

The globalisation of Italian agriculture. Transformations of migrant labour composition in agriculture in Trentino

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Abstract

The cultivation of apples is one of the principal economic activities in Trentino, which is responsible for 25% of Italian apple production and 4% of European apple production. The industry is structurally based on migrant work, especially from Eastern European countries in the EU. This model has come up against obstacles due to EU migrant workers redrawing their trajectories: They now tend to remain in their country of origin or move towards central European countries, where they find better wages and working conditions. This is also due to the inadequacy of Italian migration policies, which make it difficult for employers to recruit migrant workers. As a result, employers started to recruit refugees and asylum seekers from countries in the sub-Saharan and Indian subcontinent who had recently arrived in Trentino. This article analyses these transformations and the trend of 'refugeeisation' process of the agricultural workforce, as well as the partial replacement of seasonal workers in Trentino. It then focuses on the impact of the pandemic on international recruitment and on the organisation of the migrant workforce.

KEYWORDS

Californian model of agriculture, Mediterranean model of immigration, migrant labour, refugees and asylum seekers, 'refugeeisation' of the labour-force

INTRODUCTION

The agricultural sector is incredibly significant in Italy from an economic, social and cultural point of view. Italy is the leading agricultural producer in the EU, producing a value of 31.5 billion euros (18% of the total value of the EU) and a total production value of about 55 billion euros. In 2017, Italian agricultural exports reached a record value of 41.03 billion euros. In the last 10 years, exports increased by 23%, which was more than in the rest of Europe (+16%; Corrado et al., 2018; Macrì, 2022).

Italian rural areas and the agricultural sector have undergone extreme transformations in the last 30 years.

First, more than half of farms have disappeared, dropping from 3 million in 1982 to 1.4 million in 2014. Between 2000 and 2010, the number of agricultural companies decreased by 32.4%, while in the two decades preceding that, they had diminished by 9.1% and 15.9%. The most significant decrease was in inner or mountain areas, such as Trentino. There was a simultaneous 20% decrease in the total utilised agricultural area and an increase in the average farm size, from 5 to 8.4 hectares, as well as a percentage increase in larger farms. There are still clear territorial differences between Northern Italy and Southern Italy. Northern farms are larger in size than their Southern counterparts. Furthermore, 142 of the 170 Italian food industries with more than 250 employees are located in the North. Since 2000, there has been an intensification of the processes of land deactivation and of the concentration of cultivated and arable land. Despite this, small farms still make up the majority of Italian farms (*ibidem*).

In recent years, the structure of agricultural work has changed considerably in both small and large farms, in particular, due to the decline in family labour, which decreased by 13% between 2000 and 2010, while extra-family work increased by 7.5%. However, 92.8% of farms are still managed by family labour alone, while 6.4% make use of wage labour (*ibidem*). But the largest transformation has been a constant increase in the number of foreign workers employed as wage labourers in Italian agriculture, who now make up more than a third of the total number of employees: In 2015, almost 340,000 migrant workers were surveyed by the Italian National Institute of Statistics (ISTAT), compared to 126,000 in 2006, and this does not include those in the migrant workforce employed without contracts. Romanians were the largest national group (Macrì, 2022).¹

The specificities of migration in Southern Europe, compared to countries in Central and Northern Europe, have led several authors to talk about a 'Mediterranean model of migration' (King & De Bono, 2013; Pugliese, 2011) emerging after the post-Fordist restructuring of production systems and the consequent transformation of social relations.

Italy is included in this model, having the following characteristics: a 'non-migration policy', based on the issuing of frequent emergency measures (Ambrosini, 2018); the widespread presence of institutions that facilitate the orientation and social-occupational integration of migrants (Ambrosini, 2019; Basso, 2004; Mottura et al., 2010); migrants' limited access to social policies; the presence of both migrants' occupational integration and native unemployment, especially in the

south of the country; the coexistence of new migrant arrivals with the internal and international emigration of the native population (Pugliese, 2011); the initial entry of migrants into the informal economy, in both seasonal agricultural work and the low-skilled tertiary sector; the trade-off between low penalisation, compared to native workers in *accessing* work and high penalisation in terms of work *quality* (Panichella, 2018; Reyneri & Fullin, 2011); and the role assumed by migrants in the area of (domestic) care work (Della Puppa, 2012; Ribas-Mateos, 2004; Sciortino, 2004) within a persistent ‘family’ or ‘Mediterranean’ welfare regime (Esping-Andersen, 1995).

Though half a century has passed since Italy changed from a country of almost exclusive emigration into a country of overall immigration, the arrival of new migrants and the establishment of those already present mean that many of the aspects that made Italy part of the ‘Mediterranean model of immigration’ persist (Ortensi, 2015). This is the case with the initial recruitment of the migrant labour force in seasonal agriculture. Not only have many migrants previously employed in the manufacturing and service sectors in Northern Italy returned to the countryside of Southern Italy after finding themselves unemployed due to the economic crisis (Sacchetto & Vianello, 2016), but there has also been an increase in recently arrived refugees and asylum seekers taking these jobs (Caruso, 2018; Della Puppa & Sanò, 2021a; Dines & Rigo, 2015).

The increasing use of asylum seekers and refugees in seasonal agriculture can also be found in northern regions, although this is much less widely studied in the sociological literature. Aiming to help address this gap, this article will use empirical qualitative research to investigate the transformations of the agricultural labour market in Trentino in Northern Italy and, specifically, the changes seen in the forms of recruitment and in the organisation of the migrant labour force and its composition.

The ‘Mediterranean model of immigration’ and the ‘Californian model of agriculture’: Old paradigms and new actors

Among the various aspects that identify the so-called ‘Mediterranean model of immigration’ presented above, there is a link between the presence of ‘irregular’ migrants and their undeclared employment. Given its seasonal nature, agriculture is one of the sectors in which there is a high incidence of undeclared and irregular labour in the shadow economy. Furthermore, during harvesting periods, local labour is insufficient, leading to the recruitment of many migrant labourers (Gertel & Sippel, 2017).

