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MIGRANT LABOUR IN THE UK'S POST-BREXIT AGRI-FOOD SYSTEM:  
AMBIGUITIES, CONTRADICTIONS AND PRECARITIES

PAPER ACCEPTED FOR THE JOURNAL OF RURAL STUDIES

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## ABSTRACT

Pressure from global retailers to reduce food costs has altered downstream agri-food work regimes, with many food producers having adopted more flexible modes of working and employed migrant labour from lower income countries. Since the expansion of the European Union (EU) in 2004, the farming and food sector in the UK has recruited large numbers of migrant workers from central and eastern EU countries. The decision by the UK electorate in 2016 to leave the EU - what has been termed Brexit - has created a 'crisis' in relation to the continued supply of migrant labour. In this paper we explore the role of migrant labour within the UK's agri-food system and the ways that migrant workers have been positioned by different actors within recent discussions of farming, food and Brexit. We do this through an analysis of national survey data on migrant agricultural workers and materials from interviews with more than 70 agri-food organisations in the UK. What emerges from this research is that rather than viewing Brexit as a key moment to critique the state of the UK's agri-food system, including the structural conditions of work, dominant actors have used it more narrowly to construct a 'crisis' of migrant labour supply, arguing for new policy mechanisms to guarantee the future provision of low-cost imported labour. Within these narratives of post-Brexit agri-food futures, the presence of migrant labour has been both normalised and institutionalised by conventional food organisations but the realities of migrant work and the voices of migrants themselves have been conspicuous largely by their absence.

## KEYWORDS

Migrant labour

Agri-food

Brexit

Labour precarity

UK

## INTRODUCTION

“We rely on immigrant labour all year round. It is as important an ingredient to horticulture as sprays and fertiliser.” (UK farming union representative, interview)

The decision by the UK electorate in a June 2016 referendum to leave the European Union (EU) will have widespread economic, social and political impacts for decades to come for both the UK and remaining EU countries. While at this point in time it is difficult to highlight with any degree of certainty the details of these impacts, it is clear that restrictions on future migration to the UK will be a central plank of post-Brexit policy. In February 2020, the UK government announced a new approach to international migration, introducing a points-based system that limits the number of lower skilled and unskilled workers able to enter the country (Home Office, 2020). That a restriction on migrant numbers has been an early policy response to Brexit is hardly unexpected given the centrality of migration as an issue within the EU referendum campaign. ‘Leave’ campaigners referred to the movement of European migrants, and particularly those from central and eastern countries of the EU, to the UK in negative terms. Indeed, a powerful narrative was constructed by those groups advocating leaving the EU of migration being out of control in the UK, with those relocating from Europe accused of taking jobs from domestic workers, burdening the welfare support system and even threatening the country’s national identity (see Freedon, 2017).

The enlargement of the EU in 2004 to include the so-called A8 countries – Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia and Slovenia - and then in 2007 to incorporate Bulgaria and Romania (the A2 countries) resulted in a dramatic increase in the

number of migrants from these new EU member countries moving to the UK in search of employment. Between 2003/04 and 2019, the estimated number of A8 residents in the UK increased from 136,000 to 1.3 million, with those moving from Poland accounting for 63 per cent of this group in 2019 (Office for National Statistics, 2021). The number of A2 residents in the UK also increased significantly - from 19,000 to 555,000 across this period, with Romanians comprising 77 per cent of A2 residents in 2019 (ibid.). In addition to these rapid increases, the geography of A8 and A2 migration to the UK has been different from traditional patterns of immigration in that significant numbers of migrants have bypassed large cities and moved directly to towns and rural areas (Lever and Milbourne, 2015; McAreavey, 2018). One reason for this is that many migrants from these countries have sought employment in the agri-food sector (Agriculture and Horticulture Development Board, 2016) and, as the quotation included above indicates, migrants are now viewed by many conventional actors as an essential component of the contemporary agri-food system in the UK.

Brexit can be viewed as threatening the continued supply of migrant labour from other EU countries to the UK's agri-food sector in four main ways. First, the vote to leave the EU immediately led to the UK pound falling in value against the US dollar and the Euro, which not only increased food prices - given that UK imports the majority of its foodstuffs - but also reduced the value of earnings for EU migrant workers in the UK. Second, exiting the EU initially created uncertainties about the future residential status of EU migrant workers in the UK. A third threat, which connects with the second, is that Brexit has now resulted in the introduction of new restrictions on the movement of people between EU countries and the UK. Last, the political and cultural legacies of the 2016 Referendum debate, and particularly

those resulting from anti-immigration rhetoric, have meant that the UK has come to be viewed as a less welcoming place for EU migrants.

