

SYNOPSIS:

PLASTIC PRISON in Andalusia

Photography by **Christophe CHAMMARTIN**

Spain, 2006 - 2007 - 2008

In less than thirty years, Almeria, desert, poor and hidden region at the south-west of our continent has become a mainstay of the Spanish economy. The 32,000 hectares of crops under plastic, groundwater pumping, strong sun and hard use of fertilizers and pesticides allow Andalusian farmers to produce today more than 3 million tonnes of fruit and vegetables per year. Synchronized to the development of the Spanish motorway network and associated with transnational European transport and distribution, this system allows to feed a large part of Europe between September and May.

Almeria is a gateway to Europe and enables drug traffickers to involve their lucrative trade with the illegal transportation of people (between 1,000 and 6,000 € per crossing). More than 100,000 migrants from the Maghreb, Sub-Saharan Africa but also from Eastern Europe or Latin America, come into the province with the myth of Eldorado West. Nearly half of them have no work permit or residence. A similar proportion had no job or only a few months per year. The people that are paid are mostly "jornaleros" (workers by the day) in the agriculture sector.

Conditions unworthy of a European state

Farmers prefer to employ migrants with no papers as they often do not know their rights or are not able to defend themselves. In this way, it becomes easy for employers under pressure not to respect the collective agreement (about 8 sfr per hour), yet one of the lowest in Spain. It is common that overtime is not included, and even the work can simply not be paid. The model of intensive farming that has been developed in the South of Spain requires cheap, malleable and supernumerary labor to respond quickly to peaks of production involved three crops per year.

Country of spaghetti Westerns, the climate of the region is hot (40/50 °C – 104/122 °F) and temperature in greenhouses can easily be higher than 20 °C (68 °F). Frequent spraying of pesticides, fertilizers and hormones vegetables colorisation are regularly performed without protection and with the presence in the greenhouses of all employees. Bent positions and heavy loads carried daily were also a source of serious health problems and chronic conditions.

The citizens of the province of Almeria, conservative region, appear to be still heavily marked by almost a millennium of Moor colonization. Several cases of apartheid, such as refusal of access to some bars, the increase in prohibitive rents, and the occasional beating highlight that racism is still rooted in the conscience. These practices also show the political will to restrict migrants of color away from urban centers. They sleep crammed in small garages, warehouses, ruins covered with plastic or simply old shacks made of waste glass. The conditions are unsanitary. There is no toilet, no water, no garbage pickup and no sewer. If all is powered by electricity, the owner gladly rent for dozens or even hundreds of euros.

Far from access to public transport, means of communication, these men live a double isolation, isolated within the Spanish society and isolated hundreds of miles from their families. These contemporary slaves are no longer the ultimate economic variable adjustable to reduce costs.

And here, what can I do?

This is not to start here watchwords boycott, but to understand the conditions of production that we have on our plates and to remind ourselves that there are seasons to respect to avoid social and environmental aberrations. If the Swiss wholesale distributors are beginning to worry about the lot of workers in the region, the problem is that they have no direct contact with producers, and that the guarantees given by the intermediaries are difficult to verify. Public opinion is nevertheless the only lever to activate. Europe has an enormous responsibility towards this region, which became his main pantry.