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VOICES FROM THE FIELDS. MIGRANT AGRICULTURE WORKERS DURING COVID-19 IN SPAIN AND NEW FORMS OF ACTIVISM FOR DIGNITY¹

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Abstract: The health crisis has revealed many of the structural and endemic problems that have existed in the agriculture sector in Spain over the last two decades: the high volume of foreigners in an irregular situation, the miserable informal settlements and substandard housing in which they are forced to “reside”, and the extreme physical and social vulnerability of the workers, including those employed under official seasonal labor mobility schemes. These structural problems have traditionally been ignored by the administration, whose policies have focused on managing the mobility of migrants while neglecting the needs of migrant workers present in the territory. During the health crisis the emergence of the narrative on their “essential role”, which was incorporated in the political discourse, together with the visibility of their poor working and living conditions, have generated, promoted or consolidated several struggles based on what we can call the right to live in dignity. In the Spanish case these struggles have been caused by three types of tensions that have become particularly intense during the Covid-19 pandemic: the tension between essentiality and disposability, between temporality and permanence, and between an active and a passive citizenship.

Keywords: Migrant farmworkers, struggles, migrant activism, mobilization, coronavirus, Spain.

VOCES EN LOS CAMPOS. TRABAJADORES AGRÍCOLAS MIGRANTES DURANTE LA COVID-19 EN ESPAÑA Y NUEVAS FORMAS DE ACTIVISMO POR LA DIGNIDAD

Resumen: La crisis sanitaria ha producido la visibilización de muchos de los problemas estructurales y endémicos de los que ha adolecido el trabajo inmigrante en el sector agrícola en España durante las dos últimas décadas: el alto volumen de extranjeros en situación irregular, los míseros asentamientos informales y las formas de infravivienda en los que se ven obligados a “residir” y la extrema vulnerabilidad física y social de los trabajadores que sostienen el sector, incluidos los que se emplean a través de programas de contratación en origen. Estos problemas estructurales han sido, sin embargo, tradicionalmente ignorados por la administración, en una política de la indiferencia, que se ha centrado en la gestión de la movilidad frente a la gestión de la presencia. Sin embargo, durante la pandemia la aparición de una narrativa sobre su esencialidad, incorporada incluso en el discurso político, junto a la visibilización de sus condiciones laborales y de vida, se han configurado como elementos catalizadores que han generado, impulsado o consolidado una serie de demandas y de luchas articuladas en torno a lo que podemos denominar el derecho a una vida digna. Estas luchas han sido resultado de tres tipos de tensiones que se manifestaron de forma particularmente expresiva con la irrupción de la covid-19: la tensión entre esencialidad y desechabilidad, entre temporalidad y permanencia y entre una ciudadanía activa y pasiva.

Palabras clave: Trabajadores migrantes agrícolas, luchas, activismos migrantes, movilización, coronavirus, España.

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INTRODUCTION

Starting in the middle of the 1980s the intensive agricultural production of high value horticultural products was restructured, transforming the economic and demographic dynamics of many rural communities. The high level of modernization of the agrifood industry in terms of technology and production, as well as its focus on external markets and intensive use of labor, has introduced very strong processes of capital and labor mobility into the territories where they operate (Goodman and Watts, 1994; McMichael, 1994; Basok, 2002; Ruhs, 2006; Rogaly, 2008; Martin, 2013; Gertel and Sippel, 2014; Corrado, de Castro and Perrota, 2017; Rye and O'Reilly, 2020). Labor relations in these global agricultural factories must be highly flexible and production is ruled by the seasonal discontinuity of the crops and by the changing demands of the markets. In these agricultural communities, the national labor force has gradually been replaced by foreign workers with different legal and migratory statuses, including resident immigrants, workers who settle temporarily while taking part in the seasonal circuit and workers recruited under seasonal labor mobility schemes (López-Sala and Godenau, 2015). The presence of migrant workers during planting and harvesting campaigns has become one of the most significant aspects of the communities where agribusiness is located (Molinero-Gerbeau, 2020a; Avallone, 2014) and is one of the characteristic elements of what Woods defined as a "global countryside" (Woods, 2007).

The dynamics of this global agroindustrial regime are also present in the Spanish case. The transformation of the Spanish agricultural sector has had serious repercussions on its labor market. Even during acute employment crises national labor has gradually been replaced by foreign workers due to the poor employment conditions and instability of agricultural field work, caused by climatic variations and the volatility of demand, the improvement of economic and living conditions in the areas where this type of agriculture has flourished, and the low status of agricultural field work (López-Sala, 2016a; Corrado, 2017; Molinero-Gerbeau, López-Sala and Serban, 2021). Spanish agriculture has been restructured thanks to the availability of an abundant, cheap, flexible and mobile foreign labor force, and this process has shaped migration policies and revealed the interrelationships between capital, labor and mobility, consolidating global and transnational systems of exclusion (Parreñas, Landolt, Goldring, Golash-Boza and Silvey, 2021; López-Sala, 2016b; Ba-

sok and López-Sala, 2016), which impose regimes of disciplinary power (Basok and Belanger, 2016).