In this paper we explore the shifting position of migrant workers within the UK's agri-food system in the context of Brexit, with a specific focus on food production and processing. We begin with a critical review of existing scholarship on migrant food labour in global North countries, considering the factors underpinning its recent growth and broader issues concerning the precarity, exploitation and marginalisation of this work. Utilising empirical materials from recent research undertaken by the authors on Brexit and the agri-food system - involving an analysis of official statistics on migrants and seasonal agricultural workers and 77 semi-structured interviews with a broad range of conventional and alternative agri-food organisations - we then consider the role of migrant labour within the UK's agri-food system and the ways that such labour has been positioned within discussions of agri-food and Brexit. Engaging with food labour and food justice literature emerging from the US, which has positioned migrant labour as a structural marker of inequality and injustice (see, for example, Sbicca, 2018), we end the paper with a critical discussion of how the political economy of agri-food in the UK has normalised and institutionalised migrant *labour*, constructing it as critical to the efficient running of the contemporary agri-food system, and how this same political economy has also marginalised migrant *labourers*, excluding their voices and the realities of their working conditions from dominant narratives of agri-food.

## CENTRALITY - MARGINALITY - INVISIBILITY: THE AMBIGUOUS POSITION OF MIGRANT WORKERS IN THE AGRI-FOOD SYSTEM

The dominance of a small number of multinational corporations and retailers within the global agri-food system has led to considerable downward pressure being exerted on other (lower placed) actors in the system to deliver 'high quality, low-cost, just-in-time' food products (Davies, 2019, 297; see also Busch and Lawrence, 2007; Howard, 2016). With labour representing one of the only flexible costs associated with food production, farmers have responded to this downward pressure by altering their workplace regimes (Preibisch, 2012), adopting new technologies and increasing the use of 'zero hours' contracts and piecemeal payments to raise levels of productivity (Rogaly, 2008). Near full employment and the introduction of minimum wage policies in many global North countries in recent decades have also made the relatively low paid and demanding work associated with food production less attractive to the domestic workforce, which has led to labour shortages (Clutterbuck, 2017). Food producers have increasingly turned to migrant workers in order to respond to such shortages as is evidenced by data relating to various countries. In the EU, for example, Natale et al. (2019) report that while the number of 'native' workers employed in agriculture fell by 13 per cent between 2011 and 2017, the number from other EU countries rose by 36 per cent and from countries outside the EU increased by 31 per cent, and in the US, it is estimated that 72 per cent of hired crop farmworkers in 2016 were immigrants, the vast majority of whom were working illegally (US Department of Agriculture, 2020).

This growing dependence on migrant labour has not just been about filling vacancy gaps. As the major food retailers have also demanded more consistency in relation to the supply of

higher quality products, so food growers have looked for particular qualities in their workforce (Fuchs, et al., 2009). Commenting on the UK agri-food system, Rogaly (2008) suggests that workers have been sought who are 'reliable, flexible and compliant. For the growers we interviewed, all these "qualities" were seen as more likely to be found in foreign workers' (500). In addition, many farmers have increasingly turned to labour providers in order to secure the required volume and quality of migrant workers (Rogaly, 2008; Strauss, 2016). It is claimed that this preference for migrants contrasts starkly with the prejudice shown towards potential domestic workers (Scott, 2013), with key agri-food stakeholders actively seeking to 'reframe labour market conflict as a matter of local workers deficit and poor labour supply rather than poor job quality' (Lever and Milbourne, 2015, 319; see also Tannock, 2013).

