



Rosarno: a rebellion still unheard today

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Between 7 and 10 January 2010, the news of a hard and violent uprising broke out in Calabria and defined by some journalists as “urban guerrilla warfare” spread in the main national media.¹ A protest carried out by a group of immigrant workers, mostly Africans, in Rosarno, a town located in the Gioia Tauro plain: a small town of about 15,000 inhabitants, where, still today, thousands of laborers, almost all of them foreigners of African origins, are recruited every year to work in the fields, especially for the harvesting of oranges. The hygienic, housing and wage conditions in which these agricultural workers, unfortunately still persisting today, were poor. They were forced to massing in abandoned farmhouses and ruined structures, such as those of the former Rognetta factory and the former “Opera della Sila”. These buildings were used as dormitories, but they lacked electricity, gas and running water. The citrus groves' laborers, who lived essentially in conditions of semi-slavery, managed to earn an average of one euro (in black) for the harvesting of a crate of oranges weighing just under 20 kg. Behind the low quality of life and the exploitation of the labor of the agricultural laborers of the Gioia Tauro plain was hidden the hand of the corporal and the 'ndrangheta. This is the context of the protest that broke out in 2010.

The fuse that exploded the rebellion of those days was yet another physical violence against a migrant.² That January 7, 2010, in fact, Ayiva Saibou, a 26-year-old refugee coming from Togo (therefore, holder of a residence permit) was hit in the abdomen by some plungers fired from an air rifle. The boy, once he went to the emergency room of the hospital of Gioia Tauro to be treated (he was then given a prognosis of 10 days for a gunshot wound),

¹ Please see: “A Rosarno immigrati in rivolta: scene di guerriglia urbana”, *Il Sole 24ore*, 7 gennaio 2010, here: <https://st.ilsole24ore.com/art/SoleOnLine4/Italia/2010/01/Rosarno-immigrati-rivolta.shtml?uuid=c7127>.

² Please see also: G. Naletto, “La ribellione di Rosarno”, in *Lunaria* (a cura di), *Cronache di ordinario razzismo. Secondo libro bianco sul razzismo in Italia*, Edizioni dell'Asino, Roma 2011, pp. 107-111.



declared that he had been wounded while walking along the Via Nazionale 18, near the town of Rosarno, and that the shots had come from a person driving a car. This is the reconstruction of the police headquarters of Reggio Calabria at the time of the facts.³

The aggression against Saibou was not, as anticipated, an isolated case, but the umpteenth aggression of a foreign citizen in the area of the Plain of Gioia Tauro. Shortly after his injury, another laborer, Yacouba Camara, 25 years old, from Guinea, was reached by a shot fired by "a big black car with two people on board". (these are the words of a witness who walked with him).⁴ The episodes of physical violence against African laborers in the Plain of Gioia Tauro were nothing new. The violence perpetrated against foreign workers in the citrus orchards had been recorded since 1992, when the exploitation of their labor in that area had begun. So much so that, as early as December 2008, the exploited laborers had already demonstrated peacefully against the serious gunshot wounds of two citizens from the Ivory Coast⁵. The exasperation for the attacks and aggression suffered, combined with terrible living conditions, had pushed many of them to demonstrate, in 2010 more harshly, to try to get out of a situation of persecution and labour exploitation.

For two days, hundreds of migrant workers protested by organizing roadblocks on the same State Road 18, where the two young people from Togo and Guinea had been hit. The anger that had matured from their injury had led the laborers to react violently, and this, of course, had immediately caught the attention of the media. "Immigrants in revolt, hundreds of cars damaged", "In Rosarno the revolt of immigrants", "The black revolt of Rosarno"... These are the titles that have appeared on some of the main Italian newspapers., Particular emphasis was given to the rebellion of foreign laborers residing in the town of Calabria, but without

³ See: "Rosarno. La ricostruzione della rivolta fatta dalla Questura", *Il Quotidiano del Sud*, 10 gennaio 2010, here: https://www.quotidianodelsud.it/archivio/benevento/2010/01/10/rosarno-la-ricostruzione-della-rivolta-fatta-dalla-questura/?cli_action=1588752767.274.

