

# Italy: Are your tinned tomatoes picked by slave labour?

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## **How the Italian mafia makes millions by exploiting migrants.**

On 6 August last year, 14 immigrant farmhands in Foggia, on the ankle of the Italian boot, were coming home from a 12-hour shift picking tomatoes in 40C heat. The minibus carrying them was registered in Bulgaria; the driver didn't have a licence or insurance. The seats inside were wooden planks, and it was so crowded that passengers couldn't even see out. The vehicle was travelling at speed when it collided head-on with a truck loaded with tomatoes.

After the crash, you could see contorted limbs through the smashed windows. The entire front third of the vehicle was concertinaed and the roof was ripped open. Bags and clothing spilled out on to the road, and there were large patches of blood on the asphalt. Twelve of the 14 labourers died. Only two days before, also in Foggia, four labourers had died in a similar accident: 16 dead in 48 hours.

In the Italian south, the lives of foreign agricultural labourers are so cheap that many NGOs have described their conditions as a modern form of slavery. They live in isolated rural ruins or shanty towns. Some have Italian residency permits, but many don't. A few have work contracts, although union organisers often find they are fake. Desperate for work, these labourers will accept any job in the fields even if the wages are far below, and the hours far above, union standards. The produce they pick regularly ends up on the shelves of Italian, and international, supermarkets, bought by consumers who have no idea of the suffering involved.

Although some of the workers are eastern Europeans, most of those picking crops in the Italian fields come from Africa, mainly – at the moment – from Gambia, Ghana, Nigeria, Sudan and Somalia. The number of arrivals has been growing exponentially in recent years: the number of boat people landing in Italy peaked at [181,436 in 2016](#).

The largest migrant reception centres are almost all in the south – in Sicily and Calabria – where mafia organisations exert greatest control and where agriculture requires a constant supply of labour. That supply is organised by gangmasters: agents who recruit seasonal workers and who are tasked with squeezing extra work out of them at the lowest possible cost.

“There are a few factors on which modern slavery thrives,” says [Jakub Sobik](#), of the British NGO Anti-Slavery International: “Vulnerability, discrimination and a lack of the rule of law.” In Italian agriculture, all of these conditions are present.

There is no question that the migrant workers are vulnerable to exploitation, but Yvan Sagnet, a Cameroonian anti-slavery activist who once worked picking tomatoes in Puglia, explains that the vulnerability is mental as much as physical. “When you have been enslaved,” Sagnet says, “it’s such a strong thing that your head begins to reason differently. It’s not the slavery of hundreds of years ago, when you were deprived of your liberty. [Slavery](#) in the 21<sup>st</sup> century doesn’t need chains, because they exploit a continual sense of intimidation that the most vulnerable people, like

immigrants, feel.”

Discrimination and violence against African workers gets worse in Italy with every passing day. In 2018, there were 126 racially motivated attacks [recorded](#) in the country, some fatal: in May last year a neo-fascist [shot and wounded](#) six black people in Macerata, near the central city of Ancona. A Cameroonian was shot in the city of Aprilia, an hour’s drive from Rome. A few weeks before, in July, a Moroccan man was beaten to death there. The problem is so severe that the Italian intelligence agency [warned](#) earlier this year about the rise in far-right groups and “a real risk of an increase in episodes of intolerance towards foreigners”.

But it’s the absence of the rule of law – Sobik’s third prerequisite for modern slavery – that is most evident in Italian agriculture. Labourers without papers are considered outside the law, so they can expect no protection. “You know that what you’re suffering isn’t right,” says Sagnet, “but you can’t denounce it because they’ll report you as an illegal immigrant.”

In the Italian deep south, where the mafia runs a parallel system of local rule with its own violent enforcement, the law holds little sway. Workplace inspectors are “very few and very corrupt”, according to Rocco Borgese, secretary of the FLAI-CGIL union (which represents agricultural workers) in Gioia Tauro, Calabria.

In 2018, Global Slavery Index, an organisation providing a country-by-country ranking of the number of people currently enslaved, estimated there are 50,000 enslaved agricultural workers in Italy (the Index claims [a total of 145,000 people](#) are enslaved in the country as a whole, forced into prostitution and domestic services). The UN’s special rapporteur on slavery said last autumn that 400,000 agricultural workers in Italy are at risk of being exploited and almost 100,000 are forced to live in inhumane conditions.

“There’s a form of exploitation which, in some ways, exceeds what happened in the past, when slave-owners at least cared about the health of their slaves because they needed them,” said an Italian-Ivorian trade-unionist and campaigner, Aboubakar Soumahoro. “Today, there’s not even that care.”

Rather than denying the situation, the country’s interior minister, Matteo Salvini, has repeatedly [said](#) immigrants are the “new slaves”. The observation isn’t sympathetic but strategic: publicising their destitution is a calculated attempt to dissuade more from coming to Italy. It serves his political purpose to perpetuate their ghettoisation, and also shores up the far-right narrative that immigrants can never integrate.

Salvini and his allies have turned logic on its head. For them, the victims aren’t the people who have been enslaved, but the Italian people. In their view, the criminals aren’t gangmasters who exploit the workers, but immigrants (“every day in Italy”, Salvini has tweeted, “immigrants commit 700 crimes”). One of his most familiar slogans is “*la pacchia è finita*” (“the free ride is over”) – echoing the popular myth that refugees and pro-immigration leftists have somehow got rich at the expense of ordinary Italians. When you speak to rightwing politicians in [Italy](#), almost all reiterate the conspiracy theory that mass immigration has been financed by dark forces.

It is true, however, that some people are making money off the backs of the displaced and desperate. Italy’s agricultural sector is booming, with food products making up 8.7% of Italy’s flagging GDP. The tomato industry alone is worth £2.8bn. Mass immigration is chaotic and uncontrolled, but the exploitation of immigrant workers is systematic.

“The criminal economy is far better organised than the ordinary one,” says Leonardo Palmisano, sociologist and author of *Mafia Caporale* (“Gangmaster Mafia”), a study of the illegal exploitation of

workers in Italy.