The Mediterranean European countries that, as anticipated, have transformed into predominantly immigration countries over the last 30 years—Italy, Spain, Greece and, to some extent, Southern France—have, at the same time, begun developing large-scale intensive agriculture (Corrado et al., 2017; Gertel & Sippel, 2017). Production in this industry is organised seasonally, with a huge number of jobs that are almost always temporary and low-skilled but physically demanding, which are inevitably carried out by an irregular, undocumented, blackmailable, flexible and more easily exploitable migrant labour force, organised according to nationality (*ibidem*). In other words, in Italy (and, more generally, in Mediterranean Europe), it is possible to trace what Berlan (1986, 1987) called the ‘Californian model’ of agricultural production, in which the migrant labour force—who, in California, are mainly Mexican (Rodriguez, 2004), and in Italy, mainly African—constitutes a structural component in its development, just like in the Mediterranean scenario described above.

Exactly like the ‘Californian model’ of agricultural production, agriculture in Mediterranean Europe requires massive and almost exclusive recourse to temporary, low-skilled but physically

demanding labour and is inevitably carried out by migrant workers who are particularly exposed to the risk of exploitation (Berlan, 1986, 1987). These factors increase the risk that much of the work carried out in Italian agriculture is not intercepted and is thus underestimated by statistical surveys.² Hence, in keeping with the ‘Californian model’, the irregular, flexible and poorly paid immigrant labour force assumes a structural role in agricultural production in Mediterranean Europe and Italy. Like in California, the role of migration is relevant not only to the processes of transformation of agricultural models but—and this is particularly clear in Italy—also in relation to the restructuring of family economies and social relations (*ibidem*), such as, for example, the replacement of local women and local young people in agricultural work and in domestic and care work (Della Puppa, 2012; Ribas-Mateos, 2004; Sciortino, 2004), as mentioned above. Over time, small agricultural producers have become increasingly ‘dependent’ on the exploitation of low-cost and irregular migrant labour due to price competition as a result of the pressures of large-scale distribution and European policies but also due to a growth in needs and consumption capacity (Corrado et al., 2017, 2018). This is particularly evident in Southern Italy, but also in northern regions, such as Trentino, where apple prices and the management of apple production are dictated by large companies (e.g., Melinda).

Another way in which Mediterranean European, and thus Italian, agriculture follows the ‘Californian model’ is in its mechanisation. Given the extreme exploitation of the immigrant labour force, human labour is more productive, cheaper and thus more affordable than mechanisation. After World War II, those who previously worked in agriculture in Southern Italy, including the young people and pensioners who worked in the fruit harvesting sector in Trentino, were replaced by machines, leading to the practical disappearance of human labour. However, the arrival in Italy in general, and in Trentino in particular, of the Californian model has restored the centrality of manual labour not because the work cannot be mechanised but because the low cost of exploited labour gives much higher profit margins (Laboratorio sulle disequaglianze, 2023).

Alongside analyses of the Californian model in its Southern European forms and applications (Burawoy, 1976; Goldman et al., 2004; Santos Gómez & Villagómez Velázquez, 2013; Thomas, 1992; Wells, 1991, 1996), a broad literature has developed on the entry of Mediterranean rural areas into global agricultural production (Colloca & Corrado, 2013), meaning that their products have become part of the global agri-food chain, to be transformed and distributed at the level of the world market (Perrotta, 2018).

Mediterranean Europe’s replication of the Californian model has been thoroughly analysed elsewhere (e.g., Critz, 1995). For example, the works of Corrado et al. (2017) and Gertel and Sippel (2017) offer a general and in-depth picture of the labour, social and migratory transformations in the Mediterranean countryside, especially in relation to European Mediterranean countries, but also including some analysis of countries along the Mediterranean’s southern and eastern shores (on agriculture in the non-European Mediterranean area, see Acloque et al., 2015; Aslan, 2013; Potot, 2013).

For example, various studies have been carried out in relation to the Spanish case, including analysis of: the reasons for (mainly African) migrant employment, their concentration in certain regions of the country and their working conditions (Hoggart & Mendoza, 1999); the intertwining of the labour market and migration policies (Achón Rodríguez, 2013; Martín Díaz & Rodríguez, 2001); transnational recruitment modalities (Hellio, 2009); the ‘integration’ of migrants into local rural communities (Rye & Scott, 2018); and the links between changes in consumption and the productive organisation of fruit and vegetables (Pedreño Cánovas & Quantara, 2002). Among other aspects across the supply chain, studies focusing on the Greek context have highlighted: the structural and increasingly indispensable role of migrant labour for agriculture in rural areas

of the country (Kasimis et al., 2003; Papadopoulos & Fratsea, 2017); the multifunctional roles that migrants play in the economy and rural society of Greece and the reactions of the rural Greek population towards them (Kasimis & Papadopoulos 2005; Kasimis et al., 2010); the processes of racialisation—in the sense of discrimination—and the control and self-disciplining mechanisms to which these social groups are subjected (Kukreja, 2019); farmworkers' precarious health conditions (Alexe et al., 2003); and farmworkers' struggles against the organised system of exploitation in the countryside (Gialis & Herod, 2014). In the case of Southern France, the literature includes research on the internal and international mobility of the migrant labour force in relation to the needs of agricultural capital (Mesini, 2013) and studies on how a combination of productivist logic, discriminatory dynamics and racialisation processes driven by politics, 'social entrepreneurs' and the local population, reinforce the social vulnerability of migrant labourers (Crenn, 2013; Iocco et al., 2020). There is also extensive literature on the use of migrants in Italian agriculture, which has included research on: the role of *caporalato* in the organisation of production (Brovia, 2009; Perrotta & Sacchetto, 2012); housing and labour segregation (Perrotta & Sacchetto, 2013); the implementation of greenhouse farming (Piro & Sanò, 2017); the struggles of labourers (ibidem); local forms of solidarity (Filhol, 2013); and imperialistic relations across the Mediterranean and the creation of forced labour (Pradella & Cillo, 2020).

It should also be emphasised that some recent contributions have shown how the employment of migrant workers in Mediterranean agriculture sometimes occurs in ways that are far from typical of the 'Californian-Mediterranean' model, which is characterised by mobility. In these cases, a plurality of organisational and residential methods are used, and boundaries are mobile (Nori & Farinella, 2020). A typical example of this is the 'Ragusan transformed belt' in Italy, which is responsible for one of the most significant sources of Italian fruit and vegetable production (Cortese & Palidda, 2020; Piro & Sanò, 2017).