⁴ Please see: "Human Rights Watch interviste con migranti africani gravemente feriti in singole aggressioni", 4 febbraio 2010, here: <https://www.hrw.org/it/news/2010/02/04/238782>.

⁵ Please see: "Tensione in Calabria. Rosarno, 'pulizia etnica' decisa dalla 'ndrangheta", *Avvenire*, 10 gennaio 2010, here: https://www.avvenire.it/attualita/pagine/rosarno-pulizia-etnica-decisa-dalla-ndrangheta_201001110749096870000.



investigating in depth on the premises and facts prior to the protest. The prominence given to the protest, combined with the little attention paid, instead, to the working and living conditions of the laborers, meant that they, as victims of an unjust system, quickly turned to the side of the wrong, and were painted as the culprits of the situation.

The representation of the facts, in most of the articles appearing in the newspapers, followed always the same pattern: a brief mention of the shooting of January 7, and a great emphasis on the protests of the laborers. Surely, the first protest had been violent and had involved the damage of some material goods, some store windows and cars, as well as burned bins: however, there had never been an attempt to voluntarily injure people and citizens of Rosarno and its surroundings, despite the various fake news circulated, such as that of a pregnant woman who would have lost her child due to the injury during the revolt. It should be pointed out, moreover, that the most violent forms of protest had been registered only when the news of the two immigrants wounded by gunshots had arrived. Already the next day, on January 8, the laborers had gathered to demonstrate peacefully,,: about 700 had paraded near the headquarters of the Municipality of Rosarno, to try to explain, in a meeting with the President of the Extraordinary Commission of the Municipality, the reasons that had pushed them to react so hard.

What is most striking in the whole Rosarno affair is the violent counter-protest organized by some Italian citizens in the following days. As a result of their demonstration, the migrants-workers of the Gioia Tauro plain began to suffer (even more than before) harassment, threats, intimidation and continuous physical attacks. Several labourers were injured because they were shot with sticks, bars and shotguns. Episodes so serious that it was necessary, for their safety, a transfer to prevent the situation from escalating further. Escorted by the Police, over a thousand migrants were transferred to the CPA of Crotona and Bari. The "deportation" was probably the objective of this attack. In the small town of



Calabria, a real "hunt for the immigrant"⁶ had taken place, with organized patrols. "We defend our city and our homes. We are on the hunt for Africans: if they want to work they stay, but if there is no work, they have to leave", "You have to beat them up and not us, because they are the real criminals": these are the absurd statements made by two men who took part in the patrols⁷. It was an organized expedition to "clean up" the area from migrants considered as "beasts".

The story of Rosarno was the occasion (yet another) to unleash an absurd instrumental polemic on "illegal" immigration. Roberto Maroni, MP of the Northern League, and at the time of the events, Minister of the Interior of the Berlusconi Government, had declared in Parliament on January 12, 2010: "The events in Rosarno also make evident all the negative consequences that derive from illegal immigration that, precisely for this reason, the Government has begun and will continue to fight without hesitation. Illegal entry into the territory of the State is the prerequisite for the marginalization and labor exploitation of many foreigners and, often, the reservoir for the recruitment of criminal laborers". Yet, in that same information, he himself had declared that almost all the migrants transferred to Crotona were in order with the residence permit, as well as half of those transferred to Bari. The majority of the laborers, therefore, had the necessary legal status to reside in Italy.

Ignazio La Russa, Minister of Defense, had been the same opinion at the time of the events: "Too much tolerance towards illegal immigrants. The State has a duty to enforce the laws, to enforce the rules. There can be no tolerance, especially for those who use violence so

⁶ Please see: "Rosarno, caccia all'immigrato. Aggrediti e assediati nei casolari.", *La Repubblica*, 9 gennaio 2010, here: https://www.repubblica.it/cronaca/2010/01/09/news/notte_rosarno-1885961/.

