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ESSENTIAL BUT FORGOTTEN. MIGRANTS PICKING FRUITS DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC IN VALENCIA

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Abstract: This article addresses the situation of migrant workers in La Ribera del Xúquer, a Valencian citrus-growing region, from the confinement of March 2020 to April 2021. Two periods of fieldwork were carried out, the second during the pandemic, with observation, informal contacts and interviews with 55 key informants of varying profiles. Although the risk situations during the harvest are common to all workers, Spaniards and immigrants, these affect with less or greater intensity according to the position occupied in the ethno-fragmented work structure, country of origin and, more broadly, social and living conditions. The pandemic situation and the measures taken have reinforced the pre-existing ethnic segmentation of the labour market. On the one hand, workers with “permanent-discontinuous” contracts, Spaniards and immigrants rooted in the area; on the other, temporary workers and those provided by temporary agencies, almost all of them immigrants, who accumulate risk, job insecurity and social insecurity.

Key words: migrant agricultural workers, ethno-fragmented work structure, COVID-19 pandemic, unequal distribution of risk.

ESENCIALES PERO OLVIDADOS. MIGRANTES RECOGIENDO FRUTAS DURANTE LA PANDEMIA DE COVID-19 EN VALENCIA

Resumen: Este artículo aborda la situación de los trabajadores inmigrantes en La Ribera del Xúquer, una comarca citrícola valenciana, desde el confinamiento de marzo de 2020 hasta abril de 2021. Se realizaron dos períodos de trabajo de campo, el segundo en pandemia, con observación, contactos informales y entrevistas a 55 informantes clave, con diferentes perfiles. Si bien las situaciones de riesgo en la recolección son comunes a todos los trabajadores, españoles e inmigrantes, estas afectan con menor o mayor intensidad según la posición que se ocupa en la estructura de trabajo etnofragmentada, el origen y, de forma más amplia, las condiciones sociales y de vida. La situación de pandemia y las medidas adoptadas han reforzado la segmentación étnica del mercado de trabajo preexistente. Por un lado, los trabajadores fijos discontinuos, españoles e inmigrantes arraigados en la zona; por otro lado, los trabajadores temporales y de ETT, inmigrantes casi en su totalidad, que acumulan riesgo, precariedad laboral y social.

Palabras clave: trabajadores inmigrantes agrícolas, estructura de trabajo etnofragmentada, pandemia covid-19, desigual distribución del riesgo.

INTRODUCTION

In order to deal with the COVID-19 pandemic, governments have imposed confinement measures and restrictions on social interaction, which have collapsed the economy. Researchers and health workers, but also agricultural, transport and supermarket workers, among others, became essential workers who ensured food, basic supplies and health care, without which the containment strategy would not have been possible. In OECD countries many of these workers are migrants, given the high over-representation of migrant labour in sectors such as agriculture, healthcare and domestic care (Anderson, Poeschel and Ruhs, 2020). This article addresses the situation of some of these essential workers: immigrant agricultural workers in Ribera del Xúquer (Valencia).

In our analysis we consider the COVID-19 pandemic as a “total social fact”, a concept used by Mauss to refer to phenomena that affect the totality of society and its institutions and has implications in all spheres and requires its consequences to be considered as a whole (Mauss, 1973). From the field of medicine, R. Horton (2020), editor-in-chief of *The Lancet*, proposed considering COVID-19 as a syndemic, a pandemic in which biological and social factors interact and are decisive in public health outcomes (Singer, Bulled, Ostrach and Mendenhall, 2017). Early research showed the syndemic nature of COVID-19, with a different health and social impact depending on age, social class, gender and ethnocultural origin (Grasso et al, 2021). Rather than giving rise to new realities, the situation generated by COVID -19 exacerbates pre-existing inequalities. During 2020, the living conditions and quality of life of immigrants in Great Britain, Germany and Spain worsened more than those of natives (Shen and Bartram, 2021; Soiné, Bulled and Dollman, 2021; FOESSA, 2022). Moreover, by disrupting normality, the pandemic makes more evident some of the contradictions of our social system, such as the situation of essential workers.

In the early months of turmoil, the responsible, and at times heroic, attitude of healthcare and other essential workers was not based on their contract or salary, precarious for the vast majority, but on their convictions of professional duty and social commitment. It was about “working with others”, an expression that Linhart (2013) uses to underscore the dimension of work that is a social relationship, linking us to one another and generating an awareness of interdependence. This was what was acknowledged and appreciated by the massive applause dedicated to healthcare

workers at 8pm every evening. However, this work for others is contradictory to the neoliberal construction of work, based on competitive individualism and the dilution of its social bonding and citizenship (Pedreño, 2020). This contradiction gives rise to two paradoxes that have one of their clearest manifestations in the case of migrant agricultural workers.