In the Italian context, structural and systemic characteristics can be seen emerging in the replacement of the 'traditional' migrant labour force—made up of long-stayers often affected by the economic crisis who return 'from the factories to the countryside' or workers without residence documents—with a labour force composed of refugees and asylum seekers (D'Agostino, 2013; Della Puppa & Sanò, 2021a; Dines & Rigo, 2015). However, there is still little research that engages in a systematic in-depth study of this dynamic, exploring the intersection of transformations in migration regimes with transformations in the agricultural labour market.

Since sociological analysis on this subject in Italy has focused mainly on the south of the country, there is a lack of research into the agricultural migrant labour force in Northern Italy (Azzeruoli, 2017; Hanus, 2013; Perrotta, 2017) and even fewer studies that look at the processes of the replacement of agricultural labour in these regions through the employment of asylum seekers and refugees. There is also still no scientific literature on the impact of the pandemic and the crisis on the agri-food sector and its work organisation, on the recruitment mechanisms of the migrant labour force and on the dynamics of its exploitation (Kukreja, 2021).

This contribution thus analyses the transformations of the agricultural labour market in Trentino (Northern Italy) and changes in its forms of recruitment. It specifically focuses on the slow but progressive process of 'refugeeisation' of the agricultural labour force in the area and the partial replacement of seasonal labour. It also engages in an in-depth examination of the impact of the pandemic on the mechanisms of the international recruitment and organisation of the migrant labour force.

It may be useful to use the concept of the 'refugee gap' to explain the disadvantages affecting refugees and asylum seekers in their countries of destination both in socio-material and work terms, compared to migrants with a different legal status (Bakker et al., 2014; Bevelander &

Pendakur, 2014; Connor, 2010). This disadvantage has been attributed to shorter migratory 'seniority', poorer linguistic knowledge, lower cultural capital, lower levels of education, the absence of family support networks and more precarious psycho-physical health conditions. A further dimension that could partly explain this gap is *civic stratification* (Lockwood, 1996; Morris, 2003) that results in refugees and asylum seekers being penalised more than other migrants. It is worth keeping in mind that once applicants for international protection have passed through hotspots and 'first reception' centres, they are handed over to the 'second reception' of the Reception and Integration System (SAI), in which they are meant to be received in a diffuse way—in small numbers that are integrated into the local social fabric—and involved in projects that aid them in achieving social, work and housing autonomy. In reality, the vast majority of applicants are accommodated in CAS (i.e., extraordinary reception centres), originally conceived as temporary structures to be used in the event of emergencies, but which have in fact become the norm. These centres concentrate large numbers of applicants in one place that is disconnected from the local social fabric, and they usually lack the economic resources to engage in socio-work integration programmes (Della Puppa et al., 2020). Thus, applicants for international protection do not have opportunities to build social networks that could be useful for work integration, and neither do they have family support, unlike immigrants with residence permits for work reasons, who have been in Italy for longer. Once they have entered the Italian territory, immigrants who apply for international protection are issued with a residence permit to apply for asylum, which allows them to work legally, but only 60 days after they have made their application. This permit lasts another 60 days, after which regular employment becomes more difficult, although applicants cannot be expelled until they receive the final decision on their asylum application. Moreover, during this wait, which often lasts over a year, they can stay in the reception centre, but their territorial mobility within Italy is limited, as they are administratively dependent on the prefecture of the province in which they are registered (Della Puppa & Sandò, 2021a). The permit also does not allow them to leave Italy, and even if they are granted protection and, therefore, a residence permit for international protection, they can only leave Italy for brief periods and not for work. Finally, the cancellation of so-called 'humanitarian protection'—national protection—which was the most widespread and recognised protection status in Italy, has automatically created a huge number of undocumented immigrants and thus an enormous pool of low-cost and highly flexible labour that is easily recruitable and exploitable, especially in agricultural work (ibid.). These policies therefore create a civic hierarchy, creating a stratification of social, mobility and employment rights and opportunities, which puts international protection seekers at a disadvantage in relation to so-called 'economic' immigrants, and, of course, in relation to natives.

The perspective of civic stratification (Lockwood, 1996) describes the different ways in which the institutionalisation of forms of citizenship directly or indirectly structures life opportunities and social identities under conditions of social and economic inequality. It calls into question not only how one's position in the social hierarchy of classes acts on the integration process but also how social integration acts on the class structure, using the social cohesion resulting from the different types of collective and individual actions as a measure of actors' integration. It describes a social order based on a system of civic stratification in which the mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion from the status of citizenship are combined with the possession, or lack, of a certain capital. Keeping in mind that the stratification device acts on all actors wherever they are placed in the field of citizenship definitions, we should analyse its particular effects on immigrants, as well as examine the so-called 'rules of the game' (ibidem) that lead to the identification and selection of 'useful citizens' and 'less useful citizens', as well as the acceptance of the procedural

principles that underlie them. In fact, in relation to migrants, the different statuses of formal citizenship, the different types and duration of residence permits, as well as competition between differently located institutional subjects (from the local to the supra-national level), and the multiple administrative regulations and consequent discretion in their application have given rise to heterogeneous systems of access to social and citizenship rights and, therefore, also to the labour market.

Next, the Trentino context and its seasonal agricultural model will be outlined, and the methodological choices used in the research explained. The following sections will show how the Trentino agricultural model was thrown into crisis, how the migrant labour force was recruited and then replaced by refugees and asylum seekers and finally the impact of the pandemic on these dynamics.

The ‘Trentino model of agriculture’

In the socioeconomic context of the Province of Trento (also known as ‘Trentino’), the two most important agricultural sectors are viticulture and fruit-growing, in particular, apple production—and, secondarily, small fruit production—which, similarly to the neighbouring Province of Bolzano, play a major role in the local economy.

According to the ISTAT, in 2020, Trentino accounted for 27% of the apple-growing area of Italy and 36% of Italian apple production. The sector thus creates a considerable amount of satellite activities, making fruit growing a pillar of the economy in some of Trentino’s valleys.

Operations related to harvesting and initial fruit storage mainly begin in late summer, triggering a demand for labour that has always been very strong, although not always linear, given that agriculture employment is susceptible to fluctuations linked to weather and production trends. Its employment model has been characterised by the predominance of male workers and the use of unskilled workers and fixed-term contracts. The use of labour for a very limited period of the year responds to the needs of the fruit harvest and the requirement to conserve and store fruit in warehouses. The temporary labourers involved in the latter also include women.