⁷ Please see: "Rosarno, altri quattro immigrati feriti. Spari e scontri in strada: è battaglia.", *Corriere della Sera*, 8 gennaio 2010, disponibile qui: https://www.corriere.it/cronache/10_gennaio_08/rosarno-scontri-maroni_cef157a6-fc32-11de-98e4-00144f02aabe.shtml; "Spari e spranghe contro gli immigrati, 4 feriti. Manganelli invia un contingente di polizia", *La Repubblica*, 8 gennaio 2010, here: https://www.repubblica.it/cronaca/2010/01/08/news/maroni_troppa_tolleranza_con_i_clandestini_a_rosarno_situazione_difficile_come_altrove-1875099/.



clearly, just because they are immigrants⁸. Those laws that, however, Italian citizens did not respect, when they violently hurt migrants.

Was it really "irregular" immigration the problem that triggered the events in Rosarno? Obviously not. But it would have been more difficult to admit the negligence and carelessness on the part of the State towards a situation now well known to all for several years. The violence unleashed by the patrols of Rosarno has only one face: that of racism and exploitation of the laborers, that of the mafia system of illegal hiring.

Ten years have now passed since the events of Rosarno, then, many promises were made to improve the situation. To date, what has changed in the Plain of Gioia Tauro? Apparently, nothing.⁹ The foreign laborers continue to work in exploited conditions, abandoned to themselves. As testified by the words of the parish priest of St. Anthony at Bosco di Rosarno released to the newspaper *Avvenire* in January 2020: "After 10 years nothing has changed. Only that there is no longer the shantytown. But the children still live in the same way"¹⁰. Medu (Doctors for Human Rights), an association that has been working in that area for a few years, has denounced, moreover, the poor living conditions of the laborers in the Plain in a recent report¹¹: "Yesterday as today - underlines the NGO - the local institutions - often commissarized for mafia infiltration - and the national ones seem incapable of any effective, courageous and far-sighted political planning, limiting themselves instead to propose the vicious circle of eviction-camps-shantytown, which for ten years has left unchanged the scourges of labor exploitation, housing degradation and abandonment of the territories".

⁸ Please see: "Maroni: 'Clandestini troppo tollerati'. Bersani: 'Il ministro fa da scaricabarile'", *Corriere della Sera*, 8 gennaio 2010, here: https://www.corriere.it/politica/10_gennaio_08/reazioni-politiche-rosarno_c4690e2c-fc47-11de-98e4-00144f02aabe.shtml.

⁹ You can find a chronology of main events here: <https://www.terrelibere.org/rosarno-10-anni-dopo/>.

¹⁰ Please see "10 anni fa. Dopo la rivolta di Rosarno nulla: stranieri più nascosti e sempre sfruttati", *Avvenire.it*, 7 gennaio 2020, here: <https://www.avvenire.it/attualita/pagine/rosarno-dopo-la-rivolta-nulla>.

¹¹ Please see: "Rosarno, 10 anni dopo l'emergenza umanitaria resta uguale. La denuncia di Medu.", *Redattore sociale*, 10 gennaio 2020, here: <https://www.redattoresociale.it/article/notiziario/rosarno-dieci-anni-dopo-l-emergenza-umanitaria-resta-uguale-la-denuncia-di-medu>.



The immobility (if not even the worsening) of the work and life situation of the workers of the Plain testifies how often it is not possible to draw lessons from painful past experiences. The protest in Rosarno could have been a starting point to mature a deep reflection, and then act accordingly to fight the illegal hiring (which unfortunately exists not only in Calabria, but in several Italian campaigns) and to promote social and work inclusion interventions for migrants. Despite the birth of solidarity projects, such as SOS Rosarno or Medu, the State continues not to care about them. It's like they're not even here.