A first paradox is that the vast majority of the workers who have sustained our society have highly degraded working conditions, precarious contracts, low wages and low social value. Given the key nature of agriculture and the importance of immigrant labour, the Spanish government, like other European governments, adopted various measures to support agricultural employment, without basically changing its conditions¹.

The second paradox is that we endanger those on whom we depend. As a consequence of their precarious employment and social situation, some of the essential workers are more exposed to contagion and to suffering from the disease not only because of their work but also because of their living conditions. In the summer of 2020, the outbreaks of COVID-19 most commented on by the Spanish press were those that occurred in the fruit harvesting campaigns in various regions of Lleida, Huesca and Zaragoza, which forced the confinement of several municipalities. Other outbreaks in Murcia, more limited in number, are also related to working and living conditions that force workers to prioritize the essential daily wage over their own health and that of their co-workers and cohabitants (Pedreño, 2020; Güell and Garcés-Mascreñas, 2020).

This article addresses this issue in Ribera del Xúquer, a Valencian region which produces significant exports of agricultural products, citrus and other fruits. In recent decades, three global processes have shaped its agriculture, similar to other Southern European countries. First, its full inclusion in global agri-food chains led by large distributors (Gereffi, Humphrey and Sturgeon, 2005) and governed by quality standards (Ponte, Gibbon and Vestergaard, 2011). Second, the increasing flexibilization and precarization of agricultural labor as a condition of competitiveness in global markets (Corrado, Castro and Perrotta, 2017; Rye and O’Reilly, 2020). Third, given the social changes in Spain and the conditions of agricultural labor, immigrant labor has become an indispensable and structural resource (Molinero-Gerbeau, 2020), which has generated an ethno-fragmented structure of agricultural labor in which immigrants occupy the

most precarious, flexible and lowest paid positions (Pedreño, 2020). These processes are common to other agro-exporting areas in Spain and other countries, although depending on the territory, they take on specific forms in terms of production relations, working conditions and local actors (Friedland, 2004; Coe and Hess, 2013). This also produces specific social configurations in pandemic. Within this framework, Ribera del Xúquer is a good reference territory, given that it is representative of other citrus exporting areas of the Valencian Community. In addition, it presents differences with other Spanish agro-exporting areas such as Murcia, Almería, and the fruit-growing areas of Lleida, Huesca and Zaragoza, which allows a comparative analysis.

After this introduction, the second section presents the objectives and methodology of the article. The third section presents Ribera del Xúquer as a fruit-growing region and its subordinate inclusion in global chains. The fourth section is devoted to harvesting work, the insertion of immigrants and the ethnic fragmentation of agricultural workers. Within this framework, the fifth section presents the results on pandemic harvesting and the situation of immigrant workers. As a consequence of labor and social factors, an unequal distribution of risk has been generated, which is dealt with in the sixth section, which also compares the situation of Ribera del Xúquer with that of other Spanish agro-exporting areas. Synthetic conclusions close the article.

OBJECTIVES AND METHODOLOGY

This article addresses the situation of migrant workers in La Ribera del Xúquer, from the confinement of March 2020 to April 2021, with three objectives. The first is to grasp the implications and consequences of agricultural work during the pandemic for migrant workers, considering aspects referring to their work in the fields, as well as factors relating to their social integration, their housing conditions, their access to the national health system and other public services. Since the end of the 20th century, Ribera del Xúquer has had an ethno-fragmented structure of agricultural work, with a majority of immigrant labour. The second objective of the article is to show whether or not the pandemic and the measures adopted tend to reinforce the pre-existing ethnic segmentation of the labour market. The third objective is to compare the pandemic situation in La Ribera del Xúquer, an area representative of other Valencian citrus-growing regions, with other Spanish agro-exporting areas, to

note similarities and differences and to advance some hypotheses about the most relevant factors.

This article is based on the results of two periods of fieldwork. The first, between October 2018 and February 2020, involved observation, informal interviews and transcribed individual and group interviews with 29 key informants (male and female workers, crew leaders and warehouse managers, quality technicians, trade unionists and labour inspectors). The second period of fieldwork took place between February and April 2021. Thanks to previous contacts in the area, 26 additional people were interviewed, with similar key informant profiles². Given the pandemic situation, some of these interviews were conducted in the offices or premises of companies, cooperatives or trade unions. In other cases, they were carried out in squares and gardens, in outdoor cafés when they reopened and, on several occasions, in the interviewee's home, which allowed us to observe the home and other aspects of their social situation. We also used quantitative data from the 2009 Agricultural Census, the latest available, from LABORA, Servei Valencià d'Ocupació i Formació, and from the Statistics Portal of the Generalitat Valenciana.