Supermarkets and their suppliers cite their use of certifications that are intended to reassure consumers that the goods we buy are produced under legal labour practices. But as these stories demonstrate, such figleaves are totally unreliable, and simply make the consumer unwittingly complicit: those purchasing Italian produce are unaware that their healthy Mediterranean diet is, sometimes, the fruit of 21<sup>st</sup>-century slavery.

Rosarno, in Calabria, on the toe of the Italian boot, is an ugly town full of unfinished buildings and uncollected rubbish. It is notorious as a stronghold of the 'Ndrangheta, the Calabrian mafia, whose principal sources of income are drug trafficking, protection rackets, construction and agriculture. Nothing moves here, it's said, without their assent.

Thousands of immigrants head here every winter to work on the orange harvest, and end up staying in shanty towns three miles west of Rosarno. This cluster of temporary shelters, near a town called San Ferdinando, has grown up on the far side of the dual carriageway, the railway, and an industrial estate. Close by are the red-and-white cranes of Gioia Tauro port, the entry point for much of the cocaine sold in [Europe](#). As you approach, you see dozens of young black men riding old bikes, plastic bags dangling from their handlebars. All the bushes for miles around have been coppiced by labourers for twigs and sticks to build their shacks.

There are three shanty towns in San Ferdinando. Testa dell'Acqua is a horseshoe of 20 leaking mobile homes. The white walls have turned black with mould. Old freezers have been refashioned into chicken houses and TV aerials are tied to long branches. There's even a small cultivation of maize. Nearby, 700 more people live in 54 blue tents (more than a dozen per tent) supplied by the Italian Ministry of the Interior, which were put up in August 2017.

The main shanty town has the mud and improvised paths of a very edgy music festival. Stray dogs, cats and rodents pick through piles of rubbish. Police cars prowl outside day and night. You can still see the shack that was left uncompleted by a 29-year-old Malian, Soumaila Sacko, who [was killed](#) while he was in the process of constructing it: he had arranged 15 vertical sticks, five by three. About a quarter of the roof of sheet metal had been hammered in place. He was shot dead last summer by an Italian while he was trying to find some more metal in a nearby abandoned warehouse.

The encampment, though, is strangely vibrant. There's music and laughter. You feel as if you could find anything here: there's a bar, a hairdresser, an ironmonger, a butcher, a bike-repair guy, a mosque and a church. There's even a football team, called Qui Bosco ("Here's the Wood"). The resourcefulness is evident: old inner-tubes have been knotted to tie down a tarp, an old shelf has become a bridge over a ditch of plastic bottles, a metal bed base is used as a screen door.

This area of Calabria is known for its orange groves, and in late autumn, as the fruit turns, like traffic lights, from green to amber, young men turn up carrying all their worldly goods, and negotiate with someone to buy an old, damp mattress (€5) and rent a patch in a shack on which to sling it (often €30 a month). Nothing is dry.

Here, the nationalities are mostly Nigerian, Gambian, Ghanaian, Sudanese, Somali and Burkinabé. About 5% are women. There is one tap, but the water isn't drinkable. Toilets are nothing more than holes in the ground. There are a few generators and various gas bottles for cooking. Nobody knows how many people live in these conditions around San Ferdinando, but at the height of the season, there are probably 2,000 people.

A charity offering medical support in these shanty towns, MEDU, says 21% of those it sees have intestinal ailments, 17% respiratory problems, and 22% osteoarticular pains. Many have mental health problems, and the horrors they have suffered on their journey here have left them with PTSD. As we walk round, a young Nigerian woman called Honour shouts: "You must help us." She shows the rashes up her arms; she doesn't know if the skin irritation is due to constant contact with pesticides in the fields, or mosquitoes and horseflies. One of the many microbusinesses here is a trade in painkillers, especially ketoprofen. Sometimes they have to cycle for one or two hours to get to work, and most people are so exhausted that all they do when not working is sleep.

Life expectancy in slums such as this is very low. Jacob, a Ghanaian who keeps chickens in the disused freezers, shows us where Nigerian migrant worker [Becky Moses](#) used to live before she died in a fire in 2018. Fire is a constant danger: it is the only way to keep warm, and people will burn anything: old car seats, tyres, cardboard. Three others have died in fires on this site alone in the last six months.

There are dozens of slums like San Ferdinando across southern Italy, swelling and contracting according to the season. Often, the labourers are driven from one remote shanty town to another by gangmasters. After a winter in Calabria picking oranges and kiwis, they go north in the spring to Campania to pick strawberries, melons and shallots. In summer, they cross to Puglia, the heel of Italy, to pick tomatoes and peppers, before moving to the Veneto or Piemonte to pick grapes in early autumn. There are variants: some will go to Cassibile, in the south-east corner of Sicily, for the new potatoes, or stay behind in the slums once the workers have moved on to pick through the detritus and try and sell off scrap metal and sodden mattresses.

A major draw for tomato-pickers is Borgo Mezzanone, near Foggia. One of the men who died in the carminibus crash last summer had a brother, Sid, who was living in London but came to Italy when he heard the news. Sid shows us around the camp. He says he couldn't believe his brother had been living in such misery. "It's not real," he says.

We enter the camp through a man-sized hole in a fence. "Welcome to Africa," says Sid ruefully. Smoke is billowing from makeshift homes. Everywhere there are plastic bottles, smashed concrete, planks of wood, torn clothing, old brick phones and empty bottles of whisky and vodka. Abandoned mattresses act as walls and roofs to the shacks, bungied together with the swelling chipboard of kitchen worktops. Someone has painted on a wall in white: "shut up becaus is rule".

Migrants usually arrive in Italy with nothing but debts, after borrowing money from relatives back home to finance their journey to Europe. They usually know nobody when they reach their destination, and have no one to appeal to when in difficulty. Few even reveal to relatives back home the desperate situation in which they find themselves. In an abandoned warehouse, not far from the shanty town of Borgo Mezzanone in Puglia, an immigrant worker called Njobo tells us: "The Africans that are living here, most of them are living a fake life. They look for beautiful pictures and put them on Instagram. None of us would take a picture from this place and send it back." He gestured around his makeshift home, revealing the dilapidation of his surroundings, the room dotted with shredded plastic rags and broken glass.