During the spring of 2020, the lockdown that accompanied the health crisis raised alarms among agrifood companies and political leaders in the run-up to many of the agricultural campaigns that take place in Spanish territory. In those first months, public debate and political action focused on the foreseeable problems in covering the demand for workers that accompany the most intensive periods of production and harvesting in those campaigns. As in the case of other countries (Palumbo and Corrado, 2020; Hooper and Le Coz, 2020; ILO, 2020; Molinero-Gerbeau, 2020a), the centrality of migrant labor in the sustainability of this sector prompted some exceptional measures on the part of the Spanish government² (Güell and Garcés-Masareñas, 2020). The mechanisms to boost employment in the sector, both of unemployed nationals and resident immigrants, were accompanied by a relaxation of travel restrictions for EU workers from Romania and Bulgaria who are usually employed in Spanish agriculture between March and October. The most immediate institutional response was therefore aimed at guaranteeing production through the supply of workers, which was in line with the central objectives that have modulated the labor migration policy in the agricultural sector for several decades. In the context of the health crisis and the lockdown, a public narrative emerged around the essential nature of this work, mostly carried out by migrant workers, to guarantee not only the viability of the sector, but also the food security of the population as a whole.

However, in the summer months of 2020, the public debate took a new direction marked by the health risks associated with the presence of seasonal workers during the campaigns, which activated an alternative narrative of danger and the proliferation of unsanitary spaces. Spanish public opinion became aware of the appalling living conditions of workers employed in the agriculture by the outbreaks of coronavirus in various regions of Aragon and Catalonia, the hundreds of seasonal workers living on the streets of Lleida and the unsanitary conditions of informal settlements in Huel-

2 The Spanish government approved a royal decree (R.D 13/2020) in early April to attract other workers to agriculture: young migrants aged 18-21 that used to be under protection; migrant workers whose residence permit ran out between March 15 and June 30; asylum seekers; and unemployed people who could combine a job contract in agriculture with unemployment benefits (see Güell and Garcés-Masareñas, 2020, 32).

va, Almeria or Albacete. The health crisis has revealed many of the structural and endemic problems that have existed in this sector over the last two decades: the high volume of foreigners in an irregular situation, the miserable informal settlements and substandard housing in which they are forced to “reside”, and the extreme physical and social vulnerability of the workers, including those employed under official seasonal labor mobility schemes. However, these structural problems have traditionally been ignored by the administration, whose policies have focused on managing the mobility of migrants while neglecting the needs of migrant workers present in the territory.

Research on how the pandemic has affected migrant agricultural workers in different geographies has shown that the health crisis has exacerbated the forms of exploitation they suffer (Palumbo and Corrado, 2020; Haley, Caxaj, George, Hennebry, Martell, and McLaughlin, 2020; Molinero-Gerbeau, 2021) and heightened their labor, social and health vulnerability (Basok and George, 2020; Tagliacozzo, Pisacane and Kilkey, 2021). However, the emergence of the narrative on their “essential role”, which was incorporated in the political discourse, together with the visibility of their poor working and living conditions, have generated, promoted or consolidated several struggles based on what we can call the right to live in dignity.³ The objectives and strategies of these struggles are diverse, but they highlight the emergence of a migrant activism linked to specific agricultural enclaves, but which also form part of a broader movement for social justice that can be articulated autonomously or through alliances with civil society organizations.

Our starting premise is that in the Spanish case these struggles have been caused by three types of tensions that have become particularly intense during the Covid-19 pandemic: the tension between essentiality and disposability, between temporality and permanence, and between an active and a passive citizenship (Isin, 2009). This activism has highlighted the emergence of new subjectivities on the part of immigrant workers employed in the agricultural sector and expressed through collective “performances of defiance” (Basok and Belanger, 2016). Through the analysis of these struggles in the Spanish case, the article aims to delve into an element that continues to receive insufficient attention in migration studies. This analysis has made it possible to show the common elements and differences between

various types of demands and mobilizations, revealing the complexity and specificity of these struggles, but also their common goal of having the right to dignity. This “migrant politics of rural discontent” (Papadopoulos, Fratsea, and Mavrommatis, 2018), fueled by the structural problems that migrant labor in agriculture has faced, has been largely made possible by the health crisis, as the visibilization of the “seasonal problem” has created opportunities that have driven collective action and revealed workers’ agency.

This article further argues that this mobilization transcends the residency-based citizenship claims that have been the focus of most analyses of struggles around the citizenship of migrants with precarious statuses (Nyers, 2010). The diversity of migratory and legal statuses and mobility patterns of migrant workers employed in agriculture contrasts with the similarity of the forms of labor exploitation and physical and housing insecurity they experience, as well as, in the context of this crisis, with the emergence of a shared awareness of the essential nature of their work. Hence, these claims are linked to what some authors have defined as a “rightful presence” (Squire and Darling, 2013) or as “a politics of presence” (Darling, 2017).

