Working Conditions in EU Agriculture: The Figures of Precarity, Exploitation, and Inequality

- *At least 10 million dependent workers across the EU but, considering daily labourers, this figure can go up to 17 million.*
- *High undeclared work.*
- *32% of undeclared or underdeclared employment (vs 5% in the EU economy).*
- *500 fatal accidents annually (EU-wide), being among the most dangerous sectors.*
- *150,000 non-fatal accidents annually*
- *Informal settlements: improvised shelters, lack of sanitation (e.g. Greece, Spain, and Italy).*
- *Illegal labour intermediation: gangmaster practices (e.g. "caporali" system in Italy).*
- *No effective social protection coverage in several Member States.*
- *Rare inspections: e.g. inspections every 350 years for an asparagus farm in Germany.*
- *Only 0.024% of farms with workers inspected in 2023 (4,351 inspections).*

Farm Workers: Essential but Treated as Disposable

In addition to farmers and their families, at least 10 million dependent workers are employed in Europe's agricultural sector, representing an important part of Europe's rural population. These workers play an essential role in our societies, although the living and working conditions of a large proportion of them remain a source of struggle.

Every day, agricultural workers ensure that we have food on our tables. They also combat hydro-geological instability, land degradation and soil erosion, and help maintain biodiversity. In short, their work is vital to the maintenance and long-term social, economic, and environmental sustainability of rural areas and forms the backbone of Europe's prosperity, health, and security.

The decline in overall employment in agriculture has too often given EU decision-makers a misleading impression of the sector: in fact, the number of dependent workers in European agriculture has been slowly increasing for years, although this has not fully compensated for the decline in the number of farmers. However, a closer look at the agricultural labour market reveals the growing importance of agricultural workers in stabilising rural employment.

Despite the growing important role they play, a vast proportion of farm workers in Europe get low wages combined with high working hours. Other hardships include a high proportion of illegal and precarious working conditions especially for migrant and seasonal workers, an extremely high incidence of accidents at work, and low participation in education and training programs. Taken together, this paints a bleak picture with many workers vulnerable to widespread exploitation, including gangmaster practices and other forms of modern slavery.

The introduction of social conditionality into the Common Agriculture Policy (CAP) and the adoption of key EU directives such as the directive on minimum wage and due diligence are important steps in the right direction. If properly implemented, these initiatives can make a real difference in raising labour standards in agriculture. At the same time, many challenges remain. It is long past time to address the long-standing systemic problems affecting the sector from both an employment and a food chain perspective.

With this briefing, EFFAT provides additional information on the agriculture sector and outlines its political demands.

Number of Farm Workers

Knowing how many people are employed in agriculture is not easy. This is explained by the fact that many farm workers pursue agriculture as a part-time activity, that many farms are family-run with family members providing help on the farm at different times of the year, and that there are seasonal peaks in labour (particularly when it comes to harvesting).

According to Eurostat, people working in agriculture (crop and animal production, and related service activities) accounted for about **4.2% of total employment** in the EU in 2020, corresponding to an estimated **8.7 million workers**. Agriculture is a particularly big employer in Romania, accounting for over one in every five persons (20.9%) employed in the country in 2020, as well as in Bulgaria (16.6% of total employment), Greece (9.7%) and Poland (9.0%).

Nevertheless, many more people help out on farms without being employed. This helps explain why the EU's regular agricultural labour force is considered much higher, at **17.0 million workers in 2020**; for many of them, farm work only represented a minor activity.[1]

Agriculture largely depends on the work of mobile and migrant workers who make up a significant proportion of those harvesting our fields during seasonal peaks. The majority of seasonal workers are mobile workers, i.e. citizens of EU Member states making use of the free movement of workers enshrined in the EU treaties. They do not need a residence and work permit to work in another EU country and, due to the short period of stay in the country of work, they do not register with the local authorities in the country of work. At the same time, a growing proportion of third-country national seasonal workers are employed in the agriculture sector. Some of them have no choice but to work undeclared as they are undocumented. Their condition is particularly challenging as they are more easily exposed to workers' rights violations and even exploitation.

Overall, it is impossible to obtain reliable official data on the number of seasonal worker – only estimates are available. Those estimates range from **4 million seasonal workers by EFFAT**[2], to 2.5 million seasonal workers by the EESC[3], and 650.000 to 800.000 seasonal workers by the European Commission[4].

Furthermore, undeclared and underdeclared work is widespread in European agriculture. The Platform for Undeclared Work estimated that 32% of all employees in the agricultural sector have no written contract of employment (compared with 5% for the overall EU28 workforce)[5].

