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Agricultural workers are left out of Europe's Green Deal

Extreme weather events create dangerous conditions for farmworkers. Europe's political institutions need to include them in a just transition

A series of record-breaking environmental disasters has swept the globe during this year's summer period. While unprecedent floods have brought death and destruction to Central Europe and China, heatwaves hit North America and Southern Europe – with wildfires burning hectares of forests in Greece and Sicily as well as in Canada and Siberia.

Beyond its devastating effects on our natural environment, these extreme weather events pose enormous challenges for workers employed across the food chain. As the climate becomes more volatile and precarious, so does agriculture and the working conditions of those harvesting our food. Workers' rights violation on one side and environmental degradation on the other are tightly connected and both exacerbated by an unsustainable, unequal, and destabilising food system. This why the fight against climate change is also very much a fight for workers' rights.

For instance, as has been widely reported, agricultural workers in the US faced soaring temperatures with few protections during the country's recent heatwaves. To avoid the worst, some of them resorted to working in the darkness of the night. In Oregon, Guatemalan-born Sebastian Francisco Perez was one of several farmworkers who died in temperatures above 40°C.

Working in unbearable heat

Europe is no different. With rising temperatures, workers face a growing risk of dehydration, sunburn, and – in the worst cases – death. Tragically, this was the case for Camara Fantamadi, a 27-year-old seasonal farmworker from Mali, who died after working in the field in 40°C heat in Brindisi, the Italian Apulia region, on 24 June. That day, his shift had started at noon when temperatures were already unbearable. After his work in the field, he had been cycling back home when he suddenly

stopped pedaling, put his bike on the ground, and collapsed on his knees. Camara was picking tomatoes for €6 per hour.

After his death, the Apulia region announced a ban on farm work during the hottest hours of the day, between 12:30pm and 4:00pm. But this decision came too late for Camara. Once again, institutions took action only after a tragedy occurred. The death of Camara and many other agricultural workers should give us pause for thought. There is something terribly wrong when the life of a man is worth less than some kilos of tomatoes.

What happened to Camara and thousands of agricultural workers diagnosed with skin cancer shows that agriculture needs radical change.

Excessive heat during work – such as experienced by Camara – creates occupational health risks: it restricts a worker's physical functions, work capacity, and even productivity. According to international and EU labour standards, employers have a clear obligation to assess all risks and to stop any operation if there is an imminent and serious danger to safety and health.

The European Federation of Food, Agriculture and Tourism Trade Unions (EFFAT) calls on all employers to engage in collective bargaining and provide shade, water, longer rest breaks and protective clothing to agricultural workers. Work during the hottest hours should be prohibited and a maximum temperature to which workers may be exposed at work should be fixed.

The risk of skin cancer grows

But heat-related distress isn't the only health challenge for agricultural workers. For instance, aridification caused by climate change is also accompanied by increased ultraviolet radiations, leading to a growing incidence of non-melanoma skin cancer among outdoor workers. The prevention of skin cancer, then, requires comprehensive strategies to be defined by political institutions with the involvement of social partners.

To begin with, EFFAT demands it to be recognised as an occupational disease throughout Europe. In several European countries the social partners and health and safety authorities are developing tools to identify the risk of exposure to dangerous radiation. Employers should always provide sunscreen products as well as hats and UV-protective glasses. Unfortunately, technical solutions such as outdoor protective clothing and sun protection devices are not practical and comfortable enough – yet. More investment in research and development is urgently needed.

What happened to Camara and thousands of agricultural workers diagnosed with skin cancer shows that agriculture needs radical change: to be truly sustainable, a new long-term vision with the full involvement of social partners needs to be developed. Sustainable agriculture means promoting farming practices that ensure profitability while being environmentally sound. But it also means ensuring decent working and living conditions and high health and safety standards for those harvesting and processing our food. Such a new vision must also embed an adaptation strategy to growing temperatures and climate change if we want to pave the way towards a better future for agricultural workers, our ecosystems, and future generations.

A just transition for agriculture

Fundamentally, this requires a just transition to protect working people – not just from health risks and precarious work, but also job losses. As agricultural employment is directly impacted by intensifying desertification, which reinforces soil erosion and floods, reduced yields will likely have a devastating impact on jobs in agriculture and the future of the sector in general.

Therefore, the necessary just transition means rigorous socio-economic impact assessments. It means anticipating change and creating high-quality work opportunities with strong individual and collective labour rights in communities at risk of job disruption; it means helping workers and their families with training and adequate social protection; it means promoting a fairer and more inclusive labour market by tackling discrimination at work, promoting gender equality, and workplace democracy.

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Unfortunately, the EU Institutions and national governments' measures fall short – so far. The newly-issued Fit for 55 package, for instance, sets ambitious targets to reduce net greenhouse gas emissions, but overlooks the social and economic reality of key sectors such as agriculture. There cannot be any transition to sustainable food and farming systems if those that must deliver the necessary change keep on facing deplorable working and living conditions.

The health of European forests

This is not just the case for agriculture. Another example of a growing mismatch between policy-makers' declared objectives and the reality on the ground is the newly published EU Forestry Strategy. While the aim is to improve the quality, quantity, and resilience of European forests, there is no reference to the crying need to increase the number of forest workers, who are the first guardians of our forests, particularly in the case of fires and other natural disasters.

Over the last decades, many forest workers have lost their job in Europe as a consequence of austerity measures. The deadliest repercussion of neglecting the health of our forests was the escalation of numerous fires in southern Europe this summer. Without forest workers, European forests will become even more vulnerable in the future despite the positive intentions of the EU. That's why EFFAT demands that at least one additional forest worker per thousand hectares is employed in the EU.

While EFFAT is a firm promoter of the ambitious environmental goals outlined in the EU's Green Deal, setting targets without an inclusive governance where workers are actively involved will not deliver. The long-term success of these initiatives in sector such as agriculture will also depend on how effectively they will contribute to eradicating exploitation and improving working conditions.

In short, there is no just transition without decent work.



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