Although there are several agro-exporting enclaves throughout Spain, the article focuses on the cases of Huelva (Andalusia) and Lleida (Catalonia). These are two of the most relevant agricultural enclaves in terms of the volume of “migrant labor”. Moreover, the particular seasonality of crops in both provinces (strawberry, red fruits and citrus in the first case and stone fruit in the second) explains to a large extent the diversity of migrant labor itineraries. The workers employed in the harvests include not only resident immigrants, but also circular seasonal migrants recruited under mobility schemes, seasonal agricultural workers from European countries and immigrants in an irregular situation. The selection of these cases is also due to the authors’ previous knowledge of the dynamics of labor mobility and its evolution over the last two decades in these provinces as a result of two previous research projects.⁴

3 In this article we define this right as workers being able to enjoy legal, housing, physical and health security.

4 Firstly, the CIRCULAR project, funded by the Spanish National Research Plan (2012-2014), and secondly the TEMPER project, funded by the European Commission (2015-2018). These projects involved extensive fieldwork in both provinces, which included in-depth interviews with different actors (employers, members of trade unions, organizations, local administrations, etc.) and agricultural migrant workers both in Spain and in countries of origin (see López-Sala and Godenau, 2015; López-Sala, 2016a; Molinero, López-Sala and Serban, 2021).

The analysis presented in this article relies on extensive empirical material from different types of sources. In particular, we draw on reports, public statements, websites, the press and secondary literature. Information on the various collectives analyzed in this article, how they work and their links with other social organizations was gathered through the testimonies of their spokespersons in different media and social networks. These instruments were also used to identify their main demands, as well as the actions (acts) and key events of their mobilization. For this purpose, the contents of the websites of these organizations and platforms were analyzed, information that was contrasted with a thematic analysis of their twitter accounts⁵ and with press articles published in the newspapers *El País*, *El Diario*, *Público* and *El Salto*⁶.

FROM MOBILITY TO MOBILIZATION. MIGRANT ACTIVISMS AS A MARGINAL TOPIC GAINING STRENGTH

Migrant activism has scarcely been addressed to date in social movement literature, largely because the most influential theories in this field - resource mobilization theory and the opportunity structure approach - consider migrants as uncontentious actors due to the legal obstacles they face, the scarcity of resources, and their limited political and discursive opportunities (Steinhilper, 2018). Therefore, in Steinhilper's opinion, these mobilizations are considered "an anomaly" in this literature (Steinhilper, 2021). In recent years and more decidedly in the "long summer of migration" scenario, the various forms of migrant activism have been gaining attention among social movement scholars (De la Porta, 2018; Nicholls and Uitermark, 2017). Some scholars have gone so far as to offer a *mea culpa*, noting that migrant activism was one of the main blind spots in this literature (Eggert and Giugni, 2015). Others, meanwhile, have

highlighted the potential contributions that the study of their collective action can have in this field (Mora, Rodríguez, Zermeño and Almeida, 2018).

At the beginning of the last decade Basok indicated the need to open a dialogue on migrant activism and highlighted the weakness of encounters between social movement studies and migration studies (Basok, 2010). Beyond some pioneering studies (Mezzadra, 2004; Tyler and Marciniak, 2014), Isin's contribution on "acts of citizenship" (Isin, 2008) and its analytical wake in the more recent literature on the mobilization of undocumented migrants, anti-deportation movements or struggles against border regimes, has been the most important contribution in the migration studies field (McNevin, 2011; Nyers and Rygiel, 2012; Barbero, 2012; Ataç, Rygiel, and Stierl, 2017). Despite recent bridges built between the two literatures (Steinhilper, 2021; Bloemraad and Voss, 2020) and the promise it offers, research remains highly fragmented across different fields. The common elements emanate more from the research agenda, without being exhaustive: labor rights, access to legal status and citizenship in the case of undocumented migrants and refugees, anti-internment and anti-deportation movements, border regimes, the "right to the city", and more recently, civil society solidarity.

Analyses of migrant activism, beyond their orientation, have additionally had an urban bias, although recent research has agreed on the need to incorporate other "geographic settings" (Schmid-Scott, Marshall, Gill and Bagelman, 2020; Rye and O'Reilly, 2020). To date, the scarce research on the mobilization of seasonal workers in agricultural enclaves has been addressed in the rural studies field, where some analytical work has been done on traditional and new social and peasant movements (Woods, 2008). This approach has been more abundant among scholars from North American and Southern European countries, where we have witnessed significant growth of these agro-industrial enclaves and the massive incorporation of migrant workers (Corrado, 2011; Caruso, 2011; Choudry and Thomas, 2013; Avallone, 2017; Cohen and Hjalmarson, 2018; Rye and Scott, 2018). These contributions have dwelt on various struggles and dimensions of the collective action of seasonal agricultural migrants, highlighting the extent of the obstacles and constrictions they encounter in their mobilization derived not only from their irregularity, but from other factors such as their status as temporary workers (Caruso, 2017), the segregation and dispersion of their accommodations or their social

5 The advanced search tool of this social network was used to perform multiple searches based on a series of parameters (topics, hashtags, time period, etc.). This tool also allows content to be systematically filtered and retweets to be eliminated.