Over time, unskilled jobs in agriculture have remained one of the most easily accessible jobs in the province. Given the lack of availability of locals inclined to do low-skilled, high risk and tiring tasks (Osservatorio del Mercato del Lavoro, 2004) and the annual need for seasonal labour, employers have started to look outside the provincial borders. The scarcity of local labour has also meant employers’ organisations more explicitly call for more open borders (Ambrosini & Boccagni, 2002). As a result of the actions of these organisations and of local public institutions, the Trentino experience could be seen as a successful example of ‘regulated’ seasonal labour immigration. The system that has been established over the years significantly reduces the length of the process between employers submitting applications for seasonal workers from abroad, their applications being granted, workers being forwarded the authorisation to obtain a visa to enter Italy, the entry of workers into the country, their applications for residence permits and the beginning of a regular employment relationship.

During the 1990s, an average of 20% of jobs in agriculture registered in Trentino involved workers from outside the province. Over the course of the decade, these new recruits were gradually joined by non-EU workers, who increased year by year to over 8000 in the year 2000, making them more than 50% of the total number of workers hired in the province in the agricultural sector. This was peculiar to the province, as at that time in the whole country, the average number of non-EU workers in agriculture did not exceed 5% (11% across the whole of the North-East).

Since then, there has been a massive and rapid increase in the number of non-EU agricultural workers in the province: In 2003, more than 10,000 authorisations to work in agriculture were temporarily granted to non-EU citizens in Trentino, which was three times the number recorded 5 years earlier. In line with the guidelines established at the national level, from the earliest stages, authorisations to enter the territory for seasonal work favoured workers from Eastern Europe: In Trentino, they came mainly from Romania, Poland, Slovakia and the Czech Republic. The labour supply of Romanian citizens was particularly strong, gradually outweighing that of workers from other Eastern European countries. While it is true that, since 2006, Romania has constantly dominated the provincial ranking of foreigners hired in agriculture, and that almost three-quarters of those hired in agriculture before the Covid-19 health crisis (and the consequent freeze on mobility) were non-Italian workers, it is equally true that the Trentino model that we have described has been subject to unprecedented dynamics in recent years that have called into question some of its structures.

Context of the research and methods

The research focused on the territories of Val di Sole and Val di Non. The former is located in the north-western part of Trentino and covers an area of about 610 km² with a resident population of about 15,000 people, of which, in line with the national average, just over 8% are immigrants (1234 in total, of which 545 are men and 689 are women). Migrants are concentrated in the age group ranging from 25 to 49 years of age, which is the most active age group in the labour market. The economy of the valley is mainly based on tourism, animal husbandry, forestry and the cultivation of fruit trees, especially apple and cherry trees. Val di Non is located in the north-western part of the region. Its economy is mainly agricultural and, specifically, based on fruit production: The valley is famous for its apple production. Val di Non has a population of 39,354, of which 9.1% are immigrants (3594 in total, of which 1621 are men and 1973 are women). This figure is slightly above the national average. As in Val di Sole, the age group ranging from 25 to 49 years of age has the highest concentration of migrants.³

The empirical material at the basis of this article was gathered from statistical data provided by the Autonomous Province of Trento, Cinformi (Immigration Information Centre of the Autonomous Province of Trento) and the Labour Agency of the Autonomous Province of Trento. These data provided an overview of the presence of immigrants in the two valleys and of their economic integration.

Subsequently, 15 in-depth interviews were collected with stakeholders and key informants for each of the socio-territorial contexts considered. In addition to these interviews, three focus groups were organised with some of those previously interviewed.

The respondents included mayors (2), trade unionists (4), employers' organisation representatives (3), local employers (2), job centre officials (2) and social workers from the local reception system for asylum seekers (2). These subjects had different interests and perspectives in relation to the Trentino agricultural workforce, and could all offer insight into the different facets of the integration of migrants into agricultural employment in Trentino, the transformations in its recruitment mechanisms and the changes in the composition of the workforce. We used these types of interviewees—that is, mainly key informants and stakeholders, leaving out immigrant workers—as the article's aim was not so much to trace the individual experiences and journeys of the workers, but rather a general and chronological look at the trends and dynamics of the

transformations in the composition of the immigrant labour force over time, the organisation of its employment and the modalities of its recruitment.⁴

The interviews were aimed at gathering narrative data on the following topics: the extent of migration in the contexts in question; the qualitative aspects of the presence of migrants; characteristics, modalities and changes in the inclusion of migrants in the local labour market, the housing market, culture and society; the ways that the migrant population accessed social rights; the discriminatory dynamics suffered and the claims put in place; and projects and indications for the future.

Finally, the authors returned to the field to interview two trade union representatives, two representatives of employers' organisations and two workers in the reception system for refugees and asylum seekers for an update on the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the mechanisms of international recruitment and the organisation of the migrant labour force.

The words of the respondents were fully transcribed and reported as faithfully as possible, bearing in mind that this process *always* involves profound interpretive work (Bourdieu, 1993). We then analysed the collected material, starting from a full reading of the interviews and—even if aiming to maintain a global reading of all of the narratives—attempting to relate them to each other. We then codified the various thematic segments and their horizontal comparison.

A model in crisis

From the in-depth interviews carried out, in addition to being able to ascertain the structural nature of foreign workers' contribution to apple harvesting (but also for small fruit harvesting, especially in larger farms), it was possible to highlight how the recruitment and selection of a significant share of fruit harvesting personnel was mainly entrusted to the relationship between employers and workers. For many years, the latter have opted for 'circular' migration trajectories: They stop in the valleys of Trentino for the weeks of the harvest and then return to their country of origin, usually a European member state (mainly Romania and Poland). They often have several years' experience in seasonal work with the same employer. In cases in which they are unable to come, they often look for someone to replace them within their family and/or friendship circle. As noted for the employment of foreigners in Italy (ISTAT, 2018; Ministero del Lavoro, 2018), even in this segment of the local labour market, the role of 'formal' intermediation by employment centres in facilitating the encounter between labour supply and demand appears to be completely marginal, with the 'informal' channel taking precedence. Exchanges of information on job opportunities happen through migrants' personal networks:

These are relationships that started many years ago, so even between the farms and the people who come there, friendships have been established. Because initially one came, then the word spread and so there is a sort of 'self-recruitment' among them. They tend to organise among themselves, so our activity of matching supply and demand is residual in this sector. (Interview 12. Job Centre official, male, 57 years old)

Recent attempts by institutions and employers' organisations to create platforms linking farmers looking for personnel with local citizens interested in seasonal employment in the agricultural sector have only produced limited results, far below expectations.

