

**Theme : Fair Trade and Agricultural Policy**

**Speakers :** Wim Baltussen (FNV Agrarisch en Groen)

Romain Feche (Confédération Paysanne, see also <http://www.agricultures-migrations.org/>)

**Information :** *The phrase 'cheaper is better' has had far-reaching effects for the food industry. One of these effects is the exploitation of migrant workers. What is the situation in the Netherlands and the EU and what policy recommendations can we make for our politicians?*

**Romain:** He told us first about the largest area in Europe where migrant workers work and live under terrible conditions: the vegetable pickers in the Almería region in Spain. To get some idea about work migration in Europe, you can have a look at the map (not quite up to date) in the powerpoint presentation. People come from Africa, even S.America (Ecuador), and Europe (e.g. Poland) but more and more from Eastern Europe.

It is modern slavery; they work for 20 euros a day irrespective of the maximum working time. Sometimes as much as 120 euros a month are taken out of their wages for the rent of a ruin. You can't really blame the farmers for the fact that they try to reduce costs, as the farmers have to try and survive on too low prices. The factor 'labour' is on average 55% of the labour is a variable compared to the highly intensive technical production costs of agricultural products, and economising on labour is the only way to adjust production costs and make a profit.

In order to have a really obedient work force, especially women are employed, for they don't complain and go back to their own countries because of the children they left behind, and also people from countries that are very restrictive as regards liberties and where there are no positive economic perspectives.

What you often see is that workers form 'cooperatives' led by people from the migrant workers' own countries; in Italy 3 people each paying 25 euros are enough to form a 'cooperative'. They are difficult to control; people work with cell phones, from parking places, changing the name of the 'cooperative' every year. It's another way to exploit people and provide growers with a cheap labour force, as the 'cooperatives' pay no social security and very low wage. It's more or less what some temporary work agencies do, but in a more informal way.

In Italy people move from the south (early vegetables tomatoes, peppers) to the north (wine) and back (citrus fruit), so they are difficult to trace.

Solutions lie in a different agricultural model, based on peasant agriculture (small and medium-sized farms) which recognizes workers' rights and guarantees equal treatment, to be achieved in different ways, such as for instance unionism, For Romain's presentation see <http://aardeboerconsument.nl/artikelen/vrijhandel-of-managed-trade/14-02-22-wsh-migrant-workers-romain>

**Wim:** He has worked with FNV (trade union) for 15 years, mostly in the agricultural sector in the Netherlands. Of course he mainly gets to see the cases where things are wrong, so he may be prejudiced.

Technically the agricultural sector has done everything to reduce costs, all the equipment is in place; the only thing left to economise on is *labour*.

The law and the rules are simple: *Pay minimum wages / people have a right to a legal amount of paid holidays and holiday-money (8%)/ and to paid sickness leave on conditions according to Collective Labour Agreements.* And usually on paper (contract; payslip) everything is o.k.: people are paid for an 8-hour working day. BUT 'paper reality' is not the same as 'real reality'. E.g. people are being paid by the piece or kilo, not by the hour. So people may have worked 15 hours a day, making (on the basis of piecework) e.g. 64 euros. In the administration of companies that amount is divided by the legal minimum wage (let's say 8 euros). In their administration these people have worked 8 hours.... Or: they have been working 7 days a week, for a certain total amount (based on piecework). Again: that amount is divided by the legal minimum wage over 5 days (instead of 7). That comes down to: no surpluses for working on Saturday and Sunday (violation of the Collective labour Agreement), violation of the Law on Working Times, etc. But on paper everything is OK.

Most people work for agencies, which offer a package deal: you want the job, then you also have to accept the conditions, e.g. housing by the agency and the price that is involved. That can be a lot of money: a normal price is 60 euro per week per person, even for a run-down caravan, in which you stay with 3-5 other persons (that's 1200 per month for the caravan). Other opportunities for agencies to offer 'cheap labour' to an employer: a 'course' to learn Dutch, which offered no real tuition until 1-1-2014, but yielded 3700 euro tax-reduction for the agencies for offering this kind of 'education'. Fines for all sorts of things, e.g. leaving food on top of the fridge instead of inside; a fine of 50 euros. There is no privacy, for according to the contract the supervisor has the right to come in at all times and supervise. There may be fines for talking at the workplace, using your cell-phone, etc. This doesn't have to be proved - hearsay is enough; the amount is deducted from your wage, when you don't agree: go to court...

You can also be registered as 'self-employed'. That is a way of employing people without a work permit, until recently mainly used for Romanian and Bulgarian people. Then you are not insured and exploited even more – there are examples, proved by the Labour Inspection, that at the end of the day people earned 3 euros an hour.

Contracting is a rather new phenomenon. A farmer sells the harvesting to a Polish (or other) company. People work on Polish conditions: no legal minimum wage, etc. Then afterwards 'the harvest' is sold back to the farmer.

Anyhow: there are a lot of things being invented/tried out with only one purpose: cheap labour.

Labels, to ensure 'a fair price for fair food'?

- In the SKAL certification there is nothing about social conditions.

- The 'Fair Produce' label (<http://www.fairproduce.nl/>) This social label (set up by employers and trade-unions) is o.k. as far as the rules are concerned. It has been finalised for mushrooms. Nearly all supermarkets use it, but not always telling it openly. It took a long time to work that out. And e.g. LIDL wants this label also for asparagus and strawberries. That's good. But: until now we haven't been able to find producers that meet the criteria...

Audits ? : Auditors should talk with *people*, don't check the papers only! This is one of the main issues concerning GRASP (Global Risk Assessment on Social Practices), the voluntary part of Global GAP (certification by auditing companies). One auditing agency is <http://www.vro.nl/>, (Barendrecht); there are agencies that don't even *want* to work in the agricultural sector.

### **Is change possible?**

Change will have to come from the people themselves. They must start to talk, but:

- Community building is difficult among these workers: they travel around.
- people are afraid (words they know: tempo, tempo, tempo! Weg, weg weg! (at the camping site)
- they don't trust unions, they remind them of communist times. They felt betrayed by *solidarnosc*, which took the road to liberalisation.

But when things get really bad they come to the union, and they do take action.

### **Recommendations:**

- consumer action / support for workers / attack the neoliberal system/.
- Organisations of researchers and civil society should inform the public.
- Transformation of food regimes comes from civil society. (Fair Produce) See also <http://www.greenpeace.nl/nieuwsoverzicht-2012/groen-boodschappen-doen-met-de-superwijzer/>