6 These newspapers have given the most news coverage on the mobilizations of seasonal workers. *El País* is the national newspaper with the highest circulation and *El Diario* and *Público* occupy the third and sixth position among the national digital newspapers. *El Salto* is a digital newspaper that provides extensive coverage of current news on migration and, in particular, on the issue of migrant seasonal farm workers. Our analysis has covered all the news published between April-September 2020 and March-July 2021.

isolation (Perrota, 2015). In parallel, other contributions have shown that despite political and discursive constraints, certain contexts drive links and coalitions with other precarious migrant collectives or with various local and national civil society actors that can favor mobilization (Papadopoulos, et.al., 2018).

Our thesis is that the visibility and increased self-perception of migrants as essential actors in the functioning of a basic sector in the country's economy (food production) have driven a mobilization which, although fragmented and volatile, has ended up channeling the voice of one of the most precarious and subaltern segments of society. Although these aspects explain the temporality of this mobilization, in some cases these struggles are anchored in the emergence of previous alliances that have been consolidated over time.

WHEN HANDS TURNED INTO VOICES

Despite the restrictions imposed on mobility and the temporary suspension of the right to assembly due to Covid-19, throughout the spring and summer of 2020 mobilizations proliferated in the agricultural enclaves of Hueva and Lleida. This fragmented mobilization across diverse geographies, struggles and organizations has been, to some extent, a milestone in the dynamics of migrant activism in Spain. Throughout the last three decades, its scenarios have been big cities and border territories. Despite the long and well-described presence of immigrants in Spanish agricultural areas, the mobilization of these workers has been subject to additional obstacles and has had less impact than other forms of activism in the media. This mobilization in times of pandemic has gravitated around three demands that have agglutinated what we refer to as the "struggles for the right to a dignified life". Faced with precarious legal status, appalling housing conditions, labor exploitation and health insecurity, migrants employed in agriculture have demanded legal status, housing and to work in dignified conditions.

No one is going to be left behind. Essential, but disposable?

"If we migrants don't work, nobody eats here."
(Seasonal worker. Lepe, Huelva, May 2020)

Following the declaration of the state of emergency and the imposition of confinement and strict limitations

on mobility in Spain, the President of the Spanish government announced, under the slogan "nobody is going to be left behind", a series of exceptional social and economic measures aimed at softening the effects of the crisis caused by the pandemic on the most vulnerable sectors of the population. These initiatives, however, excluded migrant workers in an irregular situation. Unlike countries such as Italy and Portugal,⁷ which implemented extraordinary regularizations, the majority party in the Spanish government, the socialist party, adopted a clearly contrary position, which led to tensions with a significant part of civil society, trade union organizations and the leaders of many local governments.

Thus, in the case of the agricultural sector, although exceptional measures were adopted to favor the employment of unemployed national workers, resident and temporary workers, these measures did not include the possibility of hiring irregular immigrants residing in the agricultural enclaves. Many agricultural workers had been working informally for years in different campaigns and carrying out the annual seasonal circuit, despite not having the necessary documentation to reside and work in Spain. Thus, the paradox has been that the increase in demand in the sector and government initiatives aimed at boosting agricultural employment have been combined with the presence of a large number of workers in an irregular situation who after years residing and working in these enclaves have not been able to access formal employment in agriculture due to the limitations imposed by the government.

During the health crisis, the awareness of undocumented immigrants that they are essential workers who make an indispensable contribution, but have no rights, crystallized into a significant political struggle around access to full legal status. This growing awareness that they had no rights was fueled by the categorical anti-regularization response of the Spanish government. Agricultural day laborers have been one of the main collectives involved in the *#RegularizationYA*⁸ movement that emerged in May 2020. It was a coordinated mobilization, in which different mi-

⁷ In Portugal, this regularization was aimed exclusively at people who were in the process of applying for a work and residence permit. The intention of the Portuguese government was to help people in an irregular situation access the health system and unemployment benefits. In Italy, regularization was aimed at seasonal and care workers and included a six-month work permit (PICUM, 2020).

⁸ Other groups that have actively participated in this movement have been domestic workers or street vendors (see López-Sala, 2021).

grant collectives converged, bringing together diverse struggles that were taking place throughout the national territory (López-Sala, 2021). Their view that the measures adopted by the Spanish government “were going to leave them behind” became the catalyst for the beginning of political action and the struggle for the rights of a wide range of organizations of precarious migrants, among which, for the first time in the history of the political struggles of migrants in Spain, agricultural seasonal workers have participated.