To confirm this, the qualitative research also took stock of the results of a project launched about 5 years ago in Val di Non and Val di Sole, which aimed to bring together locally available

labour—Italian and foreign people who were officially resident or living in the valleys—for fruit thinning and picking. The job centres were thus able to draw up a list of candidates to be made available to farms and employers' associations (the so-called 'zero-km lists'). Bearing in mind that the number of people to be recruited for the apple harvest could be well in excess of 10,000 in a year when the weather conditions were good, the lists, which contained around 100 people, had very little effect. It is likely that the choices made by farmers also had a major effect on the outcome of the initiative since they often preferred and privileged relationships consolidated over time with already 'tested' workers from abroad.

In addition, a representative of the sector pointed out that only a small number of these applications corresponded to an actual possibility for farmers to start working in 2020: When this was checked, 80% of those who had previously applied withdrew their willingness to be employed.

Therefore, in a context that until a few years ago had found satisfactory solutions to the needs of the agricultural sector and had been well known for its high levels of 'legality' and respect for contractual rules, some cases of exploitation and underpayment began to arise and new problems emerged, meaning that employers and professional organisations started to be called into question.

In particular, some key informants contacted in the course of the research were concerned that recently there had been no guarantee that sufficient workers would come from EU countries to meet the needs of the local economy, especially for the apple harvest. In 2019, farmers could not count on receiving the number of harvesting workers they had expected and were thus prompted to engage in co-ordination and co-operation strategies deploying foreign workers employed by other farmers in order to complete the harvest.

The widespread perception among the interviewees was that some of the migrants from EU countries who in the past chose Trentino as a destination for work during the apple-picking weeks have started to opt for other EU countries (particularly Germany) or have taken advantage of work opportunities created in the meantime in their country of origin and, therefore, no longer consider the income from temporary work in Italy to be worth it. These latter aspects were also described by a trade association representative during their interview:

It's getting harder and harder to find foreign labour too, especially because they've found jobs with higher wages... Many found work last year in Genoa on cruise ships, others went to Germany to pick small fruits, strawberries. So, many employers have had to use fewer workers and increase the length of the harvest. Some other workers will have to be found. (Interview 7. Employers' organisation representative, male, 60 years old)

These new challenges in Trentino reflect changes in the dynamics of foreign agricultural employment that emerged more generally at the national level, particularly from 2018, when there was quantitative evidence of the decline in those coming from the main EU nationalities that used to come (Romanians, Bulgarians and Poles). This decline was confirmed during 2019 (Idos, 2020).

Trends in the 'refugeeisation' of the labour force

In parallel with the decrease in the main EU nationalities described above, data from the Italian National Institute for Social Security (INPS) demonstrated a trend showing the increasing use of agricultural workers from some sub-Saharan African countries, confirming what our qualitative

analysis found in the Province of Trento, in which we saw that asylum seekers and refugees began to constitute a labour pool, albeit small in number, on which some local employers and mayors began to draw (Dines & Rigo, 2015):

In my area there are many people of sub-Saharan origin, Nigerians... people who have been seeking international protection [...] If the apples are to be picked, workers have to be found somewhere. (Interview 2. Mayor, male, 65 years old)

The narratives of representatives from trade unions and employers' organisations regarding what could be seen as an initial process of partial labour force substitution are confirmed by the Trento Labour Agency's quantitative evidence.

Since the ISTAT survey on the labour force does not include data on seasonal work in agriculture, the Trento Labour Agency's data on recruitment is the main source of information on trends in the agricultural labour market in Trentino.⁵

Romanian is the nationality with the highest number of agricultural workers in the region, but their numbers clearly decreased in recent years, going from making up 57% of the agricultural workforce in Trentino in 2018 to 55.9% in 2019, settling, with 8300 recruitments, at 50.9% in 2020. The decline in the hiring of Polish workers is even more marked: They made up 12% of the total in 2017, which became 10% in 2018, 8.6% in 2019 and 7.4% in 2020. Thus, from one year to the next, the recruitment of Romanians fell by 23.5% and that of Poles by 27.4%.

Alongside the decrease in the recruitment of EU workers who are 'traditionally' employed in the Trentino countryside, there has been an increase in the presence of other nationalities, particularly those seeking international protection: for example, workers from Pakistan, Senegal and Nigeria. Pakistan (with about 1200 hires) reached the same level as Poland in the percentage of its total foreign workers in agriculture in the region. The percentage change of Pakistani hires in the 2-year period 2019–2020 was +73.2%, and between 2018 and 2019, the change had been +21.6%. Nevertheless, in 2019, Pakistani hires were still well below 1000 (compared to 10,800 Romanians). Senegalese hires have also been growing in recent years (+38.2% between 2019 and 2020; +35.2% between 2018 and 2019), reaching 1100 in 2020.

In addition to Pakistanis, the largest group of asylum seekers in reception projects in the Province of Trento is Nigerians. In 2020, Nigeria ranked seventh in terms of foreigners hired in agriculture, with about 400 hires (2.5% of the total). In 2019, there were 332 Nigerian hires, which was double that in 2018.

The quantitative data provided by the Labour Agency is confirmed by the empirical findings gathered through stakeholder interviews. A representative of the trade union traces the beginning of this trend to the 2017 season, which was partially compromised by weather conditions, and which he saw as the turning point of a process that was already taking shape:

In recent years, it has been very difficult to find labour from Eastern Europe. Especially since 2017, a year in which we also had a frost in Trentino, which meant that practically nothing was harvested. That year, many probably organised themselves differently, finding work in other places, I know some went to Germany, others went to do other types of work. (Interview 4. Trade unionist, male, 67 years old)

Dines and Rigo (2015) describe the process of the 'refugeeisation' of the agricultural workforce as the result of a change in entry policies that have almost blocked the regular entry channels for work, alongside an increase in the entry channel of international protection. Della

Puppa and Sanò (2021a) understand this dynamic as also being a result of the ‘entrapment’ and forced immobility to which refugees and asylum seekers in Italy are subject from a legal and—therefore—geographical point of view. This ‘refugeeisation’ of the workforce is also the result of a partial replacement linked to the progressive unavailability of those migrant seasonal workers from EU countries who were ‘traditionally’ employed in Trentino’s valleys.