These immigrants don't only have debts to relatives, they are also desperate to obtain residency permits. The so-called Bossi-Fini law of 2002 (named after the two party leaders who drafted it) grants a residency permit only to those who have work contracts, meaning immigrants will put up with exploitation in order to obtain one. Those without residency permits are even more vulnerable. Two of the people who died in fires in the San Ferdinando shanty town had drifted there to hide from authorities because their permits had recently expired.

Pay, already low, is even lower for “clandestines”. Many of the labourers we spoke to say gangmasters regularly withhold their identity documents and pay. Even if, in theory, they are free to leave, circumstances force them to stay put. “If you have worked for a week or for two weeks and they haven’t paid you,” says Sagnet, “and they have your documents, of course you don’t leave.”

Many migrants have reported being beaten by employers, who also make sexual demands. Violence, especially against women, is alarmingly common. Beauty, a Nigerian woman in a purple wig who lives in the San Ferdinando shanty town, told us: “You never feel safe. Even when you sleep, you have one eye open.”

Tayo, a 22-year-old Nigerian, was assaulted when she tried to defend a friend. Sexual violence is a constant in these bleak places: in 2015, in Ragusa, Sicily, a labourer living in a shanty town was killed and his wife raped. In 2011, an investigation revealed dozens of Romanian labourers had been forced into prostitution.

Inside the camp, there are shops selling everything: iPhone chargers, bracelets, sim cards, bread, crisps, hair extensions, bike pumps and shoes. Vendors are roasting pieces of meat coated in a thick marinade and heckling passers-by. There’s a group of men intently watching a game of draughts. Restaurants in shacks advertise their menus: “The best taste of The Gambia”. There’s a club lined with discoloured sofas and afrobeat blaring from the stereo. Another restaurant doubles as a brothel. But there is no running water or formal sanitation facilities anywhere.

“If, when I was in Africa, you had told me this is what Europe was like, I would insult you,” Njobo says. “I would never have believed it.”

The men and women living in these shanty towns are exploited from the moment they arrive on Italian soil. The sociologist and author Leonardo Palmisano, who investigates agricultural slavery and organised crime, says: “The mafia in the south controls the reception of immigrants. Centres for asylum-seekers have processed hundreds of thousands of immigrants, and the mafia is often part of the management.”

The Italian state pays €35 per immigrant per day (and €45 for minors) to reception centres that house them. During the mass migrations of recent years, the government contracted out the housing and feeding of migrants, which became a billion-euro industry. The largest reception centres in Italy are called Caras (*centri di accoglienza per richiedenti asilo*, or “welcome centres for asylum-seekers”), each in command of multi-million euro contracts for providing food and other services. One investigation in 2017 into the Cara Sant’Anna (based in an abandoned military airport in Isola di Capo Rizzuto in Calabria) estimated that, over 10 years, the Arena mafia clan had [embezzled a third](#) of the €100m state funding. Tiny portions of out-of-date food were served. The number of residents was exaggerated to increase cashflow. The asylum centre had become, in the words of the investigating magistrate, “a cashpoint for the mafia”. The running of Cara Sant’Anna has now been taken over by the Red Cross.

Something similar was happening all over the country. The Roman mafioso, Salvatore Buzzi, whose consortium repeatedly won contracts to arrange housing for migrants, was heard in a 2014 police wiretap [boasting](#): “Have you got any idea how much I earn through immigrants? I make more from immigrants than I do from drugs.” His consortium enjoyed annual revenues of €55m.

The [political wind](#) was turning against those refugees even before Matteo Salvini became the Italian interior minister in June 2018. In 2017, 58% of asylum requests were turned down. The appeals process, too, was abolished. Those so-called *diniegate* – men and women denied asylum – invariably preferred to disappear into the nearby agricultural slums than risk deportation.

There, the migrants continue to be exploited for profit, through a system called *caporalato*. This is the practice through which the recruitment and payment of day-labourers is subcontracted to a gangmaster, the *caporale*. An ancient and sinister figure in Italian history, the *caporale* was – throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries – a proto-mafioso, the enforcer of the landlord's will. The difference now is that the mafioso himself is likely to be a landowner, and it's his orders that are being enforced by a usually non-Italian *caporale*.

The practice of *caporalato* has been illegal since a 2016 law banned intermediaries from exploiting vulnerable agricultural labourers (thanks, largely, to the courageous campaigning of Yvan Sagnet), and yet it is still ubiquitous. At 4am, you see hundreds of labourers cycling on main roads, without lights, to reach the pick-up points for transport to the fields. There, at crossroads and in lay-bys, the black labourers wait for a *caporale* and his minibus. No one knows if there will be work. "Work yes, work no," says one phlegmatic man, moving his hands as if he were juggling invisible balls. The only certainty is that anyone who has agitated for fair pay or better conditions will be automatically excluded.

Costs vary, but in general the labourers have to pay around €3 for transportation to and from the fields. The vehicles usually carry double the legal limit of passengers, with men and women sitting on top of each other. The fields are so remote that, once there, the workers are obliged to buy sandwiches and water for €3-4. It costs 50 cents to charge a phone or, if anyone falls ill or has an accident, €20 to be taken to hospital.

Although piecework in agriculture is illegal, that is how all labourers are paid: the going rate is €3.50 to fill a chest with 300kg of tomatoes, or €5.50 if they are cherry tomatoes; workers receive €1 for a huge case of tangerines or 50 cents for one of oranges. The going rate for 100kg of grapes is €13. Even if you work at top speed, it is hard to make much more than €30 a day, and that's before all those deductions. Contracts are essentially worthless: local unionists try to intervene, checking online to see if the correct social security payments have been made on behalf of workers. They very rarely have. Union representative Rocco Borgese shakes his head glumly: "We have lost our humanity," he says.