This movement has shown similar elements to those observed in previous struggles of *sinpapeles* in Spain (Barbero, 2012). In particular, their demands include access to legal status and the defense of their labor rights; but also the demand for a citizenship - and a way of exercising citizenship - that does not rely exclusively on the attribution of rights by the State, but that emanates from presence-residence and participation in Spanish society. Furthermore, this social movement considers that the exceptional circumstances which have risen from the health crisis have turned the present moment into a historic opportunity to give a political response to the situation of thousands of irregular immigrants employed in the underground economy, whose work has been revealed as essential for the functioning of the country, an aspect recognized by the political class itself. They also argued that immigration legislation itself protected them in this demand.⁹

After receiving strong support from civil society, trade unions and several political parties in the Parliament, *#RegularizaciónYa* drafted and registered a non-legislative proposal¹⁰ for regularization in the Spanish Congress in June 2020, a registration that was accompanied by several mobilizations throughout the national territory during the summer of 2020. Despite the intense debate that accompanied this parliamentary proposal, it was finally rejected in the Spanish Parliament in September 2020. This has been met with great disappointment by this movement, which considers that a historic opportunity to recognize their rights has

been lost and that the government has turned its back on thousands of immigrants living in Spain during the enormous social, economic and health crisis caused by the pandemic. In addition, the government’s response to this situation has been perceived by part of Spanish society as yet another indication that the current government is going to continue to uphold the policies carried out by the previous conservative administration.

Without a Roof over their Heads

“We are forgotten. We are like ghosts.”
(Seasonal worker. Moguer, Huelva, July 2020)

At the end of March 2020 the *Colectivo de Trabajadores Africanos*, an association of African migrant farm workers living in Lepe (Huelva), requested the Ministry of Health to guarantee access to water in the shantytown settlements to avoid the risk of contagion of COVID-19 in this province. At the end of that same month, a seasonal worker living in one of the settlements in this town (known as El Chorrillo) filed a lawsuit against the city council, the Department of Health of the Andalusian Regional Government and the Ministry of Health, considering his confinement in this shantytown to be an action contrary to his fundamental rights.

The outbreak of the health crisis in the middle of the strawberry and citrus fruit season brought to the forefront of the social debate one of the most serious and least attended chronic problems in the Spanish agriculture enclaves: informal settlements. Agricultural workers with and without legal status, mainly from African and Eastern European countries are forced to live in these informal settlements¹¹ without the minimum sanitary conditions due to lack of resources and the scarcity of available housing.

These shantytowns often crop up in areas close to farms, a fact that the inhabitants of many towns in

9 Article 127 of the Spanish Immigration Law states that temporary residence permits may be granted for exceptional circumstances, national security reasons or public interest.

10 This non-legislative proposition urged the government to apply article 127 of the Immigration Law and grant five-year residence and work permits. According to the proposition, the migrants would only be required to show proof of their identity, local census registration, and any document that could certify that they had been residing in Spain before March 14, 2020 (date of the declaration of the state of emergency).

11 The United Nations Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights, Philip Alston, referred specifically to the conditions of these informal settlements in the report presented after his visit to Spain in February 2020. In his own words, “In Huelva, I met with workers living in a migrant settlement in conditions that rival the worst I have seen anywhere in the world. They are kilometers away from water, and live without electricity or adequate sanitation. Many have lived there for years and can afford to pay rent, but said no one will accept them as tenants”. (<https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=25524&LangID=E>).

this province take as a matter of course. As early as 2001, the Andalusian Ombudsman called on the public authorities to provide decent accommodations for seasonal workers (Defensor del Pueblo Andaluz, 2001).¹² However, two decades later, there is still no infrastructure network capable of housing displaced workers during harvesting periods that can cover their basic accommodation needs, and few actions have been taken to promote access to private accommodations. Furthermore, over the years not only has the number of settlements increased, but also the volume of workers living in them permanently, partly due to the expansion of crops that have prolonged the months of harvest work. However, the health emergency has brought this issue back into the public debate, especially because, although the situation is by no means new and has been repeatedly denounced by social organizations working in the field, these settlements have shown public opinion as a whole the unhealthy conditions in which many of these agricultural workers subsist and the chronic lack of national, regional and local institutional responses. In July 2020, the Ombudsman called on all administrations, agricultural employers and agricultural organizations to seek a coordinated and urgent solution to put an end to “the situation of degradation in which seasonal agricultural workers live in various areas of the Spanish geography”.¹³ Organizations working in the field also denounce that the lack of action by the administrations to solve this problem has been compounded by the dismantling of many of the settlements by the municipalities and the difficulties they impose for the registration of their residents, despite the existence of a legal framework that allows them to register.¹⁴

“We want to pay. We don’t want to live for free “
(Demonstration; Lepe, August 5, 2020).

