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Roma berry pickers in Sweden

Economic crisis and new contingents of the *austeriat*

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ABSTRACT In the current era of austerity free movement of labour has produced an ongoing but also contingent flow of migrant labour, an *austeriat*, moving from poorer crisis-hit regions of Europe to those countries such as Sweden where the crisis has been less severe. This article describes the working and living experiences of Bulgarian Roma berry pickers in Sweden. It argues that, in the context of a previously well-regulated labour market, an erosion of labour standards based on the exploitation of seasonal unskilled labour migrants from Bulgaria is occurring in the Swedish berry industry, in turn posing challenges for labour market actors and regulatory authorities. The article concludes with a discussion of what might be appropriate European and national trade union responses to the issues of labour precariousness which have emerged.

KEYWORDS Roma, berry pickers, Bulgaria, *austeriat*, migration, Sweden, free movement

Since 2007 (following the Accession Treaty of 2005), the largest Roma communities in Europe (from Bulgaria and Romania) have the same right to free movement already guaranteed under EU directives to Roma citizens from Hungary, the Czech Republic, Poland and Slovakia. And they have need of such a right today, as anti-Roma sentiment is on the rise. The ancient prejudice against the Roma is now combined with a very modern disgust with the destitute, as austerity digs deeper into the lives of the working and workless poor. (Fekete, 2014: 61)

Introduction

This article describes the crisis-driven temporary migration of Bulgarian Roma to Sweden to participate in seasonal berry picking and their resulting difficulties which have led to renewed concerns regarding the labour conditions of migrants in this sector. The aim is to analyse the processes driving this migration and how poor labour conditions in this situation are dealt with by the workers themselves, as well as the authorities, trade unions, the industry and engaged civil society actors. The article is organized as follows: the first part introduces the notion of a migrant *austeriat* as a mobile population of workers seeking survival employment in the context of the global crisis; the second part describes the interview methodology employed in this study, and elaborates some of the constraints which the researchers faced in acquiring informant testimony from a group that is hard to reach; the third and fourth parts describe the views of Roma on their working and living conditions in Sweden as berry pickers; the article next discusses the Swedish authorities' policy responses and those of the berry industry, trade unions and civil society. The conclusion returns to the problem of the *austeriat* and questions whether free movement can be so described in a period of protracted economic downturn, especially in Europe's periphery.

Roma migration in the context of the crisis

Sweden has been attractive for foreign migrants seeking seasonal work in the berry-picking industry since the turn of the millennium. Wild berries 'ripened in the midnight sun' are prized for their health-giving properties and are commercially processed into much-valued cosmetics creams. Thanks to *allemansrätten* or the 'right to roam', there is a legal right of every person to access open country, and anyone is free to pick berries wherever they find them (Sténs and Sandström, 2012). Other than for recreation or family consumption, however, few Swedes today would consider this kind of temporary seasonal employment as a worthwhile occupation.

The commercialized seasonal berry-picking industry which has grown up in Sweden offers arduous and low-paid work, involving long hours of harvesting in dank mosquito-ridden forests with only the simplest of gathering 'scoops' available as labour-saving tools. However, despite the low pay, and poor working and living conditions, for many unskilled seasonal migrants it offers the prospect of relatively lucrative earnings. Previously, third-country (non-EU) migrants, mainly Thai and other East Asian nationals, have been recruited to the berry-picking industry in Sweden as part of a global supply chain (Hedberg, 2013). However, continuing labour abuses receiving embarrassing national and even international attention, have led to the Swedish authorities tightening requirements for companies operating in this sector (OECD, 2010; Yimprasert, 2010; Wingborg, 2011; Vanaspong, 2012; Woolfson et al., 2012). The legal restrictions on 'non-serious' companies in the industry, in turn, have led to a search for a substitute labour force. This workforce has been recruited from among mainly Roma Bulgarians who arrived in Sweden seeking employment in the context of the deep crisis in their homeland as a direct function of the Great Recession which has strongly affected the peripheral European economy.