Because the Bossi-Fini law ties residency to the possession of a work contract, many purchase a contract for hundreds of euros. Other times, the contract is issued in the name, not of the immigrant, but of a local man or woman who doesn't work and has probably never been to the fields. This guarantees the local person agricultural unemployment benefit if, on paper, it looks as if they have worked for more than 53 days in the year. In 2015, 3,000 of these "false labourers" were discovered in Calabria.

For the labourers dropped off at dawn in the fields, the work is relentless. In December 2018, we went out with five Africans cutting broccoli. They were wearing ill-fitting gloves and cracked wellington boots. Their clothing was frayed and encrusted with dry mud. They were each given a small knife. A green John Deere tractor crawled forward, and the five men crouched down, cutting the thick stems and chucking the broccoli heads in a crate behind the tractor. The stems, in the winter dawn, were covered in icy shards, and their knives often broke against them. By the end of the day, broken blades lay in a small pile just inside the tractor. With inadequate footwear, it was easy to slice your foot open. It was so cold we could see steam rising off the men's bent backs.

In the space of seven hours, these five men managed to fill 110 crates of broccoli. They were owed around €30, but nobody knew when they would be paid. When they are, they have nowhere to store their wages, so they carry cash – sometimes a month or two's savings – at all times. This makes them targets for muggers and vulnerable to violent attacks.



After a long shift, the men were driven back to an abandoned farmhouse. Eleven people shared the two-bedroom ruin. There were no windows, running water or electricity. They each paid a rent of €20 euros per month. The only heat came from burning scrap wood. Many don't survive these punishing conditions. In the summer of 2015 alone, 15 labourers died, including Paola Clemente, in the fields of Andria in Apulia, and Abdullah Muhammed, a 47-year-old Sudanese, in Nardò, further south in Puglia. In October 2017, a Ghanaian man, Daniel Mensah, died of hypothermia. In an article in the British Medical Journal in March, doctors representing another Italian medical charity, Doctors With Africa, [wrote](#): "Over the past six years the number of agricultural workers who have died as a result of their work is more than 1,500."

On 2 October last year, a Calabrian mayor, Mimmo Lucano, [was arrested](#). He stood accused of abetting illegal immigration and public-contract crimes, allegedly arranging a sham marriage for a Nigerian woman and improperly awarding refuse collection contracts to a local cooperative. For years, Lucano had been the mayor of Riace, a hilltop town 20km east of Rosarno.

The town first became famous in 1972 when a snorkeller discovered the so-called Riace bronzes, a pair of stunning statues of bearded, naked Greek warriors dating from 450BC. Now, though, Riace is renowned throughout Italy as one of the only places to have attempted true, revolutionary integration of migrants. The town, which was underpopulated, welcomed migrants and opened schools and businesses to them. Lucano's arrest represented a crackdown on anyone offering an alternative to the deliberate marginalisation of migrant workers. (The investigation which led to his arrest was ironically code-named "Xenia", the ancient Greek word for hospitality.)

"He's a nothing," Matteo Salvini said of Lucano after his arrest.

When we wandered around the streets of Riace last autumn, it was hard to imagine a sharper contrast to the agricultural slums. There were black toddlers singing in English from a balcony ("rain, rain, go away ..."). A veiled woman laughed with an elderly Italian man on a street corner. Bottles of water were left on park benches in case anyone was in need. The recycling bins were tidy wooden rectangles. Since the steep streets are too narrow for trucks, the binmen in recent years have been immigrants using donkeys.

The place felt like a pre-industrial Italian village with an international twist: there were small workshops - a ceramicist, a seamstress and so on - but those artisans were from Afghanistan, from Kabul and Herat. The whole village (there are fewer than 2,000 inhabitants) was colourful: the steps of a modern amphitheatre were rainbowed, and around every corner were murals of peasant workers. There were plenty of political messages too: the slogan "We raise our hands against the 'Ndrangheta", painted on a wall, was surrounded with children's handprints. There were tributes to Desaparecidos and Zapatistas, and the names of many mafia victims.

The story began in 1998 when 175 Kurds (including 72 children) arrived in Riace's nearby stretch of seaside. Mimmo Lucano, then a 40-year-old teacher, decided everything possible should be done to welcome the refugees. He was soon given the nickname "Mimmo the Kurd" as he tried to find accommodation and work for them. Riace, back then, was empty and crumbling. Many residents had moved to the cities or the north, looking for work, and local businesses were being obliterated by the arrival of shopping malls and chain stores. Lucano had a vision of immigrants not only being helped, but helping bring Riace back to life. "The migrant is a resource, not something to be used for profit," he says.

In 1999, Lucano founded an association, City of the Future (inspired by the Calabrian utopianist Tommaso Campanella). The village of Riace applied for funding for a new government programme called "diffused welcome", which would later become [a model called SPRAR](#) (system of protection

for asylum-seekers and refugees). In this model, rather than using huge detention centres, local councils accept immigrants and are given the funding and responsibility to integrate them. Unlike the many dysfunctional models used in the Italian immigration system, SPRARs are widely admired.

Lucano successfully stood as mayor in 2004, 2010 and 2014. He used the €35-a-day state funding for migrants not for personal enrichment but to employ 70 “cultural mediators” (teachers, therapists, careers advisers etc) who helped those migrants become part of the social fabric. Funds were also used to renovate empty buildings, to create cottage industries and give migrants small salaries, bringing the cobbled streets back to life in the process. In the last 20 years, Riace has received 6,000 immigrants from 20 different countries. “Riace”, the road sign now says when you arrive, “A town of welcome”.

There was something so enchanting about what Lucano had achieved in a remote Calabrian village that he became a national figure. RAI, the Italian state broadcaster, began filming a docudrama about Riace and its mayor. Lucano [was listed](#) in Fortune magazine’s 50 most influential leaders in the world.

“I define our utopia as normality,” he said in 2016. Lucano remained refreshingly scornful of worldly success and power, and his speeches were simple: “We unite our weaknesses with many other desperate people from all parts of the world. We share a dream of a new humanity free of mafias, racism, fascism and all injustices.”

Nobody doubted his sincerity: when Becky Moses died in a San Ferdinando fire last year – she had been living in Riace until her residency permit had been denied – a grieving Lucano brought her back to Riace for burial.