These 'qualities' of migrant workers, though, can be recast as 'vulnerabilities' given that migrants often occupy what Basok et al. (2014) term 'fluid zones of precarity', undertaking work that is 'dirty, dangerous, difficult and demeaning' (1395). In relation to the agri-food sector, Brown and Gertz (2011) argue that the vulnerability of migrant farmworkers has been actively engineered within the 'political economy of agrarian capital accumulation, immigration policies, and neoliberal trade policy' (121). Indeed, various studies indicate not only that the exploitation of migrant labour is now embedded within the workings of the industrial agri-food system (see Andrzejewska and Rye, 2012; McCollum and Findlay, 2015; Papadopoulos et al., 2018) but that the increased use of migrant workers has acted to



maintain low levels of pay, constrain workers' rights and perpetuate existing inequalities within the agri-food system (Preibisch, 2012; Sbicca, 2018; Strauss, 2012)<sup>1</sup>.

That the increased reliance on migrants within the agri-food sector has taken place during a period in which many global North countries have sought to reduce immigration levels may appear somewhat surprising, but it is the case that the agri-food sector has long been treated differently by national governments when it comes to migration policy (see Mitchell, 1996; Scott, 2015). As *The Economist* (2018) comments, 'even politicians who rail against immigration tend to make an exception for seasonal farm workers' (no page number). Agri-food corporations and farming unions have successively lobbied government to create the structural relations and policy contexts necessary to supply the agri-food sector with migrant workers through favourable immigration policy concessions. Of particular note here are the temporary farm worker migration schemes that have been developed in several global North countries in order to supply labour to the agricultural sector during harvesting periods (see Martin, 2016; Migration Advisory Committee, 2013).

These migrant schemes are viewed as adding to the precarity of agricultural employment by positioning migrant workers 'disadvantageously within the labor market through a range of social and political disentanglements' (Preibisch and Encalda Grez, 2010, 309). It is also the case that these schemes have exacerbated existing uneven power relations between farm employers and workers. Writing about the situation in the US, for example, Barth (2017) suggests that migrant farm workers arriving from Mexico are often tied to a particular US

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<sup>1</sup> It should also be recognised that some migrant workers now occupy more secure and managerial positions within the agri-food system.

farm and owe large amounts of money to labour providers that secured their employment. Beyond these impacts on migrant workers, it is argued that temporary migrant farm worker programmes have ‘played an essential role in allowing labor-intensive agricultural operations to withstand, even thrive under, the pressures of recent global restructuring’ (Preibisch and Encalda Grez, 2010, 309), as well as permitting food producers to utilise employment practices not permitted in relation to domestic workers (Andrzejewska and Rye, 2012).

In these senses, migration policy needs to be understood as more than just a mechanism to regulate the flow of workers to a country; it represents a ‘mould *constructing* certain types of workers through selection of legal entrants, the requiring and enforcing of certain types of employment relations and the creation of institutionalised uncertainty’ (Anderson, 2010, 312, emphasis in the original; see also Strauss, 2012). For particular sectors of the economy, Anderson suggests, immigration control constitutes less a means of protecting jobs for national citizens and more an opportunity to attract groups of ‘more desirable’ workers who possess certain qualities that are needed to participate in the flexible economy. As Scott (2015) comments, migration policy has been ‘operationalized in order to produce low-wage, temporary workers who are both “good” (however defined) and easily controlled’ (9).

Although migrant labour has become a normalised feature of the conventional agri-food system, the ‘bodies and suffering of food workers’ (Mares, 2019, 7) remain largely hidden within political and popular narratives of farming and food (see also Böhm et al., 2019). Clutterbuck (2017) suggests that ‘we want cheap food, but we don’t want to know why the costs are low. We don’t see the migrant workers getting up at all hours, working in all weathers, for wages we wouldn’t get out of bed for, nor the impact this has on local

communities and local labour' (88; see also Brown and Gertz, 2011). It is suggested that this invisibility of migrant labour within the agri-food sector is maintained in three main ways (Lever and Milbourne, 2015). First, migrant work largely takes place in peripheral spaces that are physically located beyond the dominant gaze of the public, the media and politicians. Writing about the situation in Norway, for example, Andrzejewska and Rye (2012) state that 'farms are predominantly located in sparsely populated areas, in small remote communities where there are few places to meet the members of the host society, and where ethnic organisations, often present in cities, do not exist' (264). A second form of hiddenness results from the type of work that migrants are required to undertake, with shift patterns and 'zero hours' contracts, requiring workers to be on call at all times, restricting their ability to interact with members of the local community. Third, the use of stratified working practices that divide workers according to national or ethnic groupings means that there is little incentive or opportunity for migrants to interact with local groups.