The global economic and financial crisis impacted southern Europe with particular intensity. Bulgaria already had the lowest levels of social and economic development in the enlarged European Union and the lowest per capita GDP, at less than 50 per cent of the EU average (Eurostat, 2013a). With the advent of the crisis, already-existing mass poverty has increased, with Bulgaria recording the highest levels of material deprivation in the European Union to date. Slightly more than one in every six (18.5 per cent) of the EU-28 population was materially deprived in 2011. In Bulgaria that figure was 60.1 per cent (Eurostat, 2013b). Over the space of 10 years from 2001, over 175,000 of the Bulgarian population have departed, many of whom were of Roma origin (OECD, 2013).

During the crisis, within Bulgaria its Roma population had been subject to a sharply heightening burden of poverty and social as well as physical exclusion (Dimitrova, 2009). Poverty rates are more than four times as high as among the Bulgarian population, while only one in three Roma lives above the poverty line (Bogdanov and Zahariev, 2011: 6). Roma are over-represented in the sectors most affected by the worsening economy such as construction, while during the crisis, unemployment levels in the Roma community have risen faster than those among other ethnic groups. The construction sector, which shrank by 30 per cent since the beginning of 2009, accounted for the largest share of employed Roma. Survey evidence suggests that unemployment among Roma leapt from 40 per cent in 2008 to nearly 61 per cent in the space of 12 months

(Dimitrova, 2009: 42–43). In conditions of severe austerity, the incentives to seek new sources of income and to embark upon migration journeys, however speculative, in search of temporary or seasonal employment were self-evident.

With the advent of the crisis, mobility within the European space has acquired a distinctive character, different from that which typified the more optimistic and often circular post-enlargement migrations accompanying the accession of east European post-communist states to the EU. The Roma may therefore be characterized as one of the contingents of a new migrant *austeriat*, driven by poverty and economic duress which has thrown millions of European citizens out of work from the Baltics to the Balkans since the Crash of 2008. This *austeriat* is a specific and contemporary historical manifestation (a variety) of the more generalized, if contested and somewhat amorphous, notion of the ‘precariat’ (Standing, 2011; Bremen, 2013). The more limited notion of *austeriat* suggested here, points to those *dis*-located groups of labour migrants compelled to use mobility, not so much as an economic opportunity, but as an economic survival strategy in times of recession. Thus, the term *austeriat* identifies those at the very bottom of the labour market hierarchy, for whom the crisis has exacted an especially heavy price in terms of employment informalization and reductions in living standards. The Roma populate the more impoverished contingents of this new *austeriat*. Their predicament, analysed in this article, is framed by enduring stigma of ethnicity and origin, in turn, reframed and heightened by the wider economic crisis. In its already impoverished periphery, some of Europe’s poorest citizens were propelled across the continent to seek economic relief in temporary seasonal work in one of Europe’s most affluent societies, Sweden.

Methodology

The main empirical evidence presented in this article has been gathered through qualitative interviews conducted with Bulgarian Roma migrant workers. In total 32 semi-structured interviews were undertaken (involving individuals or members of 12 groups of up to half a dozen individuals or families at one time). Additional interviews were conducted with inhabitants of the local community, police, local and national trade union representatives, local authorities and civil society organizations. These materials inform the analysis presented here but are not cited directly for reasons of space.

The interviews with Roma took place in three different settings throughout the berry-harvesting season of 2012, primarily in camps in the southern part of the north of Sweden. The interviews were conducted in several languages including Serbo-Croat, and on various occasions in Romani Chib, with

additional assistance from a Balkan Romani translator. The facility to speak and interpret in these languages enabled access to a group of informants who might be fairly characterized as hard to reach. The main interview site was a forest camp of some 400 people on the outskirts of 'Small-Town', Sweden, a typical Swedish small town. Complementary interviews were conducted in the surroundings of the camp area among separate groups who avoided living in the camp. A third set of interviews was carried out at a shelter established in Stockholm for Roma who had abandoned the camps in the forests, and were awaiting repatriation to Bulgaria. Those interviewed at the shelter came from two other camps also located in the same geographical area of northern Sweden in which in total about a dozen camps were established. What follows are excerpts from over 50 hours of transcribed recordings. These are the words of the participants themselves in what was an unfolding and increasingly difficult moment of personal crisis.