But his bluntness and visibility made Lucano some powerful enemies. Funds from central government became ever-more delayed, forcing Lucano to create Riace’s own currency of IOUs (the “banknotes” had the faces of Mahatma Gandhi, Che Guevara and anti-mafia campaigner Peppino Impastato). The RAI docudrama was blocked under pressure from Italy’s new far-right government. Last summer, Lucano went on hunger strike when he learned that the Ministry of the Interior had suspended payment for the accommodation of asylum seekers for the second half of 2017, suddenly creating a €650,000 black hole in the town’s budget. Since his arrest, Lucano has been banned from his town. His trial began this month, in the aftermath of a Salvini-allied mayor being elected as his replacement in May.

The scorn of Italy’s new government for the Riace model reveals a convergence of interests, both ideological and economic. Salvini’s electoral base doesn’t want to see immigrants at all, let alone witness them becoming part of the social fabric. In terms of the local economy, the more helpless and homeless immigrants are, the cheaper it is to employ them.

The so-called “[Salvini decree](#)”, which passed into law last autumn, was promoted as a tightening-up of security and law enforcement, but it was also a bid to combat immigration and remove humanitarian protection for an estimated 100,000 refugees. Many have since been evicted from refugee centres.

The sight of bulldozers flattening illegal settlements has become common on the evening news: in March, at the end of the orange-picking season, the main San Ferdinando shanty town was eradicated: tarpaulins, sticks and scrap metal snapped under the bulldozers’ jagged teeth. In April, the same happened – for the third time – to part of the Borgo Mezzanone shanty town.

Many activists believe this modern form of slavery is not a perversion of 21<sup>st</sup>-century capitalism, but



the logical result of putting profit before every other consideration. “Unless you counter the huge power of the multinationals,” Yvan Sagnet told us, “it will be difficult to resolve the problem of working conditions. Because *caporalato* and modern slavery are the effect of a system, not the cause of it: the effect of ultraliberalism applied to agriculture.”

If the victims are obvious, so too are the beneficiaries: food corporations, supermarkets and we, the consumers.

The enslavement of immigrant workers in the Italian south has been an open secret for years. But although the gangmaster system, in which workers are exploited and poorly paid, was outlawed in 2016, law enforcement has not caught up: a recent report by the agricultural workers’ union, FLAI-CGIL, suggested that “about 100,000 (mostly foreign) workers are forced to suffer workplace blackmail and dilapidated living conditions”.

A system of certification for Italian and international supermarkets to say that their produce is not the fruit of slavery has also failed to eradicate the practice. On the contrary: for decades, organised crime and discount supermarkets have forced down the price of raw products, reducing payment along the food supply chain and creating a system that inevitably punishes the most vulnerable.

“This isn’t a comfortable message for supermarkets”, says Rachel Wilshaw, ethical trade manager at Oxfam, “but in squeezing their suppliers so hard commercially that they can only make a profit by exploiting workers, supermarkets themselves are driving the conditions that can result in modern slavery in their supply chain.”

The story of price reduction for agricultural produce in the Italian deep south began 40 years ago, in January 1979, when two lorry drivers headed south from Verona to purchase oranges. They were in Rizziconi, next to Rosarno, when they were stopped and shot dead. Their mistake had been to purchase the oranges not too cheaply, but at a fair price. The ‘Ndrangheta intended to be the sole purchaser of oranges, and any competition had to be eradicated. As Giuseppe Lavorato – Rosarno’s anti-mafia mayor from 1994 to 2002 – wrote in his memoir: “In the 1970s, the ‘Ndrangheta kept away from our towns any trader who paid an equitable price [for oranges] in order to remain the only buyer and impose its own low price.”

According to Lavorato, the ‘Ndrangheta wasn’t content simply to be the sole purchaser of Calabrian oranges. It wanted to become the “exclusive protagonist” in the entire commercial chain, obliging farmers to go through them for every stage of production “for the labourers at harvest time, for the companies selling crates, for the lorries to transport the produce”.

Throughout the 1980s, oranges were increasingly profitable. Fizzy orangeades were becoming popular, and companies sourced juice from Calabria, where the oranges were of lower quality, and thus sold for concentrates rather than as whole fruits. With the arrival of subsidies from the EU’s Common Agricultural Policy in the 1980s, the ‘Ndrangheta saw another source of income. It took over the titular ownership of what are called “producers’ organisations” (farmers’ cooperatives) and invoiced the EU billions of lire for “paper oranges” (fruit that existed only on documents).

“They were weighing the same lorry two, four, six times”, says Don Pino de Masi, an anti-mafia priest in Rosarno, meaning that they were receiving far more subsidies than they were entitled to. It is estimated as much as €75m was embezzled in this way in 2007 alone.

It meant Calabrian farmers were extremely vulnerable to international competition when Brazil and other countries began undercutting the Calabrian juicers. As the mafia cut corners, always looking for maximum returns, the laborious tasks that the EU subsidies were intended to finance –

protecting or improving production through pruning, replanting, fencing, scientific research and infrastructure – simply hadn't been carried out.

Throughout the 1980s and 90s, the Italian mafia bought land. Cash-rich from drug trafficking, and from embezzling public funds for construction, the mafia saw the land grab as an easy way to launder profits. When garbage-disposal contracts were privatised, land offered an opportunity to dump refuse, including toxic waste. The building in San Calogero (near Rosarno) where the young Malian, Soumaila Sacko, was shot dead last summer had been used to dump 127 tonnes of industrial by-products.

But the mafia's purchase of agricultural land received a new impetus when, in 2008, the EU's subsidy system was changed: there was now a fixed sum of €1,500 per year per hectare, regardless of production. It was a further incentive to buy land, with the result that many of the orange groves of Calabria are now controlled by some of the most powerful families in the Italian underworld: the Pesce, Piromalli and Mancuso clans.

"The mafia now governs the agro-industry," Leonardo Palmisano, the anti-mafia author, told us. "You only need to look at the properties confiscated from the mafia. In recent years, they are almost all in the agricultural sector. And organised crime doesn't just control agricultural production, but also transport, commercialisation and the fruit markets."

