



Open letter to the European Commission and European Parliament on urgent and necessary measures in Europe for rural workers in the context of COVID-19

Brussels, 30 April 2020

To:

Commissioner for Health and Food Safety, Stella Kyriakides
Commissioner for Agriculture, Janusz Wojciechowski
Commissioner for Environment, Oceans and Fisheries, Virginijus Sinkevičius
Commissioner for Employment and Social Rights, Nicolas Schmit
Commissioner for Equality, Helena Dalli

Chair of the European Parliament Committee on Agriculture and Rural Development, Nobert Lins
Chair of the European Parliament Subcommittee on Human Rights, Maria Arena
Chair of the European Parliament Committee on Employment and Social Affairs, Lucia Ďuriš Nicholsonová
Chair of the European Parliament Committee on the Environment, Public Health and Food Safety, Pascal Canfin

CC:

President of the European Council, Charles Michel

This 1 May we celebrate the International Workers' Day in a unique and extraordinary context: the deep social and economic crisis generated by the COVID-19 pandemic. This crisis is showing that the working classes are essential for the global economy to function, whilst at the same time underlining that their situation of vulnerability, exclusion and poverty mean this group is most affected by the health and socio-economic consequences of the pandemic. The great challenge now is to assess whether the economic recovery to be undertaken in the wake of the pandemic will once again fall on the shoulders of working people and those who are excluded. Or, alternatively, will be an opportunity for much-needed structural reforms, in order to cover the basic needs of the population, facilitate social cohesion and put respecting human rights above protecting market power and the profits of banks and large corporations.

In this context, the European Coordination Via Campesina (ECVC), with the support of other organisations, would like to express our unwavering commitment and solidarity with local and migrant workers in all countries, and especially with those in rural areas and in the agricultural, forestry, pastoral and fisheries sectors, who are needed to guarantee food supplies for the entire population. In recent months, we have supported the many initiatives and proposals made in this vein by workers' unions, migrants' associations and civil society organisations. Now, we



wish to highlight the need that both the way this crisis is managed and the European social and economic policies in general, including the CAP, the Green Deal, the Farm to Fork strategy and others, must, without fail, consider the interests and rights of this sector of the population.

The measures taken by the various European governments in the face of the growing COVID-19 pandemic – confining populations, restricting mobility and suspending multiple economic activities, for example – have had enormous impact on the primary production sector. In view of this, **we at ECVC cannot accept that maintaining food production continues to be done at the expense of the health, rights and dignity of rural and migrant workers.**

In general, the already difficult situation of agricultural workers has been aggravated. Already, this group often faces severe structural vulnerability, precarity in terms of employment, housing and social services, as well as discrimination due to their status as migrants.

The need to continue productive activity in the countryside, including the handling, transport and marketing of agricultural products, to ensure the population can be fed, has not been accompanied by adequate measures and sufficient resources. The economic interests of the large production and marketing companies have taken precedence over the health and basic rights of rural and migrant workers.

Indeed, we are witnessing a lack of protective material in the workplace, such as masks or prevention equipment, or necessary control measures such as tests, hygienic conditions and distances between people, in working conditions that are already stressful and permanently under pressure. In addition, safe transport has also not been guaranteed; restrictions have been placed on the number of passengers in a vehicle, and no alternative has been provided. Cases of pressure to extend working hours as well as reductions in rights and dismissals, are common (in France, hours have been legally extended from 48 to 60 hours per week, for example). In general, governments have not ensured sufficient and immediate financial coverage to enable workers to choose to stay at home in situations of risk, or to ensure their basic needs when they have lost their jobs or cannot access them because of travel restrictions.

This situation is even more extreme in communities of seasonal migrant workers living in informal settlements or slums, such as in Andalusia or southern Italy, where there are not adequate conditions of hygiene or essential services. For these people, the obligation of confinement poses serious risk to their health and their lack of resources, food and drinking water. Immigration laws create additional documentation problems for migrant workers without work authorization or with expired permits, which hinders them in exercising their labour, social, and healthcare rights. The regularizations afforded in some States are insufficient, since they do not provide for comprehensive coverage of migrants' rights but are designed only to meet the need for additional labour.