The hiddenness of migrant food work has also been maintained in a couple of other important ways. According to Sbicca (2018), there exists a political dimension to the invisibility of migrant farm workers, with restrictive migration policy and its associated tactics of surveillance effectively transforming immigrants into 'an unknowable other subject to society's desire for cheap labor' (114). Indeed, Mares (2019), discussing the lives of immigrants in the dairy industry in Vermont, US, describes how many workers remain effectively trapped within the boundaries of farms, fearful of entering nearby towns due to anti-migrant rhetoric and the state's heavy surveillance of border areas. Another factor maintaining the invisibility of migrant labour has been the limited attention given by the

alternative food movement<sup>2</sup> to this topic (Brown and Gertz, 2011). While the alternative food movement has been rightly occupied by the provenance of food, the workers involving in picking and packing this food are regularly ignored (Minkoff-Zern, 2014) and, 'despite the alternative food movement's expressed concern for racial and economic justice, it has struggled to recognize and address the conditions that produce and maintain boundaries for migrant farmworkers' (Sbicca, 2015, 8).

Food justice scholarship in the United States has begun to shed light on migrant labour within the food system. Concerned with 'ensuring that the benefits and risks of where, what, and how food is grown and produced, transported and distributed, and accessed and eaten are shared fairly' (Gottlieb and Joshi, 2010, 6), food justice scholars have asked critical questions about the food dimensions of inequality as well as the uneven power relations underpinning the food system (see, for example, Alkon and Agyeman, 2011; Cadieux and Slocum, 2015; Holt-Giménez and Wang, 2011). Within this burgeoning body of literature (and associated activism), there have been calls for the increased recognition and revaluing of labour within the food system (Sbicca, 2018), with attention given to trade union activities, political campaigns and strike actions that have sought to highlight and address the precarity of food labour(ers) (Preibisch, 2012; Sbicca, 2015).

Food justice scholars have also identified a need to establish broader alliances of organisations to raise awareness of labour abuses within the food system and to develop 'more popular support for organizing tactics, such as unionization, strikes, and boycotts'

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<sup>2</sup> The alternative food movement is a broad coalition of actors, organisations and groups that are concerned with a range of food-based issues, including environmental sustainability, food security and food justice, with these frequently focused on the (re-)localisation of the food system.

(Minkoff-Zern, 2014, 95). Doing this involves connecting marginalised food workers across the full spectrum of the food system, including those employed in restaurants (Hunt, 2015); the alternative food and the food labour movements and; the food justice and other social justice movements (Coulson and Milbourne, 2020; Sbicca, 2018). It also entails those within the alternative food movement recognising that labour precarity has become normalised in both the mainstream and alternative food systems, and that 'precarious hired farm employment hinders progress toward food system transformation' (Weiler et al., 2016, 1158).

Before ending this review, it is important to bring a historical perspective to recent work on the marginalisation and exploitation of (migrant) labour in the agri-food system. Discussing the historical development of farming in England, Newby (1985) argues that the agricultural economy has long been characterised by low wages, exploitation and paternalism, with agricultural workers having 'little history beyond poverty, dependence and remorseless labour' (122). Newby's work also highlights how farm workers have never possessed any meaningful political representation and, as a consequence, they have rarely been able to mobilise themselves in order to contest or resist their working conditions. This has meant not only that farm workers have been largely absent within popular and political narratives of farming and food, but also that farm workers have become resigned to their situation of powerlessness, 'contriving to take it somewhat for granted while not necessarily endorsing it in terms of social justice' (Newby, 1979, 414; see also Verdon, 2017).

It should also be recognised that the utilisation of migrant labour within agriculture has a long history. Collins (1976) describes how UK farmers in the nineteenth century made

extensive use of seasonal agricultural labourers from ‘peripheral’ parts of the country – upland areas of Wales, the Scottish Highlands and, most significantly, western Ireland – during harvesting periods. In terms of the last group, it has been estimated that about 75,000 migrant workers from Ireland were involved in harvesting on English farms in the 1850s (Verdon, 2017). According to Collins, this historical system benefitted farmers and worked against the local community in similar ways to those outlined by researchers of the contemporary agri-food system, with the availability of (cheap) migrant labour from other areas ensuring that the ‘costs to the employer were low in terms of capital and social expenditure’ (54):

“[seasonal migrant labour] represented, as an intermediate step, an efficient allocation of resources at a stage of economic development when mechanization was neither technically possible nor always socially desirable and when labour, properly distributed, was a cheap and flexible factor of production” (59; see also Verdon, 2017).