The interview shown above also illuminates the functioning of *civic stratification* mechanisms (Lockwood, 1996; Morris, 2003), which, in this case, unfold at an international level, allowing EU immigrants to orient their work and seasonal trajectories across the European area and anchoring asylum seekers and holders of international protection in the Italian and even Trentino context. Consequently, this mechanism contributes to the widening of an intra-European *refugee gap* (Bakker et al., 2014; Bevelander & Pendakur, 2014; Connor, 2010) that sees refugees and asylum seekers penalized more than foreign workers with a different civic status, especially in terms of wages.

As mentioned above, in order to cope with the lack of the ‘traditional’ labour force, especially from the EU countries of Eastern Europe, workers are progressively recruited among refugees and asylum seekers, who are more or less permanently present in the territory. This is a labour pool that, according to the reflections of a representative of the trade association, has now clearly become one of the (limited) range of alternatives to recruiting EU workers and which, in recent times, has expanded and gained increasing visibility:

Fruit has to be picked and harvested, so we need to have more channels open to provide the workforce. So the asylum seekers’ channel is also fine, without any doubt and any prejudice. (Interview 11. Local employer, male, 58 years old)

This solution raises the question of training. The ‘teams’ of seasonal workers who used to arrive in the valleys of Trentino every year from Eastern EU countries were made up of workers with whom the Trentino employers had established a loyal relationship, they were already familiar with this type of agricultural work and the specific tasks required, as well as trained and specialised in all phases of the work process, whereas the new workforce, made up of refugees and asylum seekers, originating from sub-Saharan Africa and the Indian subcontinent, had to be trained from scratch within a relatively short period of time as key informants and stakeholders explained:

While the Romanian workers already knew how to work, also because they have been coming for many years to do the season, these [new] people all need to be trained, they have never done this job. (Interview 3. Trade unionist, female, 39 years old)

It’s also a matter of company organisation because people from Eastern Europe have been coming here for many years and now know the job well. While having new people every year is never nice because you have to start all over again, teaching a job. (Interview 5. Trade unionist, female, 42 years old)

In pointing to the difference between the training that EU national seasonal workers would have received over the years and the lack of experience of ‘new’ workers, refugees and applicants for international protection, the interviewees indirectly referred to the refugee gap and the civic stratification mechanisms mentioned above.

The following section will focus on the impact that the pandemic had on the Trentino agricultural system and on its recruitment methods, acting as an ‘accelerator’ of the aforementioned dynamics.⁶

The impact of the Covid-19 health crisis and the acceleration triggered by the pandemic

The Covid-19 pandemic, which exploded in Italy in 2020, seems to have *accelerated* an already existent trend of Eastern European labourers working alongside one composed of refugees and asylum seekers. The numbers do not yet allow us to speak of a ‘substitution’, although there is a clear change in the composition of the labour force. Already at the beginning of April 2020, in the middle of the so-called ‘first wave’ of the pandemic and the first lockdown, Coldiretti Trentino Alto Adige and Confagricoltura (employers’ associations) reported that the drastic shortage in the labour force due to Covid-19 was ‘creating a serious problem in the countryside’.⁷ The border blockade caused by the restrictive measures linked to the spread of Covid-19 led to a serious reduction in foreign workers who accounted for more than three-quarters of the workers recruited in Trentino, out of a total of more than 38,000. In the spring of 2020, the trade unions also estimated that there would be 12,000 fewer labourers, in particular, from Romania and Poland, due to the health emergency (Macri, 2020).

To contain the possible damage ahead of the fruit harvest and activate ‘green corridors’ for the entry of seasonal workers from Eastern Europe whilst also safeguarding public health, the Trentino network of agricultural co-operatives set up a local ‘active quarantine’ protocol, explicitly recognised by the provincial government. This experiment in Trentino, as well as in the province of Bolzano, averted the ‘collapse’ of the system, guaranteeing work in compliance with health protocols. This system was generally well received by the stakeholders:

The ‘green corridors’ and ‘active quarantine’ have worked. Here, we have a very important company, Melinda, which has offered a warehouse to the health authority for taking swabs. It meant there was no queue at the Health Authority’s PCR test centre and differentiated the two things. People who came to Italy to work in agriculture had to be swabbed in their own countries. Then there was ‘active quarantine’, which meant working in the fields with social distancing. After a number of days, they were all called in for a new swab, and if it was negative, everybody continued to work, wearing masks; if the swab was positive, sadly the whole team was suspended or sent back to their country or put in special accommodation for foreign Covid-positive people to do quarantine. Although it worked, very few people decided to come and work in Italy because of the costs involved, the fear, the problems at the border. [...] So the employers organised to get refugees. (Interview 17. Trade unionist, female, 39 years old)

Thus, the complexity of the situation during the pandemic discouraged some foreign workers from risking the costs and uncertainties of migration for the few weeks of the fruit harvest, thus opening up more opportunities to foreign workers already present in the area, particularly refugees and asylum seekers:

Last year, in the autumn 2020, for the apple harvest, a big chunk of the workforce that comes from Romania was missing: partly because they were scared of Covid in Italy,

partly discouraged by the cost of the swabs and other expenses—because there was an initial cost for a swab in Romania, which meant that the worker had to spend 70 euros immediately, then 150 euros for the trip, which is not paid by the employer, and this year, the cost has also increased because drivers who came to Italy had to go through quarantine, so they raised the costs to cover the cost of this quarantine; then many were stopped at the border because they did not have a legal swab result certified by an official Romanian agency. So, workers from sub-Saharan Africa, young black men, refugees, were recruited to pick apples. (Interview 18. Trade unionist, male, 55 years old)

This was also confirmed by a reception system social worker who reported that it was the apple companies themselves who contacted the co-operatives to recruit asylum seekers:

There was a shortage of seasonal workers from the East, who were stuck this year. [...] Companies would even call me personally to say: ‘Send people up! We need people!’ [...] Since there is this demand in agriculture, little groups of intermediation are created. The Nigerian who knows the company, and the owner asks for him to lend a hand finding workers! Before, there were no Nigerian asylum seekers or refugees, this, year I saw them. Many Pakistani people also did it, being paid very little. (Interview 21. Reception system social worker, female, 35 years old)

Based on data from the Labour Agency and statements made by Coldiretti Trentino Alto Adige and Confagricoltura, we can see the aforementioned role of the pandemic in *accelerating*—rather than creating from scratch—a trend that was already underway due to the more favourable conditions for the labour force of EU citizens (from Eastern Europe).