Some of the interviews were somewhat more constrained by the usually unseen but ubiquitous presence of the *patrons*, also from the Roma community, whose role was somewhat equivalent to that of a labour contractor. The *patrons* controlled groups of up to 10 or 20 separate individuals or sometimes families, most often recruited from the same village in Bulgaria. The *patrons*, together with their own accompanying family members, besides acting as recruiters and labour organizers of their fellow Roma, were capable of at least menace, if not of direct physical enforcement, in order to levy their share of the 'profits' gleaned by the berry pickers under their control.

The camps as a research setting therefore can be interpreted as providing interviews in a 'front-stage' arena, often under the watchful scrutiny of 'minders', albeit accompanied by whispered and furtive 'off-stage' disclosures. By contrast, informants interviewed at the other locations, either nearby in other locations in the forest, or among those who subsequently abandoned the camps and arrived in Stockholm seeking assistance to return home, provided more freely disclosed 'back-stage' information concerning their working and living conditions and their treatment by the *patrons*.

The Roma in Sweden: working relations and informality

Most informants had arrived directly from Bulgaria, but several spoke of experiences of living and working in other EU states – commonly in Italy, Spain or Germany. Those who had arrived in Sweden had high expectations of lucrative earnings to be had from picking the wild berries in the forests.

Some had even arrived as coordinated groups, having previously embarked on seasonal stays in other EU Member States. These accounts speak of different groups having arrived as families, colleagues and friends, who by joint investment had managed to pool sufficient finance to undertake a journey of some 5500 km. For many others, this journey meant taking on debts, or accepting offers from informal recruiters in Bulgaria of accommodation, travel costs and meals, in exchange for sharing their harvest on a 50:50 basis. Those who had arrived at the camp in their own vehicles had often brought informally contracted workers with them. The extent to which this had been an organized enterprise is difficult to grasp in detail, but the interview evidence suggests that the size of the groups of Roma who arrived ranged from jointly-investing single families to more extensive forms of informal contractual labour organization including workers who had arrived in two large busses from Bulgaria, accompanied by minivans and a larger trailer.

A common thread for most of those interviewed was the experience of poverty, exacerbated by the crisis, in which context seasonal labour migration seemed an opportunity to provide financial security for one's family in hard times. The informants conveyed a predicament well-documented in studies of Roma, where the difficulties of finding a job were common ground, but where finding a job sufficiently paid to maintain a satisfactory standard of living presents an almost insurmountable daily challenge (Pamporov, 2013: 44). Sara formulated this predicament: 'One month of living with four children, one had to get by with £60 - that's enough only to have flour and relish in the kitchen cabinet.'

By contrast, the expected earnings from berry picking were £50-£70 a day. However, soon after their arrival, because of lower berry prices offered to pickers and higher competition than expected for the best picking areas, the prospect of seasonal earnings was transformed into a matter of scraping together sufficient funds to recoup their investment costs in travel from their meagre returns from berry picking in order to return to Bulgaria. Pesha (not his real name as with all the informants quoted here) whose previous work was in construction, described this journey of hope and the disappointment that quickly followed in frank terms as it became clear that the berry-gathering harvest would not recoup their outlays:

'In Bulgaria there is no work. We heard there is work here so we came. In Bulgaria my occupation is in the construction sector [...]. But, the crisis has hit hard. All business has died [...]. Many Roma people have been fooled, they have bought mini-vans, hired people, they came here and then nothing. They ended up in debt. We at least are with relatives, friends and ourselves, we have not ended up in huge debts like others have.'

For many of those who arrived with the *patrons* however, there was the additional challenge of freeing themselves from an increasingly harsh set of circumstances without further losses or financial penalties, and of finding a way to return safely to Bulgaria. Ultimately around 650 Roma were repatriated according to estimates from local authority and embassy informants, a major logistics exercise financed by joint contributions of the Bulgarian authorities, the municipality of Stockholm and Swedish civil society.