In the next part of the paper we examine the role of migrant labour within the contemporary UK agri-food system, focusing in particular on the food production and processing sectors, and the ways that different agri-food actors have positioned migrant workers within recent and on-going discussions about farming, food and Brexit. We do this by drawing on materials from recent research undertaken by the authors, which consisted of two main strands: first, a quantitative analysis of migrant labour data derived from various government surveys of the agricultural workforce; second, semi-structured interviews with 77 national and regional agri-food stakeholders in the UK - representing a wide range of ‘conventional’ and ‘alternative’

farming, food and rural organisations - undertaken in 2017 and 2018, that is after the UK referendum on EU membership. The interviews were conducted face-to-face and by Skype, and each one was audio recorded and transcribed. The transcriptions were analysed using conventional qualitative methods of thematic coding and sorting. Detailed readings of the interview transcripts allowed codes to be allocated to participants' responses, with these then brought together to produce a series of themes and sub-themes that have been used to provide the structure for the empirical section of this paper.

## (RE)POSITIONING MIGRANT LABOUR WITHIN THE UK'S POST-BREXIT AGRI-FOOD SYSTEM

### Statistical positionings of migrant labour

Assessing the position of migrant workers in the UK's agri-food system is fraught with difficulty. Official statistics do not capture the true scale of migrant labour in agriculture as seasonal workers and those living on farms in communal accommodation are excluded from the sampling frameworks of government employment surveys. Consequently, reliance has to be placed on official surveys of farm businesses and surveys undertaken by key farming and labour provider organisations. An analysis of official employment data shows that there were around 27,000 permanent workers from other EU countries engaged in the agricultural sector in 2016, representing eight per cent of the agricultural workforce, and a further 116,000 EU nationals were employed in the food manufacturing sector (McGuinness and Garton Grimmond, 2017). It is also estimated that the proportion of the permanent agricultural labour force from EU countries increased rapidly from one per cent in 2004 to nine per cent of workers in 2016 (Migration Advisory Committee, 2018). Looking beyond

these permanent EU workers, there were about 77,000 seasonal workers in the farming sector in 2016, with almost all of these from other EU countries and the vast majority concentrated in the horticultural sector (Office for National Statistics, 2018).

Three government surveys provide additional information on migrant workers in the agricultural sector in the period since the EU Referendum. The first of these, undertaken in 2017 and covering about 600 farms in Northern Ireland (Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, 2018), found that migrant labour accounted for one-fifth of the paid agricultural workforce and that 99.5 per cent of migrant farm workers were from other EU countries. In terms of permanent migrant labour, 86 per cent of workers were from eastern or central EU countries (Bulgaria, 32 per cent, Lithuania, 28 per cent, Poland, 16 per cent and Latvia, 10 per cent). Amongst seasonal migrant workers, slightly more than two-thirds originated from just two EU countries (Romania, 51 per cent and Bulgaria, 17 per cent), with a further 12 per cent from Lithuania and 11 per cent from Poland. The survey also shows that while migrant labour is most significant in the horticultural sector, where 78 per cent of businesses were employing migrant workers, it is associated with all types of farming in Northern Ireland, being reported by 33 per cent of farms engaged in field crops and / or livestock agriculture, 12 per cent of pig or poultry farms and two per cent of farms associated with grazing livestock.

A second survey of 3,100 horticulture businesses in England in 2018 by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (2019), reveals that seasonal migrant labour was employed by 35 per cent of all farms, with this figure rising to 55 per cent amongst large farms. For the vast majority of farms, seasonal workers were engaged for short periods of



time, with 32 per cent using migrants for less than one month and a further 36 per cent of farms for less than three months. The retention of migrant labour also appears significant for some of these farms. Slightly more than one-third stated that at least three-quarters of their seasonal migrant workers were returnees from previous years and a further 13 per cent of farms reported between 50 and 74 per cent were returnees. Returnees were more of a feature of small / medium sized farms than large farms, with only 26 per cent of the latter reporting a returnee rate of at least three-quarters compared with 45 per cent for the former.