Recent investigations have supported Palmisano's assertion: in one, codenamed "All Clean", magistrates discovered that almost every aspect of the supply chain for oranges was dominated by the 'Ndrangheta: cooperatives for the harvest and sales of oranges, five different transport firms, a company involved in plastic packaging and another in cardboard packaging. In one wiretapped conversation, a member of the notorious Pesce family even boasted that he himself had created the transportation network for the Cedi Sisa supermarket in Calabria.

Many of the huge fruit-and-vegetable markets throughout Italy have also become bases for criminal organisations. With the constant coming-and-going of lorries, those permanent markets offer a good cover for drug-running: an investigation in 2007 revealed that the Morabito clan from Africo, just south of Rosarno, had taken control of the Milanese fruit-and-vegetable market, fixing prices and dealing cocaine from inside the market's administrative offices (207kg were confiscated in one raid alone).

The situation was the same 10 years later: in an investigation called *Provvidenza*, the Piromalli clan was revealed to have wrested control of the Milan fruit-and-vegetable market from the Morabitos. The same clan was also alleged to have influence over an agricultural cooperative, Copam, near Rosarno, which had, between 2012 and 2016, received €2.6m from the EU.

Italy's Agromafia Observatory, an organisation that analyses criminal incursions into the food chain, estimates that the value of food-related business to organised crime has risen 12.4% in the last year, making it now worth €24.5bn. The Observatory suggests that agriculture now makes up 15% of the mafias' total income. In the period from 1 January 2017 to 30 June 2018, the Guardia di Finanza confiscated 800 tonnes of tomato concentrate that were believed to be the product of criminal activity.

Large sections of Italian agriculture are untainted by organised crime, but the mafia has contaminated parts of the food supply chain in a way that makes it difficult to isolate.

"You have to understand", says Don Pino De Masi, the anti-mafia priest, "that in Calabria, the black economy is bigger than the real one. There are no workers' rights. You take on who you can pay the

least and the gangmaster oils this 'race to the bottom' mechanism. Above the immigrant gangmaster is the Calabrian one, the expression of the will of those who command here."

What happens to brave farmers who try and escape that "command" is telling. The GOEL Association unites 27 farms in Calabria, as well as many businesses and cooperatives that refuse all contact with the 'Ndrangheta. Its president, Vincenzo Linarello, says he is trying to persuade farmers that they can get richer by fighting the mafia: "We pay 40 cents per kilo of oranges to our farmers. That's almost six times what others receive," he says. But the consequence of taking a stand is that his farmers are constantly suffering vandalism and arson, while sheep and goats have been repeatedly released on to their crops.

"We have continuous thefts, bombings and damage," says Linarello. "They never hurt people, only objects. But you are brought to a point of absolute exasperation, such that eventually a farmer [without a supporting association] seeks them out to understand why they are being attacked. The farmer almost has a perverse sense of gratitude to the person [who can stop the attacks]." From then on, says Linarello, all the farm's contracts – for employment, transportation, sales and so on – will slowly come under the control of organised crime.

Last summer, at the height of Italy's tomato-picking season, there was a robbery at a biodynamic farm in Molise, just north of Puglia. The manager, Paola Santi, employed a number of migrants, and made sure they were paid a fair wage and worked in a healthy environment. Eager to share this good practice, she made a video and uploaded it to the business's Facebook page. "We just wanted to set a good example," she told us, "to show that some of our workers had been with us for 10 years." Within three days, the company's four tractors – worth €250,000 – had been stolen.

Every year, before the harvest is in, certain supermarkets invite a supply price for their fresh produce. Because the order, for the winning bidder, will be very large, producers compete to outdo each other with the lowest price. This is the supermarkets' "double-down" auction, infamous for reducing prices on all produce. After opening offers are called in, the lowest bid from that first round is then used as the starting point for this second round, hence "double down".

In April 2014, an auction for tomatoes was in progress. In Naples, a manufacturer of tomato products called Francesco Franzese stared at his computer screen in consternation as the price dropped. He was managing director of La Fiammante, a company based on the slopes of Vesuvius, which sold tinned tomatoes, passata and purée. What he saw shocked him. The tomato-growing season hadn't even begun, but a supermarket chain was inviting a supply price for 20m tins of tomatoes. Franzese was logged on to the online portal, and every time a rival company lowered their price, a two-minute timer started.

"It was like a game," he told us, "and you had to keep going lower to stay in it. It was the only auction that I had seen going downwards. You didn't even know if the other bids were real, or just a way to force down the price."

Franzese knew the figures didn't add up. The prices rival companies were offering to sell for had to be, he calculated, below their costs. "To produce a tin of tomatoes," he told us, "certain expenses are out of your control: the price of tin, energy and water costs and so on. The only place you can squeeze savings are in labour costs. The only place." He decided not to participate in the auction. "In accepting these industrial prices," he said, "we're actually selling the skin of the farm-workers."

Franzese's refusal to play the game, however, was an isolated protest. Given the parlous state of the Italian economy in recent years, the double-down auction has, since 2014, become more common. Discount supermarkets – the main perpetrators – now account for almost 20% of the Italian market,

and in Germany (a major consumer of Italian produce) the figure is at 40%. Between 2014 and 2017, while the Italian economy [has been stagnant](#), the major discount supermarkets have grown.

Activist Fabio Ciconte and journalist Stefano Liberti have been campaigning for a decade for a fairer food industry, and recently published a book: *Big Trolley: Who Decides What We Eat?* “The supermarkets,” they wrote, “have created a war between the poor: on the one side the farmers, who are struggling to survive, and on the other consumers, who want to spend less and less.”

The result is that tomatoes, oranges and other agricultural produce are now sold with no relation to how much they cost from the ground up, but solely how little the super-powerful supermarkets are prepared to pay from the top down. Many supermarkets also charge a “listing fee” for the privilege of being on their shelves. In their book, *Ghetto Italia*, Yvan Sagnet and Leonardo Palmisano describe it as a race to the bottom. “The link between the cost of work and the price of the product has broken,” they wrote.