LA RIBERA DEL XÚQUER: A SUBSIDIARY IN GLOBAL AGRI-FOOD CHAINS

Ribera del Xúquer is a natural and historical region, shaped by the river Xúquer. With an area of 1255.31 km², it groups together the administrative districts of Ribera Alta and Ribera Baixa, in the province of Valencia. Like other Valencian agricultural areas, from the mid-19th century it has specialized in the cultivation of citrus fruits for export markets, which are marketed by agro-export companies with Valencian capital. Although these had the dominant position, good prices and growing demand from the European market generated significant profits for the different actors in the chain, including large sectors of farmers (Gallego and Lamanthe, 2011).

Since the 1970s, Ribera del Xúquer has had a diversified economic structure, with a majority service sector, with touristic activities in the coastal area of Ribera Baixa, a great deal of industry and agriculture that maintains its economic and social importance. As in the past, the structure is made up of small landowners, 81.5% of whom have a farm of less than 4 hectares, with a significant number of cooperatives. Unlike in the past, the majority are part-time farmers, given the economic diversification of the region and the fall in agricultural incomes.

In the early 1990s, large distribution chains entered La Ribera and gradually took control of commercialization to the detriment of the network of small and medium-sized private businesses, many of which closed down, and cooperatives (Gallego and Lamanthe, 2011). As the literature has highlighted, agri-food chains are directed and controlled by the buyer (Gereffi et al, 2005), the big exporting and distributing companies, which must coordinate a large number of actors in different territories, just in time and with the flexibility to adapt to the changing requirements of the global market. In this context, quality requirements have become a model of corporate governance (Grammont and Lara, 2010; Ponte *et al*, 2011), exercising a form of indirect control through standardization (Gibbon, Bair and Ponte, 2008). The effects of the model are uneven for chain actors. Quality governance increases the control of large retailers over the production and work process (Ransom, Bain and Higgins, 2013; Moraes and Cutillas, 2014), among other reasons because of their control of the new private bureaucracy that dictates the standards to be met, how to do it and verify it, etc. (Castro, Gadea and Sánchez, 2021). Since the middle of the first decade of the 21st century, the most relevant standards such as GLOBALGAP, BCR (British Retail Consortium), for British chains, IFS (Food International Featured Standard), for German and French chains, among others, have been present in La Ribera.

In a context of increasing global competitiveness, large retailers are using their growing power (Lawrence and Dixon, 2016) to safeguard and increase their profit margins by putting increasing competitive pressure on farmers and workers. In the last two decades, farmers have suffered from falling prices at origin, both because of the increase in supply from Morocco and South Africa, and because of the oligopoly situation of a small number of large chains that control the global market (Gallego and Lamanthe, 2011; Caballero *et al*, 2012; Garrapa, 2017). Although cooperatives continue to market a third of the area's fruit production, their activity and framework for action has been adjusted - for the sake of survival - to the requirements of the global chains.

The big distributors have taken over everything without risking anything, they are the ones who are making a killing all year round... the Mercadonas, the Carrefours, the Aldis, who are above the companies... they force the prices down... the farmer is paid €2 for a crate of oranges and you go to Carrefour

and it's worth €18, a crate? Let's see, there is an expense of collecting, handling and transporting, okay. But 1000% no (Spanish, former day labourer, trade unionist, EI08).

In the last two decades, there has been a progressive substitution of citrus fruits for persimmons due to their higher average profitability. This process has been very relevant in La Ribera Alta, which provides more than half of the national production and Denomination of Origin "Kaki Ribera del Xúquer" since 1998 (Vendrell, 2017). However, given its inclusion in the same agri-food chains, persimmons have seen price and profitability declines in recent years, for similar reasons to citrus fruits.

MIGRANT WORKERS IN THE FIELDS OF RIBERA DEL XÚQUER

As in other Valencian citrus-growing areas, the traditional sales and harvesting system has been maintained in La Ribera del Xúquer, albeit modified. The farmer sells his production via the cooperative of which he is a member or he sells the harvest to the broker or salesman of a company. In both cases, a technician from the cooperative or a salesman is responsible for harvesting, with the help of crew leaders who recruit, select and direct the groups of workers.

Since the mid-1990s, this system is confronted with two main challenges, similar to other Spanish agro-exporting areas (Gadea, Pedreño and Castro, 2017; Pedreño, 2020). First, the progressive loss of Spanish agricultural workers, attracted by better jobs in other sectors, was dealt with by turning to immigrant labour. Second, the growing integration of La Ribera into the global agri-food chain increased competitive pressure to reduce labour costs. The precarious citizenship status of immigrants, the formation of an ethnically segmented reserve army, and the increased use of temporary employment agencies, facilitated the increasing flexibilization and precariousness of labour and, as a consequence, a de facto wage devaluation.

