

Italy: Immigrant harvest worker shot dead

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9 June 2018

A young man from Mali was shot dead on June 2 in the Italian province of Calabria. Soumaila Sacko, 29, leaves behind his wife and a five-year-old daughter in Mali and friends and colleagues in southern Italy. He worked to bring in the harvest and was also an activist for the grass roots union, USB, which campaigns on behalf of African day labourers.

Soumaila Sacko was one of thousands of workers who work as harvesters and day labourers, earning a pittance on the orchards of vegetable and agricultural farms in the hinterland of Gioia Tauro. The workers are housed in tents, barracks or improvised huts made of wood and plastic sheeting.

The shooting must be viewed in light of the right wing policies of the government in Rome, which was sworn in on the same day. The Lega/Five-Star coalition has announced it will deport half a million refugees within 18 months and imprison all refugees without proper permits in detention centers. Interior Minister Matteo Salvini, who is also deputy prime minister and the head of Lega, proclaimed a few hours earlier: “We tell all illegals: The party is over!” They should “pack their bags.”

On the same Saturday night, Soumaila was traveling with two compatriots in search of building materials for improvised accommodation. On the site of an abandoned former brick factory, they searched for pieces of sheet metal when a stranger stopped his Fiat Panda and began firing his rifle at them. Scrambling for cover, Soumaila was hit in the head and died on the spot. Another refugee was injured in the leg.

On Monday morning, more than 2,000 harvest workers stopped work in San Fernandino, where Soumaila had lived. Hundreds of workers took part in a protest march. Police responded by barring journalists from the immigrant workers’ accommodation.

A friend of Soumaila gave a speech denouncing “absolute slavery and exploitation.” He said,

“Soumaila, like many workers here, toiled for a few euros a day ... He was a man and a worker. He was a harvest worker like thousands in Italy. We want to know the full truth, we demand justice. And we demand reasonable accommodation for all workers!”

The deadly incident has drawn attention to the appalling living conditions for thousands of immigrant workers in southern Italy who harvest the oranges, lemons, mandarins, tomatoes and kiwis sold across Europe. They receive about 25 euros per day, from which the foreman usually deducts a pizzo [protection money] of five euros. A large proportion of the workers have no employment contract and are hired as day labourers for a few hours and paid for filling boxes with fruit and vegetables.

The medical organisation Medu, which maintains maternity wards for migrant workers, has published reports of their extremely poor living conditions. Doctors complain that employers do not provide mineral water, work gloves or safety shoes. The workers are expected to walk long distances on foot because there is no public transport. As a result of the hard physical labour, workers are often ill and many are malnourished. The workers live together, crammed into mass shelters that lack electricity and running water. The situation with regard to toilets is catastrophic and completely unhygienic.

The town of San Fernandino is in the immediate vicinity of Rosarno, where mass unrest took place eight years ago. At that time, politicians made fulsome promises to improve the housing and conditions for migrant workers but, essentially, only two things have changed: the police presence has increased, and large tent cities have been set up outside Rosarno, where workers live today as miserably as they did before in warehouses.

Most of the young workers come from Mali, Burkina Faso, Ghana, Ivory Coast or Senegal. Many of them

have no proper papers and are treated like slaves.

Significantly, several newspapers initially wrote that Soumaila had been shot while attempting to steal. That is obviously not the case, since the crime scene is a brickyard which has been abandoned for years. The fact that Soumaila was an active trade unionist indicates that very different motives could be involved. In any event it is clear that someone shot in deliberate, cold-blooded fashion at the African workers.

On Tuesday, a 43-year-old farmer named Pontoriero was arrested on suspicion of murder. A police sketch, made with the help of the two survivors, and clues regarding the auto involved pointed to his involvement. The newspaper *Corriere della Sera* writes that the Pontoriero family is alleged to be associated with the Ndrangheta, the mafia branch which dominates much of the vegetable and citrus business in the Calabrian region.

On Tuesday and Wednesday there were strikes and protests by other groups of workers in Vibo (Calabria), Melfi (Basilicata), Teramo (Abruzzo), Cagliari (Sardinia) and Vicenza (Veneto). The USB union, several NGOs and other organisations have announced further demonstrations. The protests are also directed against the new government and its openly racist agenda.

The new prime minister, Giuseppe Conte, was forced to respond to the shooting in his inaugural speech. “We are not unfeeling,” Conte claimed, calling the murder of Soumaila Sacko a “tragic and disturbing incident.” Politicians will “take care of the dramatic situation of these people,” Conte said.

The new government is evidently concerned that protests in the south could link up with strikes and demonstrations in the north. A major demonstration against racism and exploitation is due to take place in Milan on Saturday, June 9.



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