This survey also provides information on the earnings of seasonal migrant workers. The picture that emerges largely confirms the low wage nature of migrant work within the agricultural sector. The average hourly rate of income reported by these horticultural farms was £9.15, which is low in comparison to the median national hourly income (£14.37) but at least £1 higher than the National Minimum Wage at the time of the survey<sup>3</sup>. It should be noted, though, that these income levels include piece rate and bonus payments, which makes it difficult to make direct comparisons with national wage levels. As might be expected there were variations in rates of pay: 28 per cent of farms were paying workers less than £8 per hour and 12 per cent reported an hourly rate of income of more than £11. Low pay also appears to be associated more with large farms, with 34 per cent of these paying seasonal workers less than £8 per hour compared with 24 per cent of small or medium sized farms.

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<sup>3</sup> Between April 2018 and March 2019, the National Minimum Wage in the UK was £7.83 per hour for workers aged over 25 years, £7.38 for those aged 21-24 years and £5.90 for workers aged 18-20 years.

Of those farms in the Northern Ireland survey employing migrant workers, 97 per cent claimed that such workers were either 'important' or 'very important' for their business. Asked about the impacts on their businesses of any restrictions on the recruitment of migrant workers from EU countries, 34 per cent stated that they would likely reduce production, 23 per cent considered that they would recruit more workers from the UK or Ireland and 18 per cent felt they would invest in labour saving technology. Moving to the English survey, one-third of farms had experienced a shortfall of seasonal labour in 2018, with this problem more pronounced amongst large farms (44 per cent compared with 25 per cent of small or medium sized farms) and impacting on soft fruit farms in particular, where 45 per cent reported labour shortages. Looking at how labour shortages had impacted farm businesses, of those reporting a shortfall of workers, a moderate or significant impact was reported by 65 per cent in relation to increased employment costs, 37 per cent of farms in terms of decreased profits, 16 per cent concerning unharvested crops and 12 per cent of farms in respect to failing to deliver customer contracts. Slightly more than half of these farms (54 per cent) had made changes to their business as a consequence of a shortfall of labour, with the main ones being more selective harvesting of crops (53 per cent), recruiting more workers themselves (36 per cent) and making more use of labour providers (29 per cent). Interestingly, only 11 per cent of farms stated that they had responded to a seasonal labour shortfall by offering overtime payments to workers.

A third survey of horticulture farms in England, undertaken quarterly in 2018 and 2019 (Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, 2020a), provides further detail on seasonal worker requirements, usage and shortfalls within this particular sector. Table 1 sets out the findings from this repeat survey, from which it is possible to make three key points.

First, a reliance on seasonal workers was reported by less than 40 per cent of horticulture farms in all but one of these quarters. Second, of those farms that were reliant on seasonal workers, less than one-third reported a labour shortage in six out of these eight quarters. Third, the proportion of farms reporting a labour shortage was lower for each quarter in 2019 than in 2018, and the average percentage shortfall per quarter in 2019 never exceeded that in the previous year.

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#### Post-Brexit narratives of agri-food and migrant labour

The importance of migrant labour to the contemporary agri-food system in the UK was reinforced by many of the stakeholders involved in our interviews. For example, a major labour provider estimated that 95 per cent of the workers it supplied to the agri-food sector were migrants and a farming union representative considered that without migrant labour in the horticultural sector ‘we simply could not, as an industry, produce the volume of horticulture crops we do today’. Other interview participants pointed to the significance of migrant workers to different parts of the agri-food system. A representative of the National Pig Association revealed that in a recent survey 58 per cent of members stated that they employed at least one migrant worker. In relation to the food processing sector, it was claimed that the migrant workforce ‘underpins our [food] processing sector, particularly in the red meat sector where 80, 90 per cent are employees at the main meat plants’ (farming union representative) and that approximately 30 per cent of the fruit manufacturing workforce consists of migrant workers (Welsh Government interviewee).

