

<https://gegen-kapital-und-nation.org/en/covid-19-and-harvest-20/>

Covid-19 and Harvest-20

That the profession of farmer is in principle a precarious and arduous affair is something borne out by almost any news story on agriculture. As suppliers of raw materials for the food industry, a successful branch of capitalist production, farmers have to invest huge sums of money. In contrast to the food industry, however, the advances in productivity never really pay off for them. Agriculture survives in capitalist countries only with large state subsidies, the working hours of farmers are significantly higher than those of wage labourers, and yet their *income* is not really different from the average UK income. Somehow there must be a catch in the direct processing of nature with regard to monetary yields – which is a question for another time. In any case, it becomes clear that in cases where extremely cheap labourers are used in agriculture, this is not a case of the usual profit calculation of companies, i.e. “the more cheap labour, the more profit”. Rather, agriculture as an industry under capitalism does worse than most, even with low wages: low wages are a requirement for any income at all to be made in this sector.

Prior to the impact of Brexit, 75,000 people were employed as seasonal workers in agriculture, with 98% of them estimated to be from other EU countries – mostly in Eastern Europe. [*Migrant workers in Agriculture, House of Commons Library*](#)

So agriculture is not a particularly profitable sector of the economy and the industry is therefore dependent on particularly low wages. Fortunately, farmers have been able to fall back on people freed from Real Socialism, who want to work en masse in the West for poor wages (just as in the care sector), because the alternatives at home are even shittier. This happy situation has foundered on the rocks of two issues – Brexit, and now the Covid-19 pandemic.

Last year farmers were already complaining about the lack of workers willing to come to the UK. Romanian and Bulgarian workers had somehow got the message that they might not be welcome here, and in any case an unfavourable exchange rate made Germany, Spain and the Netherlands [*more attractive destination*](#). The National Farmers Union, fearing the loss of these workers, has decried government plans not to offer visas to low-skilled workers, and fought for the [*expansion of a Seasonal Workers pilot scheme*](#).

Now, in 2020, the matter has been compounded by a pandemic and the international travel restrictions affecting borders across Europe. To make matters worse, anyone who did travel would be in cramped accommodation and working conditions that make social distancing impossible. This brought (and still brings) many farmers in the cauliflower, strawberry and pumpkin industry into hardship. There is simply a lack of workers.

Where can farmers turn to for help? One traditional answer has been [*undocumented migrants*](#). After all, where can you find people who have worse prospects than the normal wage earner from Eastern Europe? In the form of people who, due to the particularly lousy legal position into which they have been put, have no access to the benefit system and consequently no choice but to accept any work they can get.

Reliance on dodgy gangmasters isn't enough however. Economics 101 might suggest that the solution to a labour shortage is to increase the wage – but that lever is not available to employers

in the agricultural sector and the State chooses not to make it available. Instead, two alternative strategies are pursued in parallel.

On the one hand, farmers, backed by the environment Secretary, therefore *turned to nationalism*, with a dash of WWII nostalgia, calling for a *“land army”* to “help feed the nation”, reckoning on the patriotism or desperation of unemployed and furloughed workers to keep calm, carry on, and dig for victory. 10,000 *swiped right*. But despite the initial enthusiasm, only *112 have actually accepted a job on a UK farm*. The State has therefore made a renewed bid to encourage the unemployed, furloughed workers and students to *‘Pick for Britain’*.

On the other hand, the farming industry had realised a land army wasn’t going to cut it¹. Taking advantage of the lifting of Romanian travel restrictions, planes were chartered to transport seasonal workers to support the celebrated volunteers and the less celebrated off-the-books migrants. But the numbers being brought over are only a fraction of the *80,000 Eastern European workers* who are counted on to bring in the harvest.

Assembling enough workers aside, COVID-19 presents yet another challenge in this field – how to expose people on low pay to working conditions that break their backs while avoiding negative health implications - not for them, but for the nation, i.e. *without spreading the virus*. If enough patriots step forward and maintain *their two meters* this might work and strawberry season isn’t cancelled after all.

¹In the wake of the 2008 financial crisis the Departments for Work and Pensions and for Environment, Food, and Rural Affairs tried to encourage agricultural work as a solution to rising unemployment. On average, such workers *stayed for one week*.