

Spain/Almeria: the SOC in service of those without rights

If one sees the affirmation and the respect of human rights as a sign for civilised cultures, we have to record, that paradoxically, since the end of the 19th century, industrial development and urbanisation – phenomena that have brought social progress and comfort to societies – have also very often led to a situation in which those same rights are systematically violated. In Almeria, in the South-East of Spain, since the violent pogroms that took place in February 2000, fear, exclusion, greed, harsh working conditions as well as inhuman living conditions have become everyday facts of life.

Facing the necessity of finding immediate, middle-term as well as long term solutions to all these problems, the SOC (Sindicato de obrer@s del Campo – landworkers union) has decided to fight against the numerous obstacles that inhibit the exercise of all human rights. In daily life, this combat for human rights takes the form of several specific struggles, these being the right to

- an identity
 - work and a dignified wage
 - decent lodging
 - family life
 - correct information, as well as the right to form associations and unions
- etc.

Fighting for workers on the margins of the struggle

Immigrants, and especially those without papers, have always stood outside the struggle. All laws and legislations criminalise them and exclude them from any form of socio-economic activity. This strongly brings to mind the practices of political and economic liberalism, an ideology that made possible the exploitation of the proletarian classes in Europe in the second half of the 19th century: prohibition to hold public meetings or to form unions and associations (for example the Chapelier law in France), employee's record book, a justice system that believes the employer on his sole word whereas workers have to provide evidence etc. The massive arrival of illegalised migrants in Almeria is a big benefit for many of the farmers in the region. The law forbids their employment... in theory....

The fight for an identity

The SOC has always declared that « no one is illegal » and has never ceased to demand « papers for all » since its arrival in the region in the year 2000. Activists of the SOC are marching in the front ranks of all the demonstrations that demand the regularisation of “undocumented” people. Furthermore, the SOC is part of the Andalusian network for the defence of social rights as well as of the national network for the rights of immigrants. Our union also denounces the immigration laws because we think that « if a law codifies discrimination against a certain category of society, it often only confirms, legalises and enforces a rejection that is the reflection of a sentiment held by the majority of the population ».

The fight for the right to stable work and a proper wage

In view of the fact that 90% of the landworkers in the region of Almeria are foreigners without papers, the SOC fights for the recognition of the work of those who are illegalised. This is an important question. Because everybody knows that the Spanish state organises special flights

to transfer immigrants without papers from the Canary islands to Almeria. Once they have arrived in the region, they are submitted to a brutal persecution by the police, which makes it necessary for them to become « invisible ». Due to their vulnerable situation, they become much easier to « manage » and to exploit.

And, as a proverb in Senegal says: « those who do not have a mother to suckle turn to their grandmother » (which means that if one doesn't get what one wants, one will settle for something accessible). So, better to have a miserable salary than none at all.

In April 2007, when the SOC's new social center opened its doors in San Isidro in the rural community of Nijar, the union invited all of the social organisations active in the region to discuss several topics of high importance, such as:

- Recruitment of workers for Spain's industrial agriculture in their countries of origin
- the demand for and defence of rights
- ecological consequences of the industrial production model of Almeria
- limits of Mediterranean agriculture and its social consequences.

Security...

When we talk about security, we don't refer to social security that is theoretically guaranteed by Article 22 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. This is for a simple reason: People without papers are excluded from this article, because it is based on the status of workers. We are rather talking about the protection of life and about the integrity of all human beings guaranteed by the law.

Over the last few years, the SOC has registered a large number of complaints by immigrants against racist aggressions ranging from beatings and injuries to the loss of lives. The majority of these cases have been directed against the Moroccan community and have not been taken to court. The SOC is still waiting for the imprisonment and condemnation of the murderers of Azzouz Hosni, after having accompanied and supported all legal complaints against this crime (1).

On 1 October 2007, after a campaign against the arbitrary arrest of three Moroccan workers by the Guardia Civil, the SOC, supported by the Almeria Social Forum and the Andalusian CGT, gave a press conference in order to celebrate the final acquittal of all the comrades that had taken place a few days before.

On 24 November 2007, a protest sit-in against the aggressions, against exclusion and racism was organised in Almeria.

Accommodation

In view of the fact that most western countries have introduced important social housing projects trying to guarantee for every citizen the right to adequate accommodation, the SOC has constantly criticised the authorities in Almeria which have held back hundreds of apartments in the town of Ej Ejido while at the same time human beings are forced to sleep outside or in shabby huts or chabolas (2) – close to the greenhouses.

The rent for housing is becoming more expensive day by day without taking into account the plight of the most fragile and poorest classes. The most scandalous thing is the transformation

and renting of garages for the price of a villa. The immigrants are obliged to get together in groups of up to ten in order to bear collectively all of their accommodation costs.

The right to family life and family reunion

Confronted by the attempt to obstruct all migratory movement of people towards Spain, in April and Mai 2007 the regional authorities enforced a discretionary article of the immigration law in order to make the process of family reunion even more difficult. The following changes were made: One has to prove that one has received a salary for a period of 6 months and, furthermore, one has to prove that one has 320 Euros per month for each family member. The SOC responded by launching a campaign of protest and it organised a press conference on 29 June 2007 in front of the prefecture in Almeria in order to denounce this outrage.

Being obliged to leave home is often already a drama, not having the possibility to reunite one's family is an even bigger human tragedy. Migrants are often separated from their families for at least five or six years.

The right to information, to form associations and political organisations

Do undocumented people at least have the right to information, to form associations and political organisations? For the SOC there is no doubt that they have, even if the immigration laws introduced by the right-wing Partido Popular rejected this.

It is important to mention that it was only on 8 November 2007 that the Supreme Court declared the Articles 7.1,8 and 11,1 to be unconstitutional, thus establishing the right of undocumented immigrants to hold public assemblies, as well as to form associations and unions!

Ever since 2000 the SOC has regularly organised public meetings to inform migrants about their rights and to mobilise them. As far as its union activities are concerned, SOC representatives visit workers in the places where they live in order to talk to them about their rights and their role as well as about the need to join the union so that the whole working class can fight together jointly.

The lack of respect for human rights is a reality that has been known throughout history, even though western societies have struggled a lot to overcome this phenomenon. Today, the sad plight of hundreds of thousands of immigrant workers without papers reminds us of this reality.

Confronted with the injustice of racist attacks and unscrupulous exploitation, the SOC would never be satisfied with being an object of power. We must be the subject of history and actors for the future! It's not enough to count on one's rights – we must always be ready to defend them and to speak out loud our point of view.

(1) On 13 February 2005 five young men stabbed the 40- year old Moroccan worker Azzouz Hosni to death, as he was about to leave a bar in the town of El Ejido. Without even investigating the case, the police and local media agreed that this crime must have been a crime committed within the drug-dealing milieu. At the same time, the delegate of the central government in Almeria said that there was no reason whatsoever to believe that the crime had a racist background.

Azzouz Hosni was a member of the SOC which demanded an immediate investigation into the case – without any result. The SOC stresses that the victim of the murder never had anything to do with drugs. He had lived in the region of Ej Ejido, working in the plastic greenhouses or in the construction sector, living in a hut made out of discarded plastic. For the SOC, there is no doubt:

This was a racist murder and a sad highlight in a whole series of racist crimes that are continuing to this day.

(2) Chabolas are simple huts that are tinkered together with discarded plastic and wood, mostly in old and abandoned greenhouses or near agricultural sheds

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