A correct estimate of the total number of workers in the sector is therefore impossible.

Working and Living Conditions of Agricultural Workers

Working in European agriculture is a dangerous profession. The size of fatal accidents in the agriculture sector is deplorably high. Estimations shows that around **500 fatal accidents occur in the agriculture sector on annual basis. Agriculture also accounts for over 150,000 non-fatal accidents annually.** The latter figure is to be used with caution as only accidents that imply at least 4

[1] See Farmers and the Agricultural Labour Force - Statistics - Statistics Explained
[2] See EFFAT (2015). Improving the situation of seasonal workers in the European agricultural sector/ Project Information. Part 1. Seasonal Workers – 2015 – VS – 2014-0038
[3] European Economic and Social Committee (2023): Collecting data on the situation of social protection of seasonal workers in the agriculture and food sectors in EU Member States after COVID-19
[4] European Commission (2021): Intra-EU mobility of seasonal workers. Trends and Challenges. Final report. March 2021. Publications Office of the European Union; European Commission (2023): Report on mobile seasonal workers and intra-EU labour. Publications Office of the European Union. 2023
[5] Wiliams, Colin C.& Horodnic, Adrian (2018): Tackling undeclared work in the agricultural sector. European Platform Undeclared Work:

calendar days of work absence are recorded in the framework of European statistics on accidents at work.[6]

According to the EU Labour Force Survey (EU LFS), the agriculture sector accounts for considerably **higher rates of precarious employment** compared to the other sectors due to the seasonal peaks.[7]

According to the section ''Quality of employment'' of EU-LFS, the agriculture sector also scores considerably worse **in terms of working time**[8] (percentage of employed persons usually working 49 hours or more per week) and work on weekends[9] (percentage of employed persons usually working on Saturday and/or Sunday).

Concerning wages, agriculture is not covered by the Structure of Earning Survey (SES). However, the ILO statistics of wages fills this gaps and proves that average hourly earnings of workers in the agricultural sector is **considerably lower than those of employees in the general economy**, e.g. in Portugal 5.5€ in agriculture compared to 7.1€ in the broader economy in 2023.[10]

High collective bargaining coverage is an indication for quality jobs and good working conditions. The overwhelming majority (about 93 % in 2020) of the EU's farms are classed as being family farms, i.e. defined as being farms on which 50% or more of the agricultural labour force is provided by family members.[11] These economic characteristics impact industrial relations in the agriculture sector. There are **13 Member States without branch collective agreements**. This holds true for countries without sector-related multi-employer bargaining such as Bulgaria, Croatia, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, Poland, Slovakia, but also for countries like Greece, Portugal, Ireland and Romania where recent economic reforms heavily impacted the centralised system of collective bargaining and the extension mechanism in place.[12]

Finally, **inspections in the sector are rare,** which leads to a lack in detection, punishment, and deterrence. Although it is not easy to obtain information about the frequence of inspections segregated by sectors, there has been media coverage of an inquiry in the German national parliament which pointed out for instance that inspections in certain German crop production systems, like asparagus, are taking place every 350 years.[13] **In Italy, available data point to equally rare inspections. In 2023 for instance, only 4,351 inspections took place in the agriculture sector, which corresponds to 0.024% of all 187,000 agricultural companies** that employ farm workers.

In 2024, four extraordinary inspection campaigns were launched in Italy. An average irregularity level of 58% was detected.

The Condition of Migrant and Seasonal Workers

Despite their essential role in our societies, migrant and mobile workers are often **victims of discrimination, labour exploitation, and racism linked to their migratory status or ethnic background**. Hardships include low wages, unrecorded working hours, poor health and safety standards, deplorable housing conditions, and gangmaster practices.

A study commissioned by the EESC highlights, on a country basis, that seasonal workers in the agriculture and food sectors are not granted formal and/or effective social protection coverage in

[6] See Accidents at work statistics - Statistics Explained
[7] See Eurostat, EU - LFS, Quality of employment, lfsa_qoe_4ax1r1
[8] See Eurostat, EU - LFS, Quality of employment, lfsa_qoe_3a2
[9] See Eurostat, EU – LFS, Quality of employment, lfsa_qoe_3b3
[10] Statistics on wages - ILOSTAT
[11] Eurostat: Farms and farmland in the European Union – statistics. Available at 73319.pdf
[12] Eurofound (2016): Representativeness of the European social partner organisations: Agriculture sector. Available at EFRecord Word Template
[13] Mindestlohn auf Spargelhöfen: Alle 350 Jahre Kontrolle | taz.de

several EU Member States.[14] Other studies document the challenges and problems faced by migrant and mobile workers, such as **difficulties in reporting workers' rights violations, precarious working conditions, undeclared work, wage theft, access to social security, poor occupational health and safety, inadequate housing conditions, and unfair recruitment ranging to gangmaster practices**[15]. There are also issues such as **racial and gender discrimination and violence[16], and structural determinants of exploitative working conditions like piecework and gangmaster practices.**