From the mid-1980s, there had already been Moroccan, Algerian and Senegalese workers in the fields of La Ribera. In the 1990s, immigrant labour was decisive in the orange harvest; the aforementioned groups were joined by Latin American workers and the first Eastern Europeans. At the same time, a process of settlement began which accelerated in the first decade of the 21st century, with a clear family profile. The extension of the harvesting season, with new early and late varieties, the possibility of occasional work in

other sectors for men, and the demand for immigrant women for domestic service, care and catering, made this settlement process possible. In 2008, the 33538 residents born abroad represented 11% of the total population of La Ribera, with Romanians, Moroccans, French, Colombians, Ecuadorians and Bulgarians as the most numerous groups. After a slight decline as a result of the Great Recession, the immigrant population increased slightly. In 2020 it accounted for 36510 people, 12% of the total population of La Ribera, with the same most relevant groups. Currently, immigrants are present in all employment sectors, although immigrant men continue to be over-represented in agriculture.

The orange and persimmon harvest is mostly carried out by immigrant workers, including Eastern Europeans, Bulgarians and Romanians, Moroccans and, to a lesser extent, Latinos of different nationalities and Pakistanis. Immigrant women also participate in a minority but relevant way. The work groups are usually of the same origin (Spanish, Romanian, Moroccan, Latino, etc.), although there are also multicultural groups due to the origin of their members. All of them face the trends we have described, compliance with quality standards and devaluation of their working conditions, although we have observed a diversity of situations.

In harvesting, the vast majority of workers work on a piece-rate basis, being paid by kilos harvested. This method, given the drop in the price of oranges and persimmons and the reduction in the guarantee clause in the collective agreement³, tends to reduce labour costs. In addition to the proper rhythm and carrying out of the harvest, the crew leader must ensure that the requirements of size, ripeness, appearance and others, are met according that the broker or the quality technician of the company or cooperative transmits to him. In other words, in addition to the rhythm of the harvest, a selection of the fruit must be made. If the requirements are not met, the harvested fruit is considered to have no "commercial value" and the crew is penalized with a discount on the total number of kilos harvested.

Although in La Ribera it was common to work without a contract until 2012-2014 (Garrapa, 2017), labour inspection campaigns have changed the situation. Nowadays, the vast majority of immigrant workers work with a contract, which does not mean without irregularities. The most frequent irregularities are the payment of lower wages than those established by the collective agreement and fraud in the declared

working days, which are lower than the days actually worked, and in the resulting contributions to social security, with the consequent detriment to the worker (Torres and Pérez, 2021)⁴. In addition, there is another series of irregularities on the part of the "more cutthroat or shameless" ETTs (trade unionist. EI08): transport is charged, the crew leader's bonus is obtained from a deduction from their workers' salaries, etc. Complaints are very rare and usually only from Spanish workers.

If we combine the modality of work, the implications of quality requirements, the type of contract and the company, we can establish three relatively differentiated profiles of agricultural workers. Firstly, we have Spanish agricultural workers and a minority of immigrant workers. They work for cooperatives and companies, have permanent-discontinuous contracts⁵, harvest premium qualities on a daily basis and the rest on a piecework basis. According to all our interviewees, compliance with the agreement is strict. The immigrant workers live in a village in the region, most of them for years, have extensive experience in the sector and have diversified relationships. In several interviews, the expressions "they have laid down roots" or "they are already locals" were used to refer to them.

A second group, with a majority of migrant workers and a minority of Spaniards, have temporary contracts and work on a piecework basis for companies and cooperatives. All our interviewees prefer to work for companies and cooperatives; they only work for a temporary agency when there is no other alternative. Most of these immigrant workers live in a village in the region or surrounding areas, albeit with varying degrees of precariousness (residential, social and/or relational).

The third group is made up exclusively of immigrants contracted through temporary agencies who work on a piecework basis and suffer to a much greater extent from the aforementioned labour irregularities. The vast majority of these immigrants commute daily from various localities in the Valencia Metropolitan Area, with a growing presence of Pakistanis in recent years. To a lesser extent, during harvest peaks, there are also immigrants who do the agricultural harvesting circuit or, in some cases, who come directly from Romania or another Eastern European country.

This ethnic fragmentation of agricultural workers correlates with the increasing flexibilization and precariousness of work and the use of temporary agen-

cies. Given the advantages of temporary agency workers for companies, in terms of maximum flexibility, cost reduction and delegation of responsibilities, the use of these workers has gone from being occasional to systematic. In the last decade, more than a few companies have substituted permanent-discontinuous workers with temporary agency workers to perform structural tasks (which constitutes an irregular use of temporary agency work). “Companies want temporary agency workers ... this way they are in complete control. Those of us who are permanent workers, who are affiliated to trade unions and all that, they don’t want us” (Spaniard, crew leader, EI25). This process of substitution continues, although it has been slowed down by trade union complaints and warnings from the labour inspectors.