The mobilization led by immigrants around their living conditions in these settlements in the province of Huelva has incorporated various demands throughout the pandemic, mobilizations in which the associations of African seasonal workers in this province have had a special role. In the early stages, a large mobilization was articulated around the right to water¹⁵ in which not only organizations of seasonal immigrants, such as the *Asociación de Nuevos Ciudadanos por la Interculturalidad* (Association of New Citizens for Interculturality) or the *Colectivo de Trabajadores Africanos* (Collective of African Workers), but also several civil society organizations participated. Thus, for example, at the end of March 2020, the *Mesa Social del Agua de Andalucía*, an organization composed of thirteen trade union, environmental, agricultural and scientific organizations, requested through a letter to the Ministry of Health, the Government Delegation in Andalusia, the Andalusian Government and several municipalities of Huelva the adoption of urgent measures to provide access to water in these informal settlements.¹⁶ In April 2020, both the central and regional governments approved exceptional aid to the settlements for water distribution, cleaning and garbage collection. These measures, prophylactic and temporary, have had little effect and have barely alleviated the situation.

In the summer of 2020, seasonal workers began demanding decent accommodations in several towns in Huelva, especially in the municipality of Lepe. Workers residing in settlements there have had some history of mobilizing, but these movements gained strength in October 2019 as a result of a fire that destroyed the largest settlement in the province (known as “la urba”) and led to several demonstrations demanding decent housing and denouncing what they consider a form of “housing racism”.¹⁷ Later fires in July 2020 provoked new and more numerous demonstrations, the

12 This is particularly common in the province of Huelva, where there are large settlements in Lepe, Lucena del Puerto, Moguer and Palos de la Frontera in which about 2,500 people live (see Mesa de la Integración, 2017; FECONS, 2017). The other area of Andalusia where these settlements are common is the province of Almería, especially in the town of Níjar. Although to a lesser extent there are also settlements in other provinces, such as Murcia or Valencia (CEPAIM, 2013).

13 See <https://www.defensordelpueblo.es/noticias/situacion-trabajadoras-trabajadores-temporeros/>

14 Resolution, March 16, 2015 on technical instructions to municipalities regarding the Padrón Municipal de Habitantes (article 3.3)

15 A research on health conditions of migrants residing in the informal settlements of Huelva identified, among their expressed needs, that access to water was their main demand, followed by protection from the risk of fire. These two needs came before demands for regularization and working conditions (see García Padilla, Sánchez Alcón, Ortega Galán, de la Rosa Díaz, Gómez Beltrán and Ramos Pichardo, 2021).

16 https://www.eldiario.es/andalucia/en-abierto/carta-mesa-agua-sanidad-huelva_132_1001357.html

17 These demonstrations denounced not only the lack of public facilities, but also the fact that it was practically impossible to access housing in the locality due to the reluctance of local landlords to rent to them.

creation of the platform “*Solución Asentamientos*” made up of several associations of seasonal workers and civil society actors and a protest camp in front of the town hall that lasted throughout the summer of 2020. These protests have also highlighted that the number of people permanently residing in the settlements has increased over the years, and that their presence is structural and permanent, despite, in most cases, their temporary residence.

Faced with this lack of response, throughout 2020, the *Asociación Nuevos Ciudadanos por la Interculturalidad* (New Citizens for Interculturality Association), an association formed by African seasonal workers that supports and defends the workers residing in the settlements, decided to carry out an initiative of its own that “has broken the script” (Isin, 2008; Darling, 2017) and shocked the institutions: the construction of a shelter for homeless migrant seasonal workers. Through a fundraising campaign on social networks, this platform raised funding of 100,000 euros that has allowed them to build a shelter for over 40 workers in just a few months.¹⁸

Many of these initiatives seem to be a glimpse of certain changes to come. In March 2021 the municipality of Lepe approved an ambitious plan for the eradication of shantytowns that included providing municipal land for the construction of a shelter for between 500 and 800 seasonal workers living permanently in the settlements.

“How does this fruit reach me? Who has picked this fruit?
Have the workers been exploited?
Do they live with dignity?
(Member of *Fruita amb Justicia Social*, Lleida)

Problems related to housing also focused the debate on the impact of the pandemic on seasonal workers in the province of Lleida during the summer of 2020. Although in the case of this Catalan province which has a long agricultural tradition, the emergence of informal settlements has not been observed, substandard housing, overcrowding and the occupation of abandoned infrastructures are chronic problems that have also been worsening in the last decade (Achón, 2014). A survey conducted in 2015 indicat-