Groups of Roma, recruited to pick berries had been bussed to Sweden from Bulgaria in an organized (albeit informal) system of labour recruitment. One complicating dimension in this account is that it was unclear in many cases who were in a position of direct employment dependency on the *patron*, and who were so-called ‘free pickers’, simply acting on her or his own behalf. Both groups were taking advantage of the opportunity for free movement within the enlarged EU, and legally had the right to reside in Sweden for three months without seeking residence permission. Their stay in Sweden was thus not registered by any of the Swedish authorities and although formally necessary to inform the Migration Board if the stay extends beyond this period in order to seek temporary residence permission, many seasonal and short-term migrant workers do not do so, and there are no further checks made. In addition, as ‘free movers’ (not in a formal employment relationship) they also had a right (as with any EU Member State citizen, including Swedes) to collect and sell berries without being liable for Swedish taxation contributions if their stay was six months or shorter.

The informality of employment statuses is well illustrated in the quotation below from Esma:

‘If I was to be asked at the border who I worked for, then (I was to say) ‘everybody works for himself’. If they asked, then ‘I worked for myself’, but I actually worked for him ... We were told to lie.’

Camp interviews conducted in specific clusters of tents suggested that there were indeed ‘no bosses’ and that ‘everybody worked for themselves’:

Luca: ‘Everybody works for himself.’

Sofia: ‘Berries can be found everywhere. And there is a guy that buys them. We have no boss, just so you know.’

Luca: ‘We are our own bosses.’

Thus, questions of exact legal status of work relations were clearly sensitive. However, Beli – one of the *patrons*, wanted to convey a clear understanding of the difficult situation he himself faced with his ‘employees’. Expecting to sell

the berries for at least £2.5/kg, he was dismayed to discover the prevailing price on offer from the buyers was no more than £1.2/kg. Beli complained:

‘You have also to take the workers into account. That is, I have arrived with workers. I share fifty-fifty, you understand? If they earn £20, £10 had to go to me, 10 to him. [...] It means, they are staying with me, and I cannot leave them.’

It seems that in the forests of Sweden the exploiters and exploited were each victims of a common predicament. Thus, when the expected returns from berry picking failed to materialize the situation impacted most severely on those who had financed the journey to Sweden through loans, but also on the free movers. In several interviews with those who had arrived with their own transportation, it was emphasized that now that they were already here, their only hope was to work to minimize the debts that awaited them back home and the interest that would be charged on these. Ilia and Mala explained:

Interviewer: ‘Then the plan is that you would give back a bit extra or? [...]’

Ilia: ‘Yes to give back a bit extra. To earn here, but now we don’t even have money to return. [...] We’ll try to find some way to get help to reach Bulgaria ... if it is possible.’

Interviewer: ‘What will you do when you arrive in Bulgaria, then you will need to pay back the money?’

Mala: ‘Slowly we will return it.’

Ilia: ‘I will sell my labour.’

Those who had arrived with a *patron* now faced more direct threats as the *patron*’s economic calculus collapsed. Interviews at the temporary shelter in Stockholm provided insight into how informally agreed unwritten contracts were progressively altered. Workers on the 50:50 sharing arrangement were earning £0.6/kg – some £5 per day (10 times less than they had expected). The narratives of those who had fled the camps relayed accounts of physical coercion and the threat of menace. In some cases, the *patron* unilaterally altered conditions, requiring that they first had to pay back the expenses for the trip that initially was said to be free of charge. Later, when no or only meagre amounts of berries were to be found, some reported that they were ordered to steal diesel and copper, and to collect empty bottles. Though constantly under surveillance by the *patron*’s relatives, they had nevertheless managed to escape and make the long journey from the north to the Bulgarian embassy in Stockholm. For some,

this was a journey that they had undertaken on foot, such was their desperation. For these workers, the *patrons* were simply mafia:

‘That’s how I would call them. Look here. I decided to leave, and with my friend I went. The luggage, and all, I left over there. Without any money, anything at all, I chose the road. [...] I have two children, two small children. I have not come here to steal.’

Another group struggled emotionally when explaining how their expectations of earning £50 per day after being recruited in their home village came to result in 12-hour shifts, constant isolation from other workers (in the case of those complaining), being poorly fed, and those earnings of £0.3-£0.5 per kg being stolen from them by the *patron’s* associates. In the next section the living conditions in the camps are described in more detail.