In the area, the growing presence of temporary employment agencies has been a key factor in generating precariousness, reducing wages and worsening working conditions, which mainly affects immigrant workers. Moreover, according to all our interviewees, it is the temporary employment agencies that are responsible for the greatest number of irregularities (falsification of pay slips, reduction of days of registration with the social security system, various discounts that constitute the crew leader’s bonus, etc.). On the other hand, another factor of precariousness is the 2012 Labour Reform. Thus, there has been an increase in the number of company agreements with conditions below the collective agreement, a possibility legalized by the reform. Although workers’ agreement is mandatory, in many cases they do not have a choice.

HARVESTING CITRUS AND PERSIMMONS DURING THE PANDEMIC

After the declaration of the state of emergency, the agricultural sector remained active to respond to the demands of a market considered essential and booming, pressured by the fear of shortages. The first two months were marked by uncertainty, lack of planning, lack of protective equipment (masks and hydrogel) and fear. Many interviewees expressed this unease and their perception of taking risks without the minimum resources or support.

At the beginning we had no masks, no soap, no gel... we had nothing, we had no organization of any kind, they sent us to the field and everyone had to organize themselves... we spent a month and a half and the masks they gave us were not masks or anything (Spanish, crew leader, EI25).

During the months of May and June, the Spanish Labour Inspectorate developed a protocol of measures for doing agricultural fieldwork, which was subsequently adapted to the new guidelines of the Ministry of Health, Consumer Affairs and Social Welfare and the Ministry of Labour and Social Economy. This protocol was to be adjusted to the reality of each company and cooperative in agreement with trade union representatives. This protocol established, among other measures, the obligatory use of masks and hydrogels, social distance between workers and new criteria for transport. To this was added, in September 2020, the creation of “bubble crews” of fieldworkers, comprised of a stable group of pickers to avoid creating unnecessary contact between workers and to minimize risks. The degree of compliance with the protocol has been uneven. According to our interviewees, most companies and cooperatives have implemented it well, others not so well, while some companies and ETTs, “have done it very badly and have not taken it into account at all” (trade unionist, EI31). In the perception of some workers, already in the winter of 2020, some companies relaxed in the application of measures, putting the economic interest of a just-in-time harvest, cheap and in line with the demands of large supermarkets, first. Some workers perceive that they are the least of the company’s priorities and the ones who suffer the most from its actions.

The company looked at the pandemic at the beginning... as the days went by... things were done that shouldn’t have been done... that we don’t have enough trucks, that so many people have to go because (the field) is very big and we want harvest it today and we can’t leave it for tomorrow... things like that. We have always been the ones who have been harmed (Spaniard, crew leader, EI25).

Citrus and persimmon harvesting has been modified by the measures adopted and the conditioning factors of the pandemic, albeit unevenly, as mentioned above. Among the organizational changes, the crew leader’s new tasks are to reorganize the work in the field in accordance with the protocols, the transmission of the prevention rules and their control during the working day. Some rules have been followed more closely than others, depending on the space (field, storage, transport), the perception of risk and the demands of the harvest. Let us look at this in more detail.

In the field, harvesting is generally carried out without a mask. The vast majority of workers con-

sider their use to be unnecessary and uncomfortable. Some believe that working outside minimizes the risk; others point out that wearing a mask is incompatible with intense and continuous physical effort, as it makes breathing difficult. "You're outside, you don't need a mask there, you can't wear one either because it's overwhelming, when I'm talking to you it's overwhelming, imagine the sweat" (Moroccan, crew leader, EI33). However, the crews adopt various strategies to maintain distance from each other while picking: one worker on each side of a line of orange trees, only two workers per line, spreading of the different pairs of the crew in the field, etc. In addition, the non-use of masks is limited to picking; they are used during transport, lunch and meal breaks and in other interrelation situations. In the cases of companies and cooperatives, the crews of permanent-discontinuous workers have functioned usually as a bubble crew; this is not the case of temporary agencies, whose workers rotate frequently depending on the needs of companies.

From the workers' point of view, working in the field without a mask is not a risky situation. However they do see greater risk during transport and when loading and unloading lorries.

The protocol for transporting workers to the field has been modified by successive ministerial orders. More restrictive at the beginning of the pandemic, the transport protocol was relaxed from September onwards in terms of vehicle capacity. In the case of permanent-discontinuous workers, Spaniards and immigrants, private cars have been used at the same time as the cooperative or company van. The transport rules, we are told, have been complied with in most of the cooperatives and companies. More problems have been experienced by the most precarious workers with the least resources, without their own vehicle, who are forced to share the temporary agency van. The vast majority of these workers are immigrants. Moreover, according to our interviewees, the temporary agencies have failed to comply with the capacity limitations and safety measures in the vehicle.

