

A Collective Refusal: When Actions Speak Louder Than Words

Every year, Europe's olives are harvested by an underpaid foreign workforce in Western Sicily. Seasonal workers start gathering in Campobello di Mazara at the beginning of October, with the prospect of a few weeks' work in the fields. Unlike other sectors, where temporary work is typically better paid and allows workers to make extra money to cover expenses during the off-season, salaries in the Sicilian agricultural sector—especially in olive-picking—are so low they fail to cover basic living expenses. Racialization and class segregation do the rest, making it impossible for those who could afford temporary housing in the village to actually rent it.



You may have gathered at this point that these workers are often racialized as Black, sometimes lack a permit of stay, and are marked by years of exclusion from the health and welfare system.

The response of European policy has lacked imagination. Instead of treating them as normal seasonal workers, the EU has

encouraged local authorities to build dedicated camps. Since 2023, these camps have been under construction and local authorities have been evicting workers from the housing solutions (often shack-like and makeshift dwelling) they had found on their own over the years to force their relocation into such enclaves. While evictions have been a routine risk for seasonal workers, they have recently become more systematic and violent.

Ironically, this year the official camp—"Fontane d'Oro," entrusted to the Red Cross—did open. It has been expanded and equipped with proper toilets and showers. It opened, however, at the end of the olive harvest. Agriculture runs on a cyclical, predictable calendar. Housing and basic rights should not be treated as a perpetual emergency to be solved after the season has essentially passed.

This begs a blunt question: where have the workers who keep the local supply chain moving lived until now?

The answers have been visible to anyone willing to look. Many have slept in rural warehouses without running water or electricity. Others have pitched camping tents on employers' land or waited overnight in the town square for a job the next morning.

Something is different this year. Many workers have chosen not to return to Campobello. The problem is not the absence of work. It is the absence of housing and dignity. This collective refusal—quiet but forceful—resembles no organized strike, yet it exerts pressure all the same: employers stop people in the street because they cannot find workers, and a supply chain discovers its fragility when those who sustain it cannot live where they labor. What remains of a community when the people who keep it going cannot inhabit it? And conversely, what does a territory become when it expels its workforce while depending on it?

Real progress will be measured not by the reopening of camps at the eleventh hour, but by the creation of stable, dignified living conditions that acknowledge workers not as disposable labor, but as residents, neighbours, and essential members of the territory they sustain.

Arci Porco Rosso - October 2025 Foto Credits: Giulia Gianguzza