Living conditions in the camp

The forest camp outside the small town was initially superficially attractive according to those who were interviewed: camping being economical, close to forest areas reportedly rich in berries, providing information regarding available harvesting areas, and offering security in numbers, especially in view of fears of local hostility. In addition, there was the convenience of having a Swedish berry buyer arriving in the camp, and permission provided by the landowner to stay legally, in the face of evictions by police from other unauthorized locations, in some cases involving relocation up to six times. Being aware of these advantages, the motives of those who chose to avoid the camp were revealing. Here Violeta recounts her concerns:

‘We do not dare to go there, if we go there other Roma people will beat us. They will not let us go to their territory. They will take our identification cards. [...] Police does not know about this. It is the truth! It’s truth! Our people have told us. [...] They are workers who work for somebody [...] and then they receive this little (gestures). One has 20, the other one has 50 workers. [...] They are not families. There is no family! [...] Look here is an SMS (from a relative). They have nothing to eat [...] there is no bread, no water.’

Accounts regarding the poor living conditions were similar at all locations. Apart from numerous complaints regarding dampness, cold and the need for clothes, the most prevalent concern was the compulsion to minimize all expenditures, whether imposed by the *patron* or necessitated by the dire circumstances in which they found themselves. When asked if the *patron* had provided the meals

one responded: 'Yes, but it came from the containers. He went to Lidl and these stores where they throw away food. [...] The food came from the trash containers'. Those who arrived in their own private vehicles complained that up to half of all harvesting earnings went towards ongoing petrol-costs as they travelled about in search of good berry-picking areas; one *patron* even sighed that the situation undermined his 'responsibilities' towards his workers.

Securing the basic necessities for living proved to be an immense hurdle. Access to water was one of the most difficult initial problems, forcing improvisations. A common strategy was to fill water cans at petrol stations for later use in the camp. For some who were unfamiliar with the area, the search for water and other basic necessities meant a 60 km round-trip that entailed further expenses. For yet others, solving the problem of water supply meant digging their own water well in the camp. As the number of people steadily increased in the camp, so also the water facilities at local petrol stations became more frequently visited. Ultimately – after complaints from the petrol station-owners and local inhabitants who jammed the telephone lines of the local authorities which were well aware of the unsanitary conditions in the camp – the situation eased when the municipality acquired and installed water-cisterns in the immediate camp vicinity.

Although water for cooking became accessible, the lack of adequate sanitary facilities remained a difficulty throughout the summer. Make-shift toilets were constructed by digging holes in the ground and encircling them with curtains – a solution approved by the municipality. Still, the migrants continued visiting local public toilet facilities. Well aware of the locals' watchful eyes, Gavril articulated the unwanted stigma to a Roma person fulfilling basic hygiene needs:

'I don't want to go every day so that they will force me away. I am cultivated. I go when I wash myself, [...] I leave it pleasantly in there. A Swede when he sees that, he will say OK this is a good man. And not as some, they go in there, my brother, throw paper around, throw everything. And, Swedes what will they say? 'All of them are like that!'

In other instances attempts by Roma to use basic facilities had led to police interventions. One group was instructed not to enter a fast-food restaurant, unless they bought something more than a 50 cent ice cream. Yet another solution to manage personal hygiene was to visit a local bathing place. Once again, encounters with locals from the near-by village led to complaints. Angela, a local inhabitant, articulated her concerns and fears:

‘They wash clothes, their cars, and take care of their hygiene and all of this there. [...] It is wrong in a way. ‘Small-Town’ locals, it is their bathing place; therefore (we) have not wanted to go down there. [...] No, nobody dared to cycle there with (their) children.’

Irritation among members of the local community was heightened by the unwelcome sight of Roma searching for food in their rubbish bins. Strained relations with the local community remained throughout the Roma stay, and even after they had departed. When the Roma left the campsite, in some cases virtually fleeing an intolerable situation, there was little opportunity for the camp inhabitants to clean up the site themselves. However, humanitarian responses by local civil society actors also spontaneously emerged, in the form on-the-spot aid and support. For the inhabitants of Small-Town, the visible plight of the Roma, especially as they scavenged for food, was deeply disconcerting. In the words of one resident, Erik:

‘People felt sorry for them, that they have no money, no food, that it was horrible. It turned into two groups one could say. Some felt sorry for them, and others were still angry.’