In the compliant companies it works as it should... people are very careful with that. The problem is the temporary agency immigrants... the temp agencies that all go in vans... they take 10 or 12 when they should only take 3 or 4. And they go piled up, any which way... and they don't have a place to shower or get ready or anything (union member, EI18)

However, what is perceived as the riskiest situation is related to loading and stacking crates on trucks. Initially, all the crates harvested are piled up at one point in the field, in a relatively small space and with a lot of movement of workers. In addition, the "rush" in harvesting and removing the harvested produce, due to the rhythm of piecework, does not facilitate compliance with social distancing and therefore acts as a factor that increases the risk of infection.

Distance? There is none, sometimes 4 go to load trucks, there is no distance, ... I mean, we have to respect the law, they say distance, but they don't want to know anything about workers, the worker is in the fields and do whatever they want, but no (day labourer, Moroccan, EI30)

Furthermore, after the crates have been loaded onto the lorry they must be properly positioned. The compartment of the lorry is an enclosed, small and unventilated space, where there are between 2 and 4 workers receiving the crates of fruit and stacking them in rows, which takes a lot of physical effort. Moreover, all this has to be done quickly as loading and stacking the lorry is not part of the working hours and their pay depends, in the piecework mode, on how much has been harvested. While lorry loading was already a contentious issue in previous years, the pandemic situation sharpened the debate and the unrest. Some permanent-discontinuous workers refused to load the lorry; in several cases, complaints were lodged with the social courts. According to the collective agreement, the loading and stacking of the lorry is not the task of the harvesters, nor of the lorry driver. It should be done by the transport company; however, this task has traditionally been done by the collectors. Another historical problem associated with the loading of the lorry is the coverage of accidents that may occur, which responds to the willingness of the company and/or cooperative, because the harvester does not have this function assigned to him in his tasks. On the other hand, according to the labour inspectorate, the technical means (forklifts, lifts) required by legislation for this kind of task are still not being provided⁶.

In practice, lorry loading has been resolved in different ways according to the degree of precariousness and/or need of the workers involved. In the companies and cooperatives with crews of permanent-discontinuous workers, it was agreed that the loading and stacking of crates on the lorry would be carried out by volunteer workers in exchange for a financial bonus, considered by many to be a laughable amount,

and coverage against possible accidents. Likewise, in quite a few cases, the loading is carried out by the permanent-discontinuous workers who have recently been promoted to that category, as a kind of moral duty. In the rest of the crews, those of temporary workers and temporary agency workers, loading and stacking without extra pay has been carried out by the youngest workers, as a sort of intergenerational pact, and in other cases, by the most precarious immigrant workers, faced with the threat, veiled or explicit, of losing their jobs.

Money does not solve the problem of having to be in the truck bed, making a physical effort, taking off your mask, in a very confined space... Is that not looked at, is health not worth anything? (...) I don't know if it's because of coercion or favourable treatment or because people are afraid of losing their jobs, what has been done is individually... to make them sign a paper to load at a price that is laughable (Spaniard, crew leader, EI25).

The company says: if you're not going to load the lorry, tomorrow you're on holiday (Moroccan, day worker, EI30).

Last but not least, the same lorry collects loads from different crews, in different fields, on the same day. This breaks the logic of the bubble crew and the lorry can become a transmission site of COVID 19 between crews and in the warehouse itself.

While trade unions point to the lack of complaints or only in very serious cases, such as an accident at work, workers feel a little control of the protocols by the competent authorities. Reporting is not perceived by workers as a feasible alternative, both for fear of losing their current job and not closing off possible future opportunities, and because of the low level of sanctions. In turn, the Labour Inspectorate insists that there must be complaints in order for it to intervene.

It's not that it's allowed, it's that nobody controls, nobody does anything [...] Who's going to report him? [...] If you file a complaint, you don't come back, and nothing will happen to the person accused [...] No, they won't do anything to him, he denies everything and that's it, and as those who are with him are afraid of not coming back, they will testify in his favour [...] And that's it. Then the person who denounces is left alone [...] And then, who will pick him "he's a snitch". Then no one picks you anymore (Moroccan, crew leader, EI33)

We asked our interviewees about their status as essential workers. They often stress that this is just a label and that this recognition, symbolic during the pandemic, has not translated into any improvement in their pay and working conditions. "Very poorly valued, both by politicians and by society, in other words, fieldwork is the lowest thing there is" (Moroccan, crew leader, IE33). This low social value is not a novelty but stems from a process of progressive loss of value of agricultural activities, their work and their social status.