Thus, the effects of the health emergency were locally mitigated by active quarantine and gave new momentum to the already existing recourse to refugees and asylum seekers in agriculture. We should also consider the effect of the regularisation measure approved in the framework of the so-called ‘Decreto Rilancio’ (Decree-Law, 34/2020). This was another tool that explicitly aimed at protecting individual and collective health while giving the possibility of regularisation to workers in agriculture and in the domestic and care sectors. This pool of potential beneficiaries seems to be decided not so much according to the ‘occupational areas in which irregular migrants are more numerous’ but ‘to the sectors where foreign labour seems most useful, or even essential—because it is difficult to replace’ (Campomori & Marchetti 2020, p. 320). In Trentino, as in the rest of Italy, it did not have significant ‘quantitative’ implications for the agricultural sector, having more of an impact in the areas of care and domestic work (Ministero del Lavoro, 2020): Out of the 873 applications received in Trentino, only 26% concerned agriculture and related activities (although this was a higher percentage than the 15% calculated at the national level). It was already clear to agricultural organisations that the measure would not solve the problem of finding labour, for in a system in which entrepreneurs only employ labourers for a few weeks, it was unlikely they would ‘bear the considerable costs of the legalisation procedure’ (ibidem, p. 83).

CONCLUSION

This article contributes towards enriching the now fruitful sociological debate on the transformations of agriculture in the Mediterranean area that have led to new forms of work and production

and, above all, to an intensification of the recruitment of migrant labour (Corrado et al., 2017; Gerstel & Sippel, 2017). This process consistently follows the ‘Mediterranean migration model’, which characterises the countries in the area (King & De Bono, 2013; Pugliese, 2011).

Specifically, it focuses on changes in the forms of the recruitment, organisation and composition of the migrant labour force in the agricultural labour market in Trentino (Italy), which is considered a virtuous model due to its organisational efficiency and the relatively few instances of severe exploitation.

Trentino agriculture is mainly concentrated on apples—accounting for over a fifth of national production—as well as small fruits and grapes, and is based on the extensive use of migrant labour from Eastern European countries (principally from Romania, followed by Poland and Slovakia), particularly due to the increasing unavailability of local labour. Over time, small and medium-sized enterprises have built up relationships of trust with migrant workers—almost all of them men with seasonal contracts—for whom they provide accommodation and organise transport each year, thus establishing a mechanism that encourages a stable labour supply. Driven by their labour needs, employers’ organisations and local public institutions have lobbied for the streamlining of recruitment practices abroad, creating an experience of seasonal labour immigration that is ‘regulated’ by the needs of the market.

Over the years, however, the ‘Trentino model of agriculture’ has been undermined by the partial reorientation of the work trajectories and mobility of workers, who have begun to turn to Central European countries (especially Germany) or to other segments of the labour market (e.g., the cruise ship industry), which offer better wages and working conditions. Some have also begun to find work opportunities in their country of origin, thus making working in Italy less attractive.

Along with this change in the composition of agricultural labour, there has also been a change in the composition and modalities of migration in Trentino and across Italy as a result of more restrictive national migration policies and political-social transformations at an international level. The latter has resulted in the arrival of new nationalities of migrants in Europe, using the only regular entry channels that has remained semi-open (in addition to family reunification), namely, international protection. The growing availability of a labour force made up of refugees and asylum seekers, originating from various countries in sub-Saharan Africa and the Indian sub-continent, in part satisfies the needs of Trentino companies, triggering a slow but progressive ‘refugeeisation’ of the agricultural workforce (Della Puppa & Sanò, 2021a; Dines & Rigo, 2015).

What for now can only be defined as a ‘trend’ strongly accelerated following the outbreak of the pandemic, which has further slowed down temporary immigration from Eastern EU countries, making it more difficult for employers to organise and recruit labour from these countries and less convenient for these workers to move seasonally to Italy. This is why the pool of labour made up of asylum seekers has been established as an alternative recruitment channel, despite measures taken at both a national level (the amnesty through which agricultural workers can be regularised) and a local level (the so-called ‘green corridors’ and ‘active quarantine’) that have simply revealed the needs and interests of companies, which are often to the detriment of workers.

The refugeeisation of the agricultural workforce seems to have intensified following the pandemic, which has further modified (or interrupted) migration trajectories, seasonal trajectories and working trajectories of EU workers and, consequently, accelerated the recruitment of refugees and asylum seekers for fruit harvesting, as well as modifying the methods used for the management and organisation of the workforce.

This change in the methods and forms of recruitment and in the composition of agricultural work allows us to see the functioning of civic stratification mechanisms (Lockwood, 1996; Morris, 2003) that penalize the status of humanitarian protection more than other civic-legal statuses such

as, for example, those for subordinate work deriving from other methods of entry into Italy. In this sense, the refugeeisation process is also fuelled by the civic stratification mechanisms that are now unfolding at a European level: Refugees and asylum seekers who are geographically immobile and socio-juridically ‘trapped’ in limbo (Della Puppa & Sanò, 2021a) are ‘stuck’ in Italy and can thus be forced to submit to wages lower than those received by EU foreign workers, who can orient their own work trajectories across the whole EU context. Thus, the intersection of these mechanisms results in an inevitable refugee gap, (also) exacerbated by ‘international civic stratification’ (Bakker et al., 2014; Bevelander & Pendakur, 2014; Connor, 2010).

The transformations in the mechanisms of recruitment and in migrant labour composition—in other words, the refugeeisation of the workforce (Della Puppa & Sanò, 2021a; Dines & Rigo, 2015)—in agriculture in Trentino is not entirely new but an intensification of a trend that was already underway due to changes in migration policies and the advent of the pandemic—which also accelerated some pre-existing trends. The novelty of this process consists in the replacement of the migrant labour force that arrives (or are administratively regularised) through being given amnesty—that is, so-called ‘economic migrants’—with a migrant labour force that arrives (or is administratively regularized) through international protection and asylum channels—that is, so-called ‘forced migrants’. This has meant a change in the nationalities of the migrant labour force—EU migrants, from Eastern Europe, have decreased while sub-Saharan and South-East Asians have increased, especially Nigerians and Pakistanis—as well as in the internationally deployed mechanisms of civic stratification and in the refugee gap.