Local women in the neighbouring rural community emptied their fridges, brought what they had at home and collected food from local grocery stores, in order to provide meals for those who had abandoned the camps but now faced a journey of 150 kilometres often by foot, to Stockholm and, they hoped, refuge. For local communities, confronted with the immediate actuality of fellow humans in distress, and at the same time, the unexpected arrival of a visible ‘other’ in their midst, these challenges tested the limits of their tolerance.

Swedish policy, industry, trade union and civil society responses

In the wake of successive years of poor harvests and continuing problems with the exploitation of migrant berry pickers, the regulatory situation for those arriving from third countries has been tightened although the situation for those from within the EU has remained much the same, posing problems of how to respond in the context of free movement. The Swedish national tax agency underlined its difficulties in enforcing existing laws to prevent abuse, especially where informal working arrangements exist, and the need for greater corporate responsibility by the berry industry. Here is the view of one specialist in the Swedish tax authority:

‘This patron, I am totally convinced that they have contacts in Sweden. And some of these, I know that they have contacts. Those that have these huge volumes (of berries), have that. They have 50 tons of berries, what will you do with it all? You have to have contacts. You cannot send out 100 persons to pick the berries and not know what to do with them, they rot. [...] This industry is a problem child, and it is not the fault of those who pick, but rather the existent Swedish berry buyers. They carry the responsibility, and we that buy the berries also have responsibility. [...] I am frustrated with this business, [...] we have arrived at this point that it is too expensive with Thais, but then we still need some others (as pickers).’

Having regulated more flagrant abuse of temporary migrant workers coming to Sweden from Thailand and the Far East, the Swedish authorities find themselves confronted with an industry that would appear to thrive on exploitation. The question of Swedish domestic legislative response also arises. Given that elements of criminality might seem to exist in terms of coercive relations between *patrons* and pickers whereby they can simply ‘extract’ the sales earnings from the pickers by menace there are important questions to be considered of the appropriate legal response by the state in particular, of how far the earnings of individual pickers can be protected from forms of wage theft. Swedish law on forced labour, which might provide the most appropriate means of redress, is itself poorly implemented despite a couple of prosecutions (Seidefors, 2014: 46).

In terms of civil society, Swedwatch, a ‘watchdog’ NGO which has scrutinized the Swedish berry industry since 2011, has recommended in several of their reports that the industry implement a programme of certified ‘full traceability’ of the berries, as a means of gaining some measure of effective control over ‘organised free harvesting’ (Wingborg, 2012: 22). In response, the leading Swedish food producers’ associations, including also major supermarkets such as ICA and Coop, announced in 2013 that, in joint collaboration with the bulk berry buyers, they would create guidelines for the middle-men berry buyers – instructing them to assess whether the individuals selling the berries at forest collection sites were actually the real collectors (Wingborg, 2013a). Though implemented to some degree at some buying-points, this voluntary initiative has not been fully complied with. At one of these stations observed, the only measure undertaken was to require the berry seller to present proof of identity. The middle-man buyer, on the other hand, complained that were he to refuse to buy berries from any given free picker, it could be highly problematic, both for the cashiers at the stations and for those who, in reality, had harvested them. While information as to the purchasing guidelines was available in several languages – stating that the one selling the berries must have actually picked them – most sellers remain free to sell large quantities at the buying-points, whether as the result of

their own individual or more organized berry-harvesting activities (Wingborg, 2013b). As an industry-led attempt to deal with the problems of informally organized labour, the purchasing guidelines to middle-men would appear to have limited value in dealing with the underlying problems.