THE UNEQUAL DISTRIBUTION OF RISK

As in other social spheres (Grasso *et al*, 2021), in La Ribera del Xúquer there is an unequal distribution of risk among the different worker profiles. Spanish and immigrant permanent-discontinuous workers settled in the region have low risk profile compared with temporary workers and temporary agency workers, mostly immigrants in a situation of social and economic precariousness, who face higher risks. As we have summarized, there are differences in terms of transport, the degree of implementation of prevention measures, the organization of work and lorry loading, etc. Given the character of "total social fact" (Maus, 1973) or syndemic (Horton, 2020) of COVID-19, these differences are reinforced by the different living conditions, in terms of housing, access to public services and social relations.

There is a very clear separation here, okay? We have those people, either Spanish or of other nationalities, but who are permanent-discontinuous and who already have their residence and are settled in Spain, and when they finish they go home to their families and so on. And then we have this other group of workers, basically foreigners, who live in houses with a lot of people and who do not always work in the same business. Because there are houses where everyone goes to work for a different company (former warehouse worker, trade unionist, EI31).

In La Ribera del Xúquer, the two groups perceived as the most precarious and with the worst working and living conditions are Pakistanis and Senegalese, the majority of whom are temporary agency workers and who in many cases work on the agricultural harvesting circuit. The Pakistanis who work in La Ribera tend to live in the Metropolitan Area of Valencia, in shared flats. Senegalese, one of the oldest groups in the area, do live in La Ribera. However, many of them

have not been able to stabilize their situations, living in very precarious housing, with poor facilities, and often shared with other workers. Given this situation, it is very difficult to adopt the care measures, both for themselves and for those living with them, that the pandemic requires. This, together with the aforementioned working conditions, places them in a more vulnerable position and at greater risk of infection.

They both live in an old ground floor commercial space, where they have a bathroom, a kitchen and a shared area where they live day and night. This house was a vegetable and fruit shop years ago. In the living room there is a large bed, a large rug (where they pray), two sofas with a small table and a television. The windows as well as the door of the old shop are covered with curtains and sheets to maintain privacy (Field diary, 11/03/2021. The home of two Senegalese interviewees).

In conclusion, the type of contract (permanent-discontinuous or temporary), the entity for which one works (cooperative-warehouse or temporary agency) and the living conditions (housing and its habitability), become determining factors in the risk of contagion among field workers.

In the summer of 2020, the outbreaks in Lleida, Huesca and Zaragoza set off alarm bells about the development of the campaign in La Ribera del Xúquer. However, unlike other agro-exporting areas, in La Ribera there have been no outbreaks, harvesting has not been interrupted, nor has it been necessary to confine any municipality. In the citrus-growing areas of Valencia, there has only been one outbreak, in Sagunto, with no significant implications beyond those affected⁷. In comparative terms, the pandemic and its socio-labour risks have had an unequal impact in agro-exporting areas which, in our opinion, depends on the productive structure of each area, the degree of temporal and spatial concentration of the labour force, its more or less itinerant nature and the housing conditions. In comparison with the agro-exporting areas of Lleida, Huesca and Zaragoza, in La Ribera del Xúquer and in other Valencian citrus-growing areas, a significant part of the agricultural labour force is settled in the area, among other factors due to the more diversified economic structure, the use of itinerant immigrant workers is lower and, on the whole, the proportion of substandard housing is lower. As Pedreño (2020) emphasizes, the areas most prone to outbreaks of COVID-19 were those with the highest concentration of vulnerable populations, due to their

working, housing and administrative status conditions. As we have found in our work, in La Ribera del Xúquer there have been cases of COVID-19 among immigrant agricultural workers⁸, but they have not taken the form of outbreaks or raised public concern. We do not have disaggregated data on COVID-19, so we cannot say whether the incidence of COVID-19 has been higher or lower than in other agro-exporting areas. In the case of La Ribera del Xúquer, COVID-19 infections have been diluted among those of the general population of the region and of the Metropolitan Area of Valencia, where a large part of the temporary agency workers live.

CONCLUSIONS

Similar to other Spanish agro-exporting regions, Ribera del Xúquer has a fruit-growing area inserted in the global agro-food chains, with a central role of immigrant labor and a growing flexibilization and precariousness of work, which has generated an ethno-fragmented work structure. As in other social spheres (Grasso et al, 2021, FOESSA, 2022), the pandemic has had unequal impacts for agricultural workers, particularly negative for a majority of immigrant workers. Although the risk situations related to harvesting are common to all workers, Spanish and immigrant, they affect them to a greater or lesser extent depending on their position in the ethno-fragmented work structure, their origin and, more broadly, their social and living conditions.