Prices paid to tomato-processing companies, which turn the raw fruit into tins of tomatoes, concentrates, sauces and ketchups, are constantly forced down. Those processors, in turn, readjust the prices they pay to farmers, in order to maintain their profit margin. A recent “fair price” campaign (launched last December by the environmental charity Legambiente, and the ethical Italian supermarket NaturaSi) highlighted just how low prices have fallen: farmers now receive an eye-wateringly low 7.5 cents for a kilo of tomatoes. The per-kilo price for oranges hovers around the 7 cents mark (there are regional and seasonal variations).

In that context, it is hardly surprising if corners are cut. Farmers use gangmasters to provide the cheapest, most vulnerable labour, and don’t ask questions about the workers’ conditions. “The farmers make up for [diminishing margins]”, Sagnet and Palmisano wrote, “through the gangmasters ... everyone makes money on the ones below, except for the very last in the chain, the labourers.”

Such purchasing practices are irresponsible, says Cindy Berman, head of the London-based Ethical Trading Initiative’s modern slavery strategy. While she noted this is common across all industries globally, ETI’s position on the matter is clear: “It is a practice we abhor, and we discourage. Responsible companies shouldn’t be doing it.”

The power of supermarkets is exacerbated in Italy by the producers’ relative weakness. In the Italian south, the average size of a farm is seven hectares. There is often little consolidation or cooperation between them, and they remain powerless compared with the national supermarket chains. There is also an almost total absence of employment agencies for the agricultural sector in Calabria and Puglia, to act as alternatives to gangmasters. “There’s a complete lack of organisation,” says Stefano Liberti. “If you need labourers quickly, there’s no efficient way to find them. That’s the intermediary role that *caporali* [gangmasters] provide.”

The price pressure is even more acute on tomatoes than on other products, because they are often used by supermarkets, like [milk in the UK](#), as what they call “*un prodotto civetta*”, a “loss leader”. Tomatoes are so fundamental to Italian cuisine that shops sell them at a loss, knowing the customer will purchase other products while shopping and make up the difference.

But the downward squeeze on prices is only part of the story of the supply chain, because it’s also apparent that someone, somewhere, is making huge profits. Although farmers were paid 7.5 cents per kg for their tomatoes last year, the consumer was charged, roughly, €2 per kg for them. That represents a price increase of 2,567%.

Given that supermarkets are sourcing their oranges and tomatoes from crime-ridden areas of southern Italy, one might expect them to be circumspect about their suppliers. But they lack the instruments, or willingness, to probe deeply into where their products are sourced. Both UK and Italian supermarkets defend themselves by the blanket use of Certification Bodies (CBs): these are companies paid by supermarket suppliers to provide an ethical audit of their businesses, thereby offering assurance that their goods meet environmental or humanitarian standards.

But CBs perform an arm's-length box-ticking exercise, and rarely visit the farms. Besides, many farms are so remote that it is hard to launch a raid or surprise inspection. We spoke to one volunteer medic, working in the fields in Sicily, who says that to avoid any surprises, big farms have lookouts on mopeds at the ends of very long tracks. Some inspectors can be paid off, and those who do their job with integrity have been threatened with violence.

Global Gap (an inspectorate for good agricultural practice founded in 1997 by retailers) is an organisation that has patented one methodology for such audits. But under the Global Gap method, only the square root of the total number of farms used by a processing plant is inspected (ie if there are 100 farms supplying a plant, only 10 will be inspected). There's no element of surprise – the general regulations of Global Gap state that “The following is true for unannounced inspections: the CB may inform the producer in advance of the intended visit.”

Almost all CBs attract business by boasting that they provide “reputational preservation” or “risk awareness”. They exist primarily to shore up a good name rather than root out and reveal bad practice. There is a conflict of interest, since the cost of certification is met not by the supermarkets, but by the clients – an agricultural producer or processor. “When the person being inspected is the same person paying the inspector's fee, 99.9% of the time the inspector will say: ‘No, you're not exploiting anyone’,” said Aboubakar Soumahoro, of the USB grassroots union. It is, he says, a racket: “The story just doesn't stand up.” One major CB told us, off the record: “We audit remotely. We rely on the documentation our customers supply.”

The announcement of inspections provides ample room for suppliers to cheat the system. “Audits are often announced in advance, which allows employers to deceive auditors [by making sure] exploited workers are not present on the day of the audit,” says chair of the Yale university working group on slavery, Genevieve LeBaron.

Farmers of the Italian deep south who are trying to do things differently and put some kind of reform in place are scathing about the inspection process. Vincenzo Linarello, from GOEL, calls CBs “the original sin” of the modern slavery system. “It's simply not true that supermarkets are sourcing from farms that don't exploit labourers,” he says. “How do they check? They make their suppliers sign contracts in which they simply self-certify.” Lucio Cavazzoni, the president of Good-Land, a company campaigning for rural and community regeneration, says that certifications “are trustworthy on paper, but absolutely unreliable for [knowledge of] the fields”.

Even some of the most powerful voices in the food industry express doubt that the certification process does anything to protect against gangmasters. “I wouldn't swear by it,” Francesco Mutti, the CEO of one of Italy's biggest and oldest tomato-processing firms, told us. Mario Gasbarrino, CEO of the Unes supermarket chain, who disdains aggressive discounting practices, is equally blunt: “I put little faith in certifications.”

The absurdity of the certification process was revealed in 2015, when a 47-year-old Sudanese immigrant, Abdullah Muhammed, was working on a tomato farm in Nardò in Puglia. Labouring without breaks, and with limited water, he suffered a heart attack and died. No medical assistance was available. It was his first day of work; he had arrived from Sicily the day before.

The farm was owned by Giuseppe Mariano, who had previously been caught up in an investigation into *caporalato*, and who had been using a Sudanese gangmaster. Using drones and wiretaps, an investigating magistrate, Paola Guglielmi, [discovered](#) that the farm was supplying processing plants owned by two of the biggest names in the Italian tomato industry, Mutti and Cirio.