In the berry industry, the major bulk berry-buying companies, particularly those who buy only a fraction of their total berry supplies from the forest pickers and middle-men, are aware of the reputational damage of ongoing negative publicity. They have called for stricter Corporate Social Responsibility-type clauses to regulate the industry (Wingborg, 2013a). By contrast, further along the supply chain, berry processors, especially companies competing with the larger operators and acquiring their supplies from the forest 'first-buyers', in most cases, have shown considerable reluctance to assume responsibility for the working and living conditions of these workers. One obligation that the industry could assume is to ensure that there are appropriate living facilities and decent campsites for berry pickers. Arguably, given the industrial scale of the harvesting operation with the recruitment of sizeable numbers of workers, the berry industry, until now profiting from informalized working arrangements, could also assume responsibility for ensuring a clear wage contract exists for each of the pickers from whom it purchases, providing the minimum income now specified for 'third-country migrants' in the berry-picking industry in Sweden. Even so, however, a perennial difficulty remains, in the context of Sweden's largely voluntaristic industrial relations model with its generally weak structures of enforcement by the competent authorities which in this case would have ultimate responsibility for oversight and ensuring 'equal treatment'.

Another central group of actors are the landowners for whom doubts over the preservation of the historic right to roam the countryside (*allmansrätten*) have regained importance due to unauthorized encampments being established by Roma. The main issue has been their frustration with the law regulating evictions from private land which requires application for an eviction notice from an enforcement authority. Eviction procedures mandate a €60 per person charge before the police can assist in implementing an eviction order. The sums, depending on the numbers of persons in the camp, can grow into vertiginous amounts for the landowners. This situation forced many landowners to tolerate encampments on their land until the end of the season, rather than have recourse to legal eviction procedures. The Federation of Swedish Farmers has taken the issue of evictions onto their own agenda, and even attempted test cases of eviction, aiming to cover some of the costs for their members. Meanwhile, national media have featured several stories concerning landowners erecting barricades on forest roads, digging trenches and placing large rocks as a means of inhibiting vehicle access to those seeking to set up encampments.

The establishment of Roma camps has also become an ongoing topic of concern among several municipalities in northern Sweden, not least due to the considerable costs entailed in assisting their inhabitants in what was effectively an emergency situation via their social services departments, a task for which they were ill-equipped even when well-intentioned. Local authorities were slow to react and did not see the matter as their responsibility at least, that is, until national television crews began to arrive on the scene. Following the 2012 season, the Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions informed its member municipalities in an internal letter that those migrants applying for support to return home must be granted finances if their home embassy would not assist. It stated further however that the Bulgarian embassy would prioritize collaboration with the authorities, and that Bulgarian embassy representatives would be sent to locations where Roma gathered if necessary, as indeed happened in 2012. In an interview with embassy staff in Stockholm it became clear that the embassy's commitment to assist their compatriots was however conditional: they would assist those who were attempting to contact friends or family in Bulgaria, in order to secure financial guarantees to cover repayment of the costs of their return journey.

It has been difficult for trade unions seeking to provide effective assistance to temporary seasonal migrants such as the Roma. Trade unions have faced two main problems: first, where individuals have been abused or cheated, they often do not stay long enough in Sweden to allow the trade union to follow up their cases within the Swedish labour court system, and, secondly, it is difficult to prove that in any particular instance that an employee-employer relationship prevails that would allow the court to adjudicate. Previously, where workers from Thailand have been cheated of wages by unscrupulous agents, the trade unions have gone to enormous lengths to sign up a sufficient number of members in order to pursue their case in the labour court. In the case of the Roma, it is less clear whether receptivity to trade union membership is limited by their general experiences of labour market exclusion in their home country. Here, a representative of LO (Landsorganisationen i Sverige, the central Swedish Trade Union Confederation) articulates his frustration with current regulation of free movement of temporary migrant workers within the EU, and their often unclear or informal contractual relations:

‘This type of conduct, where it is unclear if there is an employer, then I cannot say that we have any means [...]. It is in a way beyond EU's conceptual dictionary. They are wholly concerned about increasing (free) movement, but when these types of problems occur, then they do not understand. A political discussion of this kind just doesn't exist.’

The local representative of the Swedish Municipal Workers' Union, Kommunal (the union which organizes workers harvesting berries), offered one possible solution: that all workers in the industry should be required to register with the authorities and pay taxes (*Arbetet*, 2012). Such a solution, however, contradicts the longstanding notion that berries in the forests are a 'free good' and that anyone who picks them should have the individual right to consume or sell on at will.