The closure of internal and non-EU borders has led to an alarming labour shortage, as it has restricted the movement of hundreds of thousands of agricultural workers, who normally work the agricultural seasons in Europe. However, once again the discourse and measures surrounding this issue are focused on maintaining production and marketing and not on the human rights of workers. Thus, in Eastern European countries such as Romania, border restrictions have been relaxed to allow thousands of people to move to German farms without adequate control measures or health guarantees. On the other hand, government policies have been implemented to motivate local workers to work in agriculture, allowing them to receive economic benefits from the agricultural salary, without recognizing that in most cases the low salaries and poor conditions mean that only temporary migrants accept these jobs, due to their extreme need and vulnerability.



In order to overcome the COVID-19 pandemic, we believe States and European institutions must first and foremost safeguard the fundamental rights of individuals, ensuring compliance with the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, the Declaration on the Rights of Peasants and other people working in rural areas (UNDROP), the International Convention on the Rights of All Migrant Workers and their Families, as well as the relevant ILO conventions, in particular Convention 184 on Safety and Health in Agriculture.

We therefore call for a series of **URGENT MEASURES** to guarantee the health, employment, housing and a sufficient income for rural and migrant workers, so that their work can continue to contribute to the production of food for the entire population:

Housing and basic necessities

- Urgent mobilisation of EU and State funds to **strengthen essential health and social services for** universally available pandemic prevention and care in **rural areas**, and to ensure adequate health conditions in worker housing and accommodation, especially in **informal settlements**. Access to drinking water, food and adequate resources should be urgently provided when people are unable to move or are without employment or social benefits.
- A European agreement for States to ensure that **migrants and refugees, through extraordinary regularization**, are able to obtain and renew their residence and work permits without any obstacles, in order to be able to maintain their employment relationship in adequate conditions and guarantee the necessary health and social care, in a situation of equality with other workers. This agreement also implies the immediate **release of** all persons held in **detention centres**, who must be provided with health and socio-economic support, as well as the **elimination of all discriminatory police and security action** based on identification by ethnic profile, with effective and rigorous sanctions for those responsible.
- A European agreement and urgent mobilization of special funds for States to ensure a sufficient and unconditional **basic income** for all rural workers, regardless of their legal administrative status or type of employment relationship, to enable them and their families to subsist in dignified conditions in cases of loss or lack of employment, taking into account the special situation of migrant workers displaced by the quota system in case their employment situation is affected by mobility restrictions.

Employment and sanitary protection in the workplace

- Ban on dismissals and on the imposition of extended working hours. Full respect for **labour rights** and sufficient income must be guaranteed in all circumstances and without any form of discrimination. Guaranteed continuity of the employment relationship after the state of alarm in cases where work has been suspended due to the health crisis.
- Guarantee of economic support (100% of salary) and adequate health care for potentially exposed workers so that they are not forced to continue working instead of voluntarily going into self-quarantine or taking medical leave.
- Obligation on employers to provide **safe transport** and **adequate housing** for all their employees, as well as to increase breaks during the working day to allow for hygiene measures and adapting the pace of work to meet distance, safety and wellbeing requirements.
- Definition and application of European protocols for compliance with **health conditions and protection** against **occupational risks** from COVID-19 during transport and in the workplace, including rapid tests and provision of adequate protective equipment in the field and in processing plants, guaranteed by the responsible authorities and the Labour Inspectorate, which must be strengthened in these circumstances.



- Assumption by the EU and the governments of the countries of origin and destination of the **displaced agricultural and food sector** workers during the COVID-19 pandemic of **joint responsibility for the safety of the workers**, guaranteeing the implementation of all the necessary prevention measures in the call, in transport (including stations and airports) and in the workplace in the host country, with the obligation to inform the workers about the prevention measures. This joint responsibility extends to cases of health and social monitoring in cases of contagion, and control on return.
- Imposition in all cases of the contractual and legal responsibilities both for the **employment intermediaries**, subcontractors and farms where the work is carried out, with special attention for cases of international displacements.