Within a month of the EU referendum, the National Farmers Union (NFU) had sought an urgent meeting with the UK government ‘to discuss special measures for migrant seasonal workers’, arguing that ‘unless the government finds a way to keep migrants, growers will sell up and move to France or elsewhere in the EU’ (O’Carroll, 2016). The NFU Horticulture Chairman constructed the migrant worker issue in particularly stark terms, claiming that ‘if you took migrant workers out of the [food] supply chain you would within five days have no fresh produce on supermarket shelves’ (Sims 2016). In a similar vein, one of our interviewees commented:

“These people [migrant workers] are as important to the country as financial services. If you can’t feed the country, you haven’t got a country... If Brexit isn’t done well, we face the prospect of literally running out of food – fresh food and indeed some processed food. You’ve only got four days of supply in the chain because ‘just in time [production]’ works brilliantly.” (food and drink distribution organisation)

There were early signs that the recruitment of migrant workers was beginning to be impacted by Brexit. Holton (2016) reported that two of the largest employment agencies for the recruitment of eastern Europeans into UK agriculture had witnessed a significant downturn in interest from prospective workers, with one stating that ‘the number of people contacting their Polish and Bulgarian recruitment offices had fallen by 70 per cent since the June 23 referendum, compared with the usual 35 per cent drop recorded for the latter stage of the season’ (13/10/2016, no page number). A similar situation was recounted by the labour suppliers included in our research, with one - a large Romanian employment agency

supplying seasonal workers to UK agri-food businesses - stating that 'last August we had a lot of orders and it was really hard to fill them...I think [there were] about 800 jobs which we couldn't fill'.

Two reasons for this reduced interest in British farm work were mentioned by stakeholders. The first relates to the changing levels of earnings of migrant workers. With the UK pound falling in value against the Euro immediately after the referendum result, migrant workers from other European countries had witnessed a sizeable reduction in the value of their wages. As one interviewee commented, 'many of them are here to send remittances home, so they've had a 20 per cent pay cut. If they can find work elsewhere [in the EU], they will do it' (food and drink distribution organisation). Labour suppliers confirmed this situation, stating that many migrant workers had already decided to move to other EU countries, such as the Netherlands and Germany, where higher levels of income could be earned. The second reason behind this reduced interest from migrants concerns the political and cultural impacts of Brexit, with a representative of the pig industry remarking that there is 'an issue with feeling that they're not welcome any more, so that's making people want to question whether they want to stay'. In another case, a labour supplier asked why parents would want to 'send their 19 year old, 20 year old to a country that may not be welcoming them'?

Rather than view Brexit as an opportunity to question the reliance of the agri-food sector on migrant workers and think about alternative futures, almost all of the conventional actors involved in our research were concerned about how the current volume of migrant labour could be maintained in the post-Brexit period, with most calling for the (re)introduction of

some kind of seasonal agricultural workers programme<sup>4</sup>. As one of the farming union representatives noted:

“we need certainty for the EU workers who are here today...that they can come and go... [and] clarity from government on what the future rules will be for people coming from the EU...and the reality is we need some form of seasonal workers scheme that allows us to bring competent, reliable workers, frankly from anywhere in the world. We need to untie this from being an EU issue. It is not.”

With the UK government indicating, at the time of the interviews, that it would be looking to adopt a points-based migration system based on the skills categorisation of different occupations following Brexit, the likely positioning of much of agricultural employment in the ‘unskilled’ category was questioned by interviewees, with one complaining that ‘I hate the term unskilled because it’s not what they are, but in the government’s classification they don’t have degrees and they’re not doctors, so basically they get classified as unskilled even though it clearly takes a lot of skill to be a stockman’ (pig industry representative). Another stakeholder pondered why seasonal workers were even being included within political debates on migration in the UK given that:

“they don’t even impact on the immigration numbers. Nearly all of them are housed on farms so they don’t impact on housing...Our 2,500 or more seasonal workers that we house totally ourselves paid £6 million in tax last year and cost the NHS less than

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<sup>4</sup> A previously operating seasonal agricultural scheme was abolished in 2013.

£100,000...and they don't use social services...the country's gaining massively" (labour supplier).