Conclusion: free movement and the austeriat

The Bulgarian berry pickers posed quite unexpected and difficult issues for an array of state and non-state actors. For the national regulatory authorities, municipalities and especially for the trade unions, it was a seemingly unsurmountable challenge to identify what the appropriate responses should be in a situation of such indeterminate activities and unclear employment relationships. For unions seeking to protect the labour conditions of seasonal migrant workers, the informality of labour regimes in this industry has underlined their difficulty in deciphering employment statuses where no written contracts of employment exist. One possible way forward is to strengthen transnational cooperation between Swedish and Bulgarian trade unions, previously pioneered by German trade unions in collaboration with Polish unions in agriculture and horticulture (Dribbusch, 2003). The Irish trade union SIPTU's efforts to organize mushroom pickers offers one recent 'best practice' example among several documented, of targeted trade union responses to seasonal temporary workers which also included reaching agreement with a major end-user supermarket (McKay et al., 2011: 74–76). Kommunal (2013) has acknowledged the need for intervention in this area where employment at times verges upon 'forced labour', seeking a tripartite committee involving government, industry and the union movement (a *bärplockardelegation*). It has also made accessible information for migrant or seasonal workers in a range of foreign languages with information that focuses on the role of trade unions and how to join, although not yet in in Romani Chib or Bulgarian.

Capitalist relations, in the shape of a multi-million industry with a global reach, based on 'primitive' forms of labour performed under arduous conditions, have increasingly insinuated themselves into this last 'free' geographic space of nature's bounty, but in a paradoxical manner: namely, that those who now come from afar under free movement provisions of the European Union in order to harvest such bounty in the northern forests, have become the potential and actual victims of coercive labour abuse. As austerity seems set to maintain its grasp on the impoverished peoples of the European periphery, free movement of labour

for many forced to migrate in the face of economic adversity is generating its own perverse outcome of ‘unfreedom’. The irony is that the Roma are ostensibly responding directly to economic (push and pull) incentives to undertake mobility, in precisely the manner that free movement within the Single Market implies. However, victimhood is not a permanent or inevitable fate and when conditions have proved intolerable, the Roma also exercised agency in attempting to regain some control over their adverse working and living circumstances, first by leaving their homeland and thereafter by exiting the berry-picker encampments in Sweden (Grill, 2012).

Today’s austerity-driven mobile European citizens, among whom the Roma of Bulgaria constitutes an all-too-exploitable vanguard, comprise a new contingent of a broader marginalized *austeriat*. Their plight is a shared European one, perhaps requiring a European response, similar or greater in scale to that which has eventually resulted in the new EU Directive on seasonal migrants, seeking to address the ‘economic and social exploitation’ of third-country workers.¹ The Directive proposes a work contract or a binding job offer specifying essentials such as pay and working hours. The application also has to include evidence that the worker will stay in accommodation that meets the general health and safety standards of the Member State and that the rent will not be excessive or automatically deducted from the wage. By contrast, no similar European-level initiative is contemplated which would ameliorate essentially the same set of problems pertaining to intra-EU seasonal migrants.

This also leaves unresolved the fundamental underlying issue of the ongoing integration of one in 10 of the Bulgarian population into its domestic labour markets, measures to address which have so far had mixed results (European Commission, 2011). With full economic recovery in Bulgaria still some way off, the greater likelihood is of a protracted period of hardening lines of exclusion in the labour market. In the light of this, the contingent redeployment of human resources, Europe’s new peripheral *austeriat*, from poorer to richer Member States, from south to north and from east to west, regarded as largely unproblematic by European policy-makers, is questionable. For Roma people, labour migration to Sweden has proved to be another step on a journey of disappointment with unfulfilled promises – for economic inclusion, dignity and social justice – not least as European citizens and as workers.

1. Directive 2014/36/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council of 26 February 2014 on the conditions of entry and stay of third-country nationals for the purpose of employment as seasonal workers, OJ L 94/375 28.3.2014. Available at: <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32014L0036&from=EN>

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