ed that more than 13% of seasonal workers lived in places unfit for human habitation (such as abandoned infrastructures or agricultural warehouses) and 10% resided in substandard housing without some of the basic services (González-Rodríguez, Garreta and Llevot, 2021). This situation only worsened with the health crisis (Güell and Garcés-Mascareñas, 2020). In May 2020, hundreds of seasonal workers were sleeping on the streets in the city of Lleida. Despite restrictions, during 2020 there was a significant increase in migrant arrivals to this area from other provinces. The declarations of employers about the lack of workers (Güell and Garcés-Mascareñas, 2020), as well as the closure of tourist areas on the Mediterranean coast produced a displacement from other areas of the country of workers who have usually been employed in street vending and hospitality. This increase in the arrival of people looking for work was combined with a reduction in the number of places available in public facilities for seasonal workers, which remained closed during the state of emergency and subsequently offered less capacity due to health measures. This situation, together with the problems in accessing private accommodation, led to a significant increase in the number of migrants living in abandoned houses or on the streets of the agricultural municipalities and in the center of the city of Lleida itself. At the end of May this problem reached greater social and media visibility when, after learning about the situation of the seasonal migrants, the Monaco soccer player Keita Baldé, born in Catalonia to Senegalese parents, decided to rent a building to provide shelter for more than 60 workers during the entire campaign.

Unlike what has been observed in the case of Huelva where in recent years there has been an increase in the mobilization of seasonal workers residing in the settlements, in the case of Lleida, the actions in defense of the rights of seasonal workers have arisen from civil society. Since 2018, the mobilization of *Fruita amb Justicia Social* (Fruit with Social Justice), a platform of various social organizations that focus on the defense of legal and labor conditions of seasonal workers, has been particularly noteworthy. The members of this platform believe the agricultural production model in Lleida should not only be productively sustainable, but also socially sustainable and highlight some far-reaching structural problems that have only worsened in the last decade, including an increase in labor exploitation and homelessness of seasonal workers, and also the significant role temporary employment agencies play in the recruitment system of the sector. They also stress the need to build alliances

18 In this hostel, which was opened in the spring of 2021, workers are required to pay a deposit, and accommodation, water and electricity costs.

with consumers through awareness-raising campaigns in order to put pressure on administrations and the business sector to bring about policy changes. In addition to the work of labor support and legal advice to seasonal workers, their actions have included a good number traditional mobilization repertoires, including rallies, demonstrations and the public presentation of manifestos.

Beyond labor rights. Discrimination and sexual exploitation of female agriculture workers.

The seasonal schemes for Moroccan women to work in the Huelva strawberry sector have been one of the elements of migration policy that has aroused the most interest at the national and international level during the last two decades. Despite being mentioned in various international reports as a model of “good practices” (Newland, Agunias, and Terrazas, 2008), over the years several scholars have challenged this assumption, showing not only the forms of discrimination that arise in recruitment, but the labor, housing and social vulnerability faced by these workers during their stay in Spain (Gualda, 2012; Moreno-Nieto, 2012; Mannon, Petrzela, Glass and Radel, 2012; Molinero-Gerbeau, 2020b). Despite this, the situation of female Moroccan workers was not brought to the public’s attention until 2018. In June of that year, several female workers filed complaints against a company in Almonte (Huelva) for non-compliance with working conditions, but also, in the case of four female workers, for sexual abuse. The case was heavily covered by national and international media and initiated a complicated judicial process that is still in progress. In a broader social context of strong demands for women’s rights by the feminist movement throughout the country, several organizations supported these complaints,¹⁹ which represented a turning point in terms of the visibility of the living conditions of women participating in these programs, allegedly under broad public supervision. These complaints, which are the tip of the iceberg, show the structural problems faced by female seasonal agricultural workers and all the initiatives that must be taken by the administrations, the labor inspectorate, the unions and the companies themselves to curb their vulnerability, including the forms of sexual abuse to which they are exposed.

19 Several feminist organizations launched a statement demanding a detailed and ex officio investigation into the labor abuses suffered by the seasonal workers. This statement was published after a meeting at the Andalusian Women’s Institute and included a call for a demonstration to defend the rights of women workers employed under these programs in the province.

The alliance with the feminist movement activated a broader mobilization - which has transcended nationalities and migratory and labor statuses - among female workers employed in the strawberry sector. In 2018, the organization *Jornaleras de Huelva en Lucha*, a platform made up of both Spanish and foreign women workers, was created. Since its creation, this organization has played an important role in denouncing women’s working conditions, union mediation tasks and legal advice, as well as the promotion of awareness campaigns aimed at the population as a whole and fruit consumers. It has been very active during the health crisis. The platform *Jornaleras de Huelva en Lucha* denounced that during the 2020 campaign the working conditions were even harsher, since in many cases, the farms had to undertake the already strenuous work of picking with less workers due to the shut down of the programs in March, 2020.²⁰ Complaints also multiplied about the lack of sanitary guarantees in the accommodations, which do not have conditions that would allow the prevention of infection, as well as the limitations and problems of access to health rights in the midst of the pandemic crisis. In the case of Moroccan women workers, the effects of the COVID crisis were also prolonged after the end of the campaign in June 2020. The continued border closure and the limitation imposed by Morocco on the return of its nationals abroad prevented the thousands of women who worked in the campaign from returning home. Trapped in Spanish territory, they were forced to prolong their stay involuntarily, using up their savings to cover the cost of accommodation and living expenses. This situation provoked new mobilizations of these women, which included demonstrations and rallies in front of some companies and an immediate response from civil society. Since mid-June 2020, social organizations for the defense of workers’ rights in the area denounced that these women had been abandoned by Moroccan and Spanish institutions and that the situation could worsen if a coordinated solution was not found as soon as possible.²¹ Finally,

