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The German asparagus saga

In the Covid-19 crisis, the asparagus harvest exposed the myth of 'low-skilled' migrants. It's time to rethink labour mobility

Read this article in German.

In the past month, the Covid-19 pandemic has caused tens of thousands of deaths and millions of infections across the globe. But it has also raised fundamental questions about how we organise human societies and their relationship to nature. The pandemic has challenged the dogmas about the functioning of the capitalist economic model; against all odds, it has partly or entirely stopped the grinder of Polanyi's satanic mill, prompting us to rethink the world of work and the rights of working people.

Alongside underpaid and overworked health care workers, grocery store, cleaning services and food delivery workers have overnight been declared key occupations on which our societies rely. In Europe and elsewhere, but particularly in Germany, a heated political debate flared up around another category of workers from the margins of the world of work and yet central to food security – namely the seasonal agricultural workers unable to arrive in Germany because of border closures and reduced transport operation caused by the pandemic. The situation itself and the political intervention attempting to resolve it are particularly telling about the normativity and political economy of work and mobility in the European core-periphery constellation.

German agriculture depends on 300,000 seasonal 'harvest hands' (*Erntehelfer*) from the Eastern EU member states. From asparagus and pickles to strawberries, the export of seasonal agricultural workers from Eastern to Western Europe is an institutionalised human supply chain, involving intermediaries and actors that make the arrangements each year. As the political response to the pandemic suspended free movement in Europe and imposed strict travel bans, it prevented the seasonal workers from arriving in April as expected, threatening that the German asparagus harvest may go to waste.

The asparagus saga

Not only the dreadful thought of a spring without asparagus in Germany, but the economic cost of losing an entire annual harvest has urged politicians to attempt to resolve the crisis. Caught between health concerns, economic losses and possible food shortages, political action faced an ethical conundrum with broader implications for the EU as a political community.

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As recent infection outbreaks in meat processing factories and even reports of deaths among seasonal harvest workers demonstrate, bringing Romanian and Bulgarian 'harvest helpers' to Germany amid the pandemic not only exposes the double standards regarding health and safety concerns in the context of the crisis, but also unravels how risk and burden within labour is unequally distributed along Europe's core-periphery dividing line.

The asparagus saga reveals three important aspects of the world of work in Europe that are otherwise overshadowed by the misconceived discourse on cheap labour or welfare tourism imported from the East: first, the division of labour in EU, second, free movement as forced migration and, third, the structural deskilling and devaluation of work in sectors dominated by migrant workers.

The myth of 'unskilled labour'

Labour-intensive sectors like agriculture, care or cleaning in the European core (e.g. Germany) are predominantly relying on labour from the (Eastern) periphery. The domestic outsourcing in agriculture, in particular, was gradually moving further East with every round of EU enlargement, so that most of these workers now come from Poland, Bulgaria and Romania. Seasonal work has been essential for the German agricultural sector since before EU enlargement. Max Weber already examined the effect of Polish workers working on Prussian fields on the condition of (East-Elbian) agricultural workers in his studies of the 1890s.

The EU's free movement has only made domestic outsourcing in the sector easier and more lucrative for farmers, as the 'reserve army of labour' was expanded towards a less costly workforce with even weaker bargaining power. The bargain was sustained through the fact that low wages could increase their value upon workers' return to their member

states of origin and the strenuous working conditions could be endured because of the temporary nature of employment (no more than three months).

In the current case, the farmers' response to the government's proposal to recruit the local unemployed workforce or asylum seekers as a replacement for the missing migrant seasonal workers particularly exposed the myth about 'unskilled labour'. That would not quite work, the farmers acknowledged, as the harvest work, especially asparagus, requires experience and particular skills and dexterity, which randomly recruited local workforce will neither have nor will be able to acquire quickly. Hence, the federal ministers of interior and agriculture ultimately agreed to fly in 80,000 seasonal workers from the Eastern member states at a time when travel is massively restricted and free movement of people in Europe is effectively suspended.

Dependent on labour from the East

The decision should fundamentally shift the discourse about the Eastern European (seasonal) worker. It demonstrates that in the current division of labour in Europe, the Eastern European seasonal worker in agriculture is not 'needy' but needed – and even essential or 'systemically relevant' (*systemrelevant* in German parlance). The narrative of mobile workers from the Eastern EU member states benefiting from access to the EU's internal market (concretely the markets of the EU's Western core) can be turned around into a narrative about how these markets are entirely dependent on labour from the Eastern periphery.

Besides unravelling the division of labour in Europe's core-periphery constellation, where entire economic sectors are existentially dependent on labour from the Eastern periphery, the Covid-19 crisis also exposes the dark side of the EU's free movement – its greatest and most contested achievement. When precariousness is instrumentalised, free movement becomes a purely romantic narrative, while labour mobility actually resembles forced migration.

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The 80,000 seasonal workers have and will embark on flights, to live in crowded collective accommodation facilities, eat in common canteen, and work in close proximity in the fields. During the regular harvest season, living and working conditions for harvest helpers are the complete opposite of social (or physical) distancing. Sometimes, up to six persons live in a stuffy container room, workers commute on

labour costs and unfavourable working conditions.

buses and vans across the fields and share various cramped common spaces. A blind eye is turned to all these aspects that would otherwise be in breach with most of the current confinement measures, while seasonal workers' health and lives become the price for the salvation of the asparagus harvest.

United and divided

'United in diversity' as Europe's vocation becomes 'divided in material inequality' as the reality of Europe's core-periphery constellation, where free movement alternates between a noble choice or a forced exit, depending on whether the beholder looks at it from the core or the periphery. Considering this, the German asparagus harvest case points to the necessity of expanding the current labour mobility discussion to incorporate the neglected perspective of those at the margins of the periphery and the importance of addressing the right not to move (while enjoying economic security) in the mainstream free movement discourse.

Finally, just as other crucial crisis-sectors, e.g. care and grocery workers, seasonal work in agriculture demonstrates the relevance and essentiality of these sectors for the functioning of our societies, where work has been devalued through structural and discursive deskilling of labour. Framing particular labour as unskilled, and also often in highly ethnicised terms – as is the case with agricultural seasonal work in Germany – contributes towards sustaining low labour costs and unfavourable working conditions.

While recognising the current uneven division of labour within integrated Europe along the East-West fault line, we need to change the narrative from the needy and poor Eastern migrant workers into the key workers that kept societies and economies across Europe running amid global pandemic. Recognising the material inequalities inherent in the EU's core-periphery constellation and underlying the current division of labour across the continent, as well as the challenges regarding worker mobility and protection, offers a starting point to rethink the EU's integrated world of work beyond the commodified and utilitarian understanding of mobility, citizenship and workers' protection – not only during a pandemic but in general.



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