In general, in the fields, people pick without masks, although various strategies are adopted to minimize risks. This situation does not generate a perception of danger, or at least it is much less than other situations that affect migrant workers to a greater extent. Attempts have been made to minimize the rotation of workers in crews, but in practical terms “bubble crews” have only been a reality for permanent-discontinuous workers in companies and cooperatives, not in the case of temporary agency workers, who are subject to intense rotation. With regard to transport, there are also differentiated risks: from the fairly strict compliance with the protocol in the crews of permanent-discontinuous workers, Spaniards and immigrants, to the clear infractions of the majority of temporary employment agencies. Along the same lines, lorry loading, the situation with the highest perceived risk, has been resolved in different ways according to the degree of precariousness and/or need of the workers involved. Moreover, in more than a few cases, strict compliance with the protocol was incompatible with a just-in-time

harvest, cheap and in accordance with the standards demanded by large distributors. The logic of health clashed with the logic of global agri-food chains.

These differences in working conditions and risk between workers are reinforced by their different living conditions. In the cases of permanent workers, Spaniards and immigrants with roots in the area, they have the same standard housing conditions and access to public services like the majority of the population. In other cases, temporary workers and temporary agency workers, immigrants, the precariousness of housing, overcrowding and greater social disaffiliation have made it very difficult to adopt the measures required in the pandemic to care for themselves and others.

Our results show that the pandemic has not only increased the pre-existing differences between workers, but also reinforces structural inequalities. In La Ribera del Xúquer the pandemic and the measures adopted have reinforced the pre-existing ethnic segmentation of the labour market given that, with respect to Spanish workers, most immigrants have seen their situation worsen, with the exception of permanent-discontinuous workers settled in the area. Moreover, the initial social recognition of agricultural workers as essential, which has been diluted in the following months, has not led to any improvement in wages, working conditions or the adoption of measures to minimize risks.

Farmers, technicians and other people interviewed in La Ribera, have positively assessed the citrus season, given that there have been no outbreaks and harvesting and marketing have not been interrupted, unlike, they say, in Lleida, Huesca and other Spanish agro-exporting areas. However, this is a partial balance. As we have seen, the pandemic has had clear negative effects on immigrant workers, particularly those in the most precarious sectors. The differences in covid-19 outbreaks between some areas and others can be explained in terms of their productive structure, the degree of temporal and spatial concentration of the labour force, its more or less itinerant character and housing conditions. In comparison with other agro-exporting areas, in La Ribera del Xúquer and other Valencian citrus-growing areas there is a higher proportion of workers settled in the region, less use of immigrant itinerant workers and a lower incidence of substandard housing, which has undoubtedly helped to prevent outbreaks. However, what is common to all agro-exporting areas is that migrant workers have been essential to ensure harvesting is carried out and markets are supplied, a basic factor of social resilience

in pandemics (Anderson et al, 2020), while accumulating poor working conditions and social and residential precariousness who are most at risk. They are our most abused and neglected essential workers.

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NOTES

- 1 Among other measures, agricultural work was authorized for undocumented migrants. However, unlike Italy, the Spanish government did not agree to the regularization of undocumented migrants demanded by a broad coalition of social organizations. (Palumbo and Corrado, 2020, López-Sala, 2021).
- 2 In the two periods, 28 men and 27 women were interviewed, 32 Spaniards and 23 immigrants (of Romanian, Bulgarian, Polish, Moroccan, Ecuadorian, Argentinean, Algerian and Senegalese origin). The interviews were conducted in Spanish and Valencian and are presented as EIn^o, the individual interviews, and EGN^o, the group interviews.

3 Collective agreement for citrus fruit harvesting in the Valencian Community. 2018-2022. DOGV 8578/26.06.2019.

4 Although they collect on a piecework basis, given the low price per crate collected, the resulting wage is lower than that established in the collective agreement. This is masked by payrolls for the same amount, but declaring fewer days worked so that the wage is adjusted to the minimum wage.

5 It is a permanent contract for discontinuous work. Discontinuous-permanent workers are part of the company's staff, even if they do not work the whole year, and have the right to be called up the following year in order of seniority. It is the type of contract that offers the greatest protection and security to agricultural workers

6 Specifically, art. 3 of Royal Decree 487/1997 of 14 April 1997 on minimum health and safety requirements for the manual handling of loads.

7 The outbreak occurred in October 2020, in a warehouse in the middle of the countryside, used as accommodation for seasonal workers, and 30 migrants were infected. Las Provincias, 16 October 2020. Alert for a massive outbreak in a shelter for day labourers in Sagunto without drinking water or masks.

8 These cases have been processed as sick leave, requiring quarantine of the affected person and their direct contacts and a negative PCR for reinstatement.