The arrest warrant issued by Guglielmi for the farmer and his gangmaster spoke of “conditions of absolute exploitation” on the farm. (Thanks to the glacial pace of Italian justice, the case against the farmer and his gangmaster is yet to reach court.) The farm supposedly had anti-slavery certification, Guglielmi told us, with a humourless laugh. “But they never really checked.”

Princes (the food conglomerate owned by Mitsubishi, and maker of Napolina brand tomatoes) has been sourcing tomatoes from the Nardò farm, now under new ownership, since 2016. A spokesman said they are confident the new management is proactive in improving conditions. When questioned by food campaigners Liberti and Ciconte, Princes said that its “own audits” and “due diligence ... did not reveal any evidence of illegality”. Mutti was so aghast at the damage to its reputation that it decided, in future, to purchase only mechanically harvested tomatoes in the south. (Mechanisation reduces the working crews to four or five people, bar the driver.)

Cirio, which is owned by Conserve Italia, told the Guardian: “[We] would like to assure all ... consumers that it will continue to process tomatoes supplied by its 14,000 cooperators through the collaboration of its 3,000 employees in complete respect of ethical principles and environmental sustainability.”

The other problem of the supply chain is its astonishing secrecy. Of the 15 CBs we contacted, only two replied to our questions. The addresses of agricultural cooperatives supplying international brands are often nondescript suburban offices, and, when you visit, they refuse to divulge which farms they work with.

“I’ve been in this business for 40 years, and I’ve never understood why the fruit-and-vegetable supply chain [in Italy] is so long,” says Gasbarrino. “There’s something nebulous there.”

If the traceability is tricky on produce that is tinned or boxed, it’s even harder, of course, on loose fruit. If you attempt to trace where Calabrian oranges, picked by enslaved labourers, end up, everyone goes silent. The processing plant in Rosarno owned by Gaetano Rao, a businessman and politician, doesn’t reply. San Benedetto, an Italian orangeade producer, says it is too busy to comment. Only Fanta, which is owned by Coca-Cola, offers a complete list of all its suppliers and transporters. Since 2012, Fanta has stopped sourcing its oranges in Calabria.

“We’re taking lectures in morality from Coca-Cola,” says one Calabrian activist.

The continued use of slave labour in Italian agriculture has been made possible by a combination of factors: a migrant crisis in which hundreds of thousands of people with minimal rights have arrived in areas dominated by organised crime, just as the country’s economy is flatlining and discount supermarkets are using all means possible to push down prices.

But small victories have been won. The window of time to harvest most produce is narrow, so strategic industrial action can threaten the entire crop. In the last decade, strikes have sometimes brought results.

In 2011, Yvan Sagnet, who came to Italy from Cameroon on a scholarship to study engineering four years earlier, was at university in Turin when his scholarship was suspended. To get by, he went to pick tomatoes in Nardò with other African migrants. A sudden change in working conditions (the men were told they could no longer shake tomatoes off the vine, but had to pick them off by hand)



infuriated the labourers, who downed tools. Sagnet, in his mid-20s, was chosen as strike leader.

Despite violent threats ("Stop this strike or else consider yourself dead," one gangmaster told him), he denounced the gangmasters to police. "We showed the whole of Italy what was really going on," Sagnet told us.

He has now set up his own business making tomato produce under the NoCap label, which he is hoping will raise consumer consciousness. (It follows the model of the successful Libera label, displayed by Italian producers who have refused to pay protection money to the mafia.) It's one of a number of products that are militantly anti-gangmaster.

A recent survey suggested that 11% of Italian adults are so concerned about the provenance of food products that they now use an alternative form of shopping. There are *gruppi d'acquisto solidale* ("supportive purchasing groups"), and all sorts of other buying options: *altromercato* ("another market"), *fuori mercato* ("outside the market"), *sfrutta zero* ("zero exploitation") and Funky Tomato. These demonstrate that consumers can influence the conditions for agricultural workers. "If there are corporals [gangmasters]", says Cavazzoni, "there are also generals, and the generals aren't only the supermarkets, but their customers."

One of the few uplifting aspects of this dark story is that it may be immigrant labourers themselves who end this 21<sup>st</sup>-century slavery by standing up for their rights. Repeatedly in recent years, those with nothing to lose have revolted against gangmasters and the mafia. In December 2008, when an Ivorian in Rosarno was robbed of his entire savings and two more men were later shot, the labourers did something very rare for Rosarno: they organised a protest and denounced the criminals to the police.

In January 2010, after a Togolese man was shot in Rosarno, the immigrant labourers rebelled. Cars were burned and shop windows smashed in the so-called "revolt of Rosarno" before a savage counter-revolt was organised by the mafia and neo-fascist organisations. Four people were badly injured and the labourers' temporary quarters were razed to the ground. The story was made into a brilliant, if harrowing film, [Mediterranea](#).

It was Sagnet's protest that, in part, led to the creation of an anti-gangmaster law in 2016, with custodial sentences of one to six years (or five to eight years if accompanied by violence and threats) for those exploiting vulnerable labourers. A total of 561 people were arrested under the gangmaster legislation in the 18 months since the beginning of 2017, showing not only how widespread the problem is, but also the fact that Italian law enforcement is beginning to take the problem seriously.

Italian justice, however, isn't only excruciatingly slow; it's also rarely punitive. In April this year, the court of appeal cleared 11 of the 13 accused of "reducing their workers to a state of slavery". Only the two immigrant gangmasters, and none of the Italians, were convicted.

In May, another agricultural labourer died in a car crash in Foggia (he had no documents, so his nationality is unknown). In April, a Gambian asylum-seeker died in a fire in the reconstructed slum of Borgo Mezzanone. If anything, the plight of immigrant labourers is getting worse, rather than better. In May's EU elections, Matteo Salvini gained 34.3% of the vote, thanks largely to his incessant anti-immigrant rhetoric.

Central to his message is the branding of modern slaves as criminals – saying nothing about slavery itself.

- This article was amended on 20 June 2019 to add a comment from a spokesman for Princes.

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**P.S.**

The Guardian

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/jun/20/tomatoes-italy-mafia-migrant-labour-modern-slavery>