20 The quota established under this agreement for 2020 was 18,000 Moroccan workers at different times of the season. However, the closure of maritime and land connections between Spain and Morocco and the order of suspension of contracts at origin issued by the Spanish government prevented the arrival of 11,000 workers, who had planned to go to Huelva at the end of March, when the most intensive harvesting phase begins.

21 In June 2020, several social organizations, led by Women’s Link Worldwide, denounced Spain before the United Nations for violating the rights of strawberry season-

in mid-July 2020, social pressure led to a joint repatriation agreement by sea that allowed the workers to return home.

Despite the limited effects of this mobilization on the living conditions of women employed in agriculture, the increased visibility of these workers has led to greater monitoring of the sector by civil society, with a growing number of local feminist organizations involved. These monitoring efforts have not only made it possible to carry out more solid diagnoses of the situation²² but they have also strengthened alliances with international, national and regional feminists organizations, which have incorporated seasonal agriculture women workers into their agenda.

CONCLUSION. BREAKING THE VICIOUS CYCLE?

The health crisis has generated greater vulnerability for migrant workers employed in Spanish agriculture. In this context has worsened their legal, social and physical fragility, which had already been undermined by several decades of structural problems that have created chronic situations of labor exploitation, their spatial and housing marginalization and ghettoization, as well as their social and relational isolation. However, the context of the health crisis has also provided visibility to this collective and made it possible for them to channel different forms of mobilization, which although anchored in a prior background of contacts and alliances with other civil society organizations, have undergone, with all the caveats about their future, a certain boom. These forms of protest, although precarious and volatile, have placed migrant agricultural workers at the center of social and academic attention for the first time in Spain's recent migration history. In order to confront their supposed "disposability", migrant workers have appealed to and constructed a narrative of their essentiality as actors who make a crucial contribution to this economic sector and, in the context of confinement and mobility restrictions, also to the food security of Spanish society as a whole. This narrative has been articulated as part of their struggle for the right to be part of and participate in the localities where they live, despite their precarious legal status and their temporary,

al workers during the pandemic.

22 See, for example, recent reports by *Brigada Feminista de Observación* (2021), *Women's Link* (2019) and *Liga Internacional de Mujeres para la Paz y la Libertad* (2021).

or quasi-temporary, residence in many cases. Thus, against the idea of temporality as a mechanism of exclusion and indifference, agricultural workers have appealed to their structural presence. In this sense, these claims are in line with some of the questions raised by Squire and Darling, although referring to refugees and migrants in urban contexts: "how presence may be situated as a claim to rightfulness" and, how can we explore "those claims that are centered on a framing of justice rather than one of hospitality" (Squire and Darling, 2013; Darling, 2017). Finally, as opposed to the more orthodox, albeit changing, view in social movement literature of "the migrant" as an uncontentious actor, as critical citizenship studies have shown, migrants, despite the serious limitations and restrictions they encounter in the daily situations of marginalization they suffer, have become political actors, performing new political subjectivities that have transformed not only collective action, but citizenship itself expressed in various ways, most notably in the language of "active versus passive citizenship" (Isin and Nyers 2014; Isin 2009). Their mobilization also offers very good opportunity to foster a necessary and very promising dialogue between social movement studies and migration studies.

The analysis carried out in the agricultural enclaves of Huelva and Lleida has also shown the construction of inclusive transversal and intersectional solidarities that have given rise to hybrid mobilizations, dynamics that have also recently been pointed out in the case of other geographies in the context of the health crisis (Zajak, Stjepandić and Steinhilper, 2020; Ataç, Rygiel and Stierl, 2021). This analysis has revealed that not only are the rights being claimed transversal (legal status, labor rights, housing rights, health rights and the right to water), but the profiles of the migrant workers involved in these struggles also include a range of migration and legal statuses. The *#RegularizationYa* movement transcends geographical areas and economic sectors. Alliances with feminist collectives, anti-racist organizations and movements in defense of food sovereignty have also been decisive in the articulation and channeling of the demands of platforms such as *Fruita amb Justicia Social* or *Jornaleras de Huelva en Lucha*. This analysis, therefore, points to the need to deepen and broaden studies on migrant activism in Spain, not only to explore alternative paths that have been neglected by recent research but also to delve into the interrelationships between mobility, citizenship and the formation of political subjectivities that are reflected in alliances and struggles that cut across diverse legal, labor and racial statuses.

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