Public Policy: social conditionality of the CAP and other emergency aid

- **Social conditionality in the CAP** and all public aid, which must involve maintaining employment as an inexcusable condition, as well as paying sufficient wages, and the providing legal and decent working, social and housing conditions.
- **A European protocol on agricultural employment** which allows the legal recruitment of any worker, whether local or migrant, regardless of his or her administrative documentary status, and guarantees compliance with legal, decent and sufficient wages and working and housing conditions, through the monitoring and control of the Labour Inspectorate and the Territorial Commissions on Agricultural Employment. During the pandemic, the continued activity of trade unions, mediation centres and courts must also be maintained, guaranteed and facilitated, in order to channel workers' complaints during agricultural seasons.

The current COVID-19 health crisis has highlighted a series of contradictions and previous socio-economic imbalances that are at the root of the worsening crisis and expose an enormous vulnerability in the face of possible new pandemics or similar crises of a global nature. Among these causes are undoubtedly the privatization of public services as well as the marginalization of small-scale agricultural production and the rural world in general. It has become evident that the European agricultural sector is highly dependent on migrant workers, who in turn are experiencing the systematic violation of their labour, social and documentation rights. The visibility of these circumstances offers an opportunity to implement structural reforms to guarantee the basic rights of peasants and rural workers, and continue their essential contribution to the economy, the planet, public health and the cohesion of our society.

To this end, we believe it is essential to work on an extensive agreement that contemplates the defence of the public health system and the health and well-being of individuals, the soil, the environment and provides healthy and nutritious food for all. We need special funds to protect the lives of all, from disease but also from social marginalization, wars and shipwrecks in the Mediterranean. In addition, we need the necessary amendments to the European Directives on Migration and Refugees, on Seasonal Workers and on the Movement of Workers in order to ensure the regulation of migration flows and the recruitment, transport and labour provision of seasonal workers from the primacy of human rights and not market profits. Respect for the right to asylum, documentation and non-discrimination of migrants, stability and the labour and housing rights of seasonal workers must be guaranteed, as well as the prohibition of abusive practices by employment intermediaries. It is also essential to guarantee a minimum income for all rural workers during periods of inactivity or low income, and to establish social conditionality in CAP aid and in any other public subsidies or benefits established for agricultural enterprises.



As European peasant and rural workers' organizations, together with our allies, we believe that, in the face of the authoritarian drifts and the control of the market and big corporations on our lives, we are facing a historic opportunity to rebuild our societies from another agrarian, socio-economic and cultural model: a model anchored in human rights and the sustainability of the planet, in which the integration, respect and central role of rural workers and migrants is fundamental.

SIGNATORIES

[The updated list of signatories is available online](#)

REGIONAL-INTERNATIONAL ORGANISATIONS

European Coordination Via Campesina
Slow Food Europe
Friends of the Earth Europe (FoEE) Transnational Institute - TNI
URGENCI
Commission for Filipino Migrant Workers - International Office
FIAN International
European Alternatives
Global Social Justice

NATIONAL ORGANISATIONS

Crocevia, Italy
Fresh Eyes, UK
Colectivo Jornaleras de Huelva en Lucha, Spain
FIAN Belgium, Belgium
FIAN Sweden, Sweden
FIAN Austria, Austria
Sustainability and Participation through Education and Lifelong Learning (SPELL),
Philippines
Indian Social Action Forum – INSAF, India
Association des Démocrates Thaïlandais Sans Frontières, France
Association Pleine Mer, France
SAP-GA, Belgium
Waling-Waling Organization Supporting The Migrant Domestic Workers, UK
Akhuwat-E-Kissan, Pakistan
Pakistan Kissan Rabita Committee, Pakistan
Ukrainian Rural Development Network Public Union, Ukraine
Information, Koordination, Tagungen – INKOTA, Germany
SAP-GA, Belgium
Food Justice Group at the University of Bristol, UK
Another Europe is Possible, UK
Sezonieri-Kampagne - Campaign for migrant agricultural workers' rights, Austria
Left Unity, UK

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