In some countries, mobile and migrant workers in the agriculture sector live segregated in rudimentary shelters built in overcrowded slums without running water, electricity, and proper sanitation. These are agglomerations of self-built substandard housing made from whatever materials workers can get hold of (e.g. plastic, pallets, cardboard, car wheel rims) located on the outskirts of towns with agricultural production and/or in the vicinity of the farms they work at. Examples of these informal settlements can be found in Greece (Manolada), Spain (Murcia), Italy (Foggia and Castelvolturno, among others). In the latter two, other settlements have been documented based on tents instead of shacks.[17]

EFFAT's Demands

Improving the working and living conditions of agricultural workers is at the top of EFFAT's trade union agenda. This can only happen through quality job creation and stronger collective bargaining rights. It is crucial to tackle the process of concentration and financialization affecting vulnerable actors across the food chain, including small farmers and farm workers. Moreover, we need a much more social CAP. Additionally, we also need more EU social policy initiatives that help raise labour standards in the sector, starting with an EU Directive on labour intermediaries and fair working conditions across subcontracting chains that also aims at increasing the frequency of labour inspections, as requested by EFFAT.

- A Call for an EU Directive on Labour Intermediaries and Fair Working Conditions across Subcontracting Chains
- A Call for a Fairer Common Agricultural Policy
- EFFAT Demands for Action: Towards Inclusion and Equal Treatment for all Mobile and Migrant Workers

[14] See European Economic and Social Committee (2023): Collecting data on the situation of social protection of seasonal workers in the agriculture and food sectors in EU Member States after COVID-19

[15] See European Commission (2021): Intra-EU mobility of seasonal workers: Trends and Challenges. Final report March 2021. Publications Office of the European Union; European Commission (2023): Report on mobile seasonal workers and intra-EU labour. Publications Office of the European Union. 2023; Oxfam (2024): Essential but invisible and exploited, A literature review of migrant workers' experience in European Agriculture. Oxfam International. June 2024.

[16] See European Commission (2021): Intra-EU mobility of seasonal workers: Trends and Challenges. Final report March 2021. Publications Office of the European Union; Oxfam (2024): Essential but invisible and exploited. A literature review of migrant workers' experience in European Agriculture. Oxfam International. June 2024.

[17] See Oxfam (2024): Essential but invisible and exploited. A literature review of migrant workers' experience in European Agriculture. Oxfam International. June 2024: EFFAT (2021): Towards inclusion and equal treatment for all mobile and migrant workers. EFFAT Demands for action. Adopted at the EFFAT Executive Committee on 1 June 2021

Material

There is also a good body of national literature and research dealing with the harsh working and living conditions of migrant and seasonal workers. Here some examples:

- **Concerning Germany:**
  - Saisonarbeit in der Landwirtschaft, Bericht 2023 (Initiative Faire Landarbeit, 2023)
  - "We're Not in Europe Here" (Oxfam Deutschland, 2023)
  - On the situation of seasonal workers during COVID-19: Continuities of exploitation: seasonal migrant workers in German agriculture during the COVID-19 pandemic (Bogoeski, 2022

- **Concerning Germany, The Netherlands, and Sweden:**
  - Are Agri-Food Workers Only Exploited in Southern Europe? - Open Society Foundations (Open Society Foundations, 2020).

- **Concerning Spain:**
  - Producción alimentaria intensiva, migraciones y género: la industria del fruto rojo en la provincia de Huelva, España (Castillero, 2020)

- **Concerning Italy:**
  - Agromafie e Caporalato, VII Rapporto, Osservatorio Placido Rizzotto

Media

There have also been many recent reports and documentaries in the media on the precarious conditions of agricultural workers in Europe. Here some examples:

- 'Working here is hell': latest death of farm worker in 40C heat shocks Italy – The Guardian
- Exploited and abandoned, Indian farmworker dies in Rome – InfoMigrants
- The Pickers
- France investigates deaths of four Champagne workers in heatwave – The Guardian
- Undercover as a farm worker in Germany: 'My hands are numb. No one knows when the shift will end' – The Guardian
- Invisible Workers – A Euronews production