

Vehicle crashes claim lives of 16 migrant workers in Italy

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In early August, 16 migrant agricultural workers were killed in two separate vehicle crashes in Southern Italy. All of the victims are non-European Union farm labourers working as pickers in the tomato fields near Foggia, in the region of Puglia.

The first crash happened on August 4 when a van driving four African migrants home from their shift collided with a truck carrying picked tomatoes. The second crash occurred August 6 when a passenger van carrying 14 migrants crashed head-on with a tomato lorry. Twelve migrants died on impact and three people were injured, including the van's driver.

The causes of the crashes have not yet been determined, but witnesses of the August 6 crash report bodies were thrown all over the road, suggesting that the van wasn't safe probably due to modifications to accommodate more passengers. The van, registered in Bulgaria to avoid paying the Italian road tax, was originally designed to carry nine passengers but was carrying 14 people.

In response to these deaths, hundreds of migrant workers marched to protest their dire working and living conditions, putting forth demands that contract rights of work be respected and calling for an end to slave-like conditions of migrants. They chanted, "No more deaths at work and never slaves!"

Many wore shirts bearing the image of African migrant worker Soumaila Sacko, who was murdered on 2 June while collecting scrap metal to use for his shanty in a local migrant ghetto.

It is estimated that more than 50,000 day labourers live in the province of Foggia during the harvest season, and officials believe that 50 percent of farmers in Foggia employ seasonal workers from Eastern Europe, Africa, and Italy under illegal conditions. Unofficial surveys by local migrant charities put the

number as high as 90 percent.

Recruited to work by word of mouth and social media, such as WhatsApp, the vast majority of migrants live in ghettos without running water and electricity and inundated with mud when it rains and with little protection against the scorching summer sun. The ghettos are run in connection with the local mafia or "caporali" (gangmasters), which hire labourers out to local farmers, taking a hefty cut of the labourers' pay in return for precarious and underpaid employment.

For each 300-kilo box of tomatoes filled by the workers, the landowner gives €5 to a middleman who then pays the gangmaster. After they both take their cut, the worker gets €3. Migrants are then charged €5 for transport to and from the fields and €5 or more for food.

Laws passed in recent years call for prison sentences for those recruiting and exploiting migrant workers, and yet it is estimated that up to 300,000 workers are employed illegally. Farmers argue that they are squeezed by the retail market, require a fully flexible workforce, and don't speak the same language as migrants, thus the need to maintain low wages, zero-hour contracts, and the caporalato system.

The right-wing policies of the Lega/Five Star movement coalition government support the "arguments" of the farmers. The government denies migrants every protection and fundamental right and sends a strong signal to enterprises and landowners that in dealing with the migrant workers they have a free hand and nothing to fear from the authorities. The deadly vehicle crashes—caused by sheer greed for profit at the expense of the labourers—are by no means separated from the extremely right-wing course of the government in Rome.

Even before Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte was

appointed in June, the coalition announced that Italy will deport half a million refugees within 18 months and imprison in detention centres all refugees who are without proper permits. Interior Minister Matteo Salvini, who is also deputy prime minister and the head of Lega, proclaimed: “We tell all illegals: The party is over!” They should “pack their bags.”

After the deaths last week, Conte, who was born and raised near Foggia, also announced a visit to Foggia to “personally assess the situation” but offered no progressive plan to address the dire circumstances of migrants.

Minister of Economic Development, Labour and Social Policies Luigi Di Maio issued the usual hollow promises to address migrant issues, saying that he would deploy “more inspectors to fight the caporalato.”

President of the Puglia region, Michele Emiliano (Democratic Party), echoing Di Maio, hypocritically described the ghettos as being “controlled by criminal organizations dedicated to prostitution, drug dealing, and caporali,” and said he intends to close them and move evicted migrants into structures provided by the local government. However, there is not nearly enough public housing to accommodate thousands of migrants should they be evicted. Closing the ghettos merely serves to criminalise poverty.

For their part, the trade unions have done nothing to end the exploitation of migrant workers, let alone, address the most basic needs of workers’ contract rights, health and safety regulations, humane accommodation, and the construction of public transport. The unions only serve to create illusions of pressuring the government to reform the exploitative agricultural system.

The main migrant union, Unione Sindacale di Base (USB), which proclaims it is an incorruptible, left alternative to the established trade unions, is dominated by petty-bourgeois groups, including one wing of Rifondazione (PRC), Maoists and the organisation Sinistra Critica—affiliated to the Pabloite United Secretariat. At its demonstration in 2010, the UBS even tolerated the presence of the former minister of social solidarity in the Prodi government, Paolo Ferrero (PRC), who had agreed to legislation wiping out traditional pension rights and personally drew up the first deportation lists for Sinti and Roma.



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