We can thus conclude that the trend of the ‘refugeeisation’ of the agricultural workforce is also emerging in Trentino. Indeed, it is true that immigrant workers have been employed in Italian agriculture since the 1990s (a key aspect of the Southern European migration model), but these were immigrants entering Italy through the flow decrees, holding resident permits for work (either long-term or seasonal), or were undocumented migrants (overstayers, or awaiting amnesty, again for economic reasons). Now, in the absence of flow decrees and policies allowing regular entries for economic reasons, a progressively larger portion of the migrant workforce in agriculture consists of asylum seekers and/or refugees as evidenced in the literature (Caruso, 2018; Della Puppa & Sanò, 2021a; Dines & Rigo, 2015). While this phenomenon was clearly visible and well-analysed in the regions of Southern Italy (*ibidem*), it is now emerging, albeit slowly, in the Northern regions as well, such as Trentino. However, a distinction should be emphasised. The process of ‘refugeeisation’ of the agricultural workforce in Southern Italy has been analysed as the outcome of a change in entry policies that have almost blocked the regular entry channels for work, alongside an increase in the entry channel of international protection (Dines & Rigo, 2015) or the result of the ‘entrapment’ and forced immobility to which refugees and asylum seekers in Italy are legally and geographically subjected (Della Puppa & Sanò, 2021a). However, in the context of Trentino, the ‘refugeeisation’ of the workforce appears to be the result of a partial substitution, driven by the gradual scarcity of migrant seasonal workers from European Union countries who were traditionally employed in those areas.

These trends were already underway before 2020 due to the increasing unavailability of immigrant labour from Eastern European countries in the EU (mainly Romania and Poland), as workers moved towards Central European countries (primarily Germany), forcing employers in Trentino to recruit asylum seekers locally. The pandemic, and, above all, its restrictions on international mobility, further increased the need to recruit a labour force that was available locally— asylum seekers and refugees—to make up for the increasing lack of Eastern Europeans. From the point of view of the composition of the workforce, although Romanian and Polish are still some of the most represented nationalities among agricultural labourers in Trentino, in recent years,

as a result of the aforementioned dynamics, there has been a growth in the number of Nigerian, Pakistani and Senegalese labourers. These workers are recruited from areas in Trentino close to where the harvesting takes place and often from the refugee and asylum seeker reception centres.

It should also be emphasised that, as the literature underlines (Della Puppa & Sanò, 2021a, 2021b), the distinction among asylum seekers, undocumented migrants and refugees is progressively blurring. However, this phenomenon is precisely the outcome of the current Italian migration policies (Della Puppa et al., 2020), which (1) eliminated any channel for regular entry for work and economic reasons—forcing migrants to resort to the international protection channel; (2) made the attainment of international protection more arduous—thereby creating extensive contingents of undocumented immigrants, constituting a reserve labour force army, primarily engaged in the agricultural sector; (3) dismantled the SAI, which was the only mechanism providing some opportunity for genuine social integration—consequently subjecting even those who obtain a residence permit for international protection to the same social, material, occupational and housing conditions as the undocumented migrants and pushing them towards the agricultural labour.

In any case, it is thus still unclear why this term is introduced in this case and what the ‘refugeeisation’ of the agricultural labour force entails in terms of changes in the agricultural labour market. These dynamics obviously contribute towards changes in the demographic and social scenario in rural areas and agricultural labour markets. At the same time, they pose new challenges—which could also open up new topics of research—regarding possible forms of wage dumping and the risk of increases in instances of serious labour exploitation—such as ‘*caporalato*’—both of which are currently relatively rare in Trentino, although some isolated instances can be found. This raises the question as to how trade unions can help to confront these challenges. Future research could also make use of interviews with migrant workers themselves, in order to get a better understanding of their perspective, as a complement to this research.

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ENDNOTES

¹The latest available data on Italian agriculture and the use of immigrant labour in the agricultural sector in Italy are those reported by Macri (2022). Unfortunately, more recent data are not available.

²This explains the absence of more up-to-date data than that supplied by Macri (2022).

³The quantitative data refer to the year 2022 and has been processed by the Statistical Service of the Autonomous Province of Trento.

⁴Obviously, an analysis of the narratives of immigrant workers seasonally employed in agriculture in Trentino would have painted a picture of the meanings and motivations of their actions and choices that would have enriched and completed the present research. However, due to limited economic resources and time, this was not possible but could undoubtedly provide further insight for upcoming research.

⁵These data are different from those on employment because they are not calculated ‘per head’ but by the number of recruitments in a year, so the same person could be counted twice if they have several hires in a year.

⁶It should be noted that this process is also modifying the forms of housing (Scott & Visser, 2022) of the workforce leading to the setting up of informal camps typical of the ‘camp form’ (Sanò et al., 2021).

⁷See *il Dolomiti*, 3 April 2020; <https://www.ildolomiti.it/cronaca/2020/coronavirus-lagricoltura-trentina-in-allarme-mancano-i-lavoratori-stagionali-servono-i-voucher-per-la-manodopera-italiana>

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The authors have nothing to report.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

LIST OF THE INTERVIEWEES

Interview 1. Mayor, male, 49 years old

Interview 2. Mayor, male, 65 years old

Interview 3. Trade unionist, female, 39 years old

Interview 4. Trade unionist, male, 67 years old

Interview 5. Trade unionist, female, 42 years old

Interview 6. Trade unionist, male, 55 years old

Interview 7. Employers' organisation representative, male, 60 years old

Interview 8. Employers' organisation representative, male, 47 years old

Interview 9. Employers' organisation representative, male, 57 years old

Interview 10. Local employer, male, 69 years old

Interview 11. Local employer, male, 58 years old

Interview 12. Job Centre official, male, 57 years old

Interview 13. Job Centre official, female, 49 years old

Interview 14. Reception system social worker, female, 35 years old

Interview 15. Reception system social worker, male, 38 years old

Interview 16. Trade unionist, female, 41 years old

Interview 17. Trade unionist, female, 39 years old

Interview 18. Trade unionist, male, 55 years old

Interview 19. Employers' organisation representative, male, 60 years old

Interview 20. Employers' organisation representative, male, 47 years old

Interview 21. Reception system social worker, female, 35 years old

Interview 22. Reception system social worker, male, 38 years old

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