Efimerida Ton Syntakton*, Deputy Mayor of Evrotas Ilias Panayiotakos was forced to concede that the 26 cents per 20-25 kilos of oranges picked that migrant workers received by

working from 6 a.m. till nighttime was “what Greeks get as well. In any event, the situation is tragic, with prices being so low.”

In an effort to divert attention from this issue and prevent the strike from winning the support of the area’s Greek rural poor, the fascist Golden Dawn presented the strike as an Islamist takeover. The neo-Nazi Party has a strong presence in the Lakonia region where Skala is based. Commenting on the party’s results in the local and European elections this May, an article in *To Vima* stated, “In Lakonia, Golden Dawn’s result was 15.45 percent (7,637 votes), which made up its biggest share in all of Greece.”

The rise of Golden Dawn and the fact that its racist rhetoric is able to find an audience in Lakonia is ultimately the price being paid by the working class for the treachery of the pseudo-left. They, along with the trade union bureaucracy, have facilitated the attacks on the living standard of the working class in Greece, indigenous and foreign alike. Speaking to *I Efimerida Ton Syntakton*, local Skala residents who were members of a group called “Autonomous Intervention against Oblivion,” spoke of the “sonorous absence of SYRIZA and the KKE [Communist Party of Greece]”.



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