With the likelihood of a reduced supply of migrant labour, it was claimed by several of those engaged in food production and distribution that labour costs would inevitably rise, either through wages increasing or more overtime payments being made, which would lead to increased production costs and then to food price inflation. Such perceived consequences were very much constructed by conventional stakeholders in negative terms, with Brexit viewed as creating additional problems for agri-food businesses rather than providing an opportunity to review (and improve) the pay and conditions of those working in the agri-food sector. According to McGuinness and Garton Grimwood (2017), labour shortages should act as a potential 'catalyst for structural and other change' (19), but it would appear from our study that most conventional actors within the agri-food sector are largely concerned with guaranteeing the continued supply of low paid workers sourced from outside the UK. In fact, only a couple of participants made reference to any future labour shrinkage as a prompt for progressive change within the agri-food sector. One of these, a national government representative, considered that Brexit required the sector to make itself more attractive to UK workers by understanding 'why our indigenous population is not looking to the food sector for careers and long-term employment'. Similarly, another suggested that 'we're not just hung up about wanting migrants to come here and work, we're trying to encourage the UK population, to stimulate a generation of people who want to come and work in agriculture' (pig industry representative).

By contrast, almost all of the alternative food organisations involved in our study constructed Brexit as a critical moment to raise significant questions about the state of the agri-food system in the UK. The first of these related to food sovereignty, with the (negatively constructed) national sovereignty focus of Brexit arguments viewed as able to be transposed more progressively to food, principally through discussions of how the UK could develop a food system that was more concerned with national needs and localised food chains. As the representative of an organisation representing small farmers reflected:

“My view is that we should be thinking more in terms of local food sovereignty or national food security and, you know, providing more of our own food...The regaining sovereignty discourse [that] has been associated with Brexit...could be turned in a positive direction in terms of local food sovereignty...There’s an opportunity there to be thinking politically more about national food, self-reliance as a kind of strategy of security...in these crazy political times.”

These issues of self-reliance and (re)localisation within the UK food system were also mentioned by other stakeholders. An interviewee from a permaculture organisation, for example, asked whether Brexit could be a ‘way of adopting a little England mentality to start to...look at the massive inefficiencies of our food system?’ Making reference to the UK’s responses to previous food crises, he went on to pose a question about ‘whether there is perhaps some opportunity there to think about food and farming in the English countryside and saying if we’re really going to shift towards British produced food, what might that look like?’



Others considered that Brexit could be used to bring a greater degree of fairness into the agri-food system. In an important political intervention in 2017, Michael Gove, the then Secretary of State for the Environment in England, argued that ‘the Common Agricultural Policy<sup>5</sup> rewards size of land-holding ahead of good environmental practice, puts resources in the hands of the already wealthy, and encourages patterns of land use which are wasteful of national resources’ (quoted in Elgot, 2017). Subsequently, the English government proposed a new (post-Brexit) agricultural policy that would provide public money to farms in relation to the public goods they could supply, with these largely defined in terms of environmental benefits. This proposed policy shift was well supported by stakeholders from alternative food organisations. Some pointed to the way that the CAP funding regime had disadvantaged smaller farmers in the UK, suggesting that the new approach could move towards:

“supporting small-scale and innovative growers, much more towards environmental goals and outcomes. The subsidy reduction could challenge the industrial model of farming to recognise that it has massive hidden costs and to actually start a discussion about them” (permaculture organisation).

It was suggested that the ending of the CAP could lead to broader discussions about alternative futures for the UK’s agri-food system. As one stakeholder commented, ‘if we have a new agricultural policy that recognises [public benefits] then...the whole of the food sovereignty movement will have a much better time’ (community supported agriculture organisation). Redesigning the public subsidy system was also viewed as opening up new

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<sup>5</sup> The Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) is the main mechanism for distributing public funds to agriculture in EU countries.

opportunities to develop a more holistic approach to farming and food that could lead to a food system that is more sustainable and where issues of 'food justice are embedded across all the decisions that are needing to be made...' (food justice organisation).

In discussing how Brexit could engender broader debates about more progressive agri-food policy, it needs to be acknowledged that alternative food stakeholders made very little reference to the (marginalised) position of labour and labourers within the food system, and even when issues of work were mentioned, these tended to form part of a broader narrative on predicted or desired change, as is illustrated in the next couple of interview extracts:

"I would like to see a subsidy system that took a whole farm approach and allocated subsidies in a number of senses...[to ensure that] any farm conforms to a number of different criteria – one of which would be its environmental performance, another would be attaining or maintaining a decent level of production...and minimum wage[s]" (small farmers' organisation)

"we could have...a more coherent food policy that connects environment, sustainability, welfare, working conditions, embedded in the sustainable development goals, ambitious in getting rid of poverty...[and] the use of food banks." (food ethics organisation)

Labour was also absent from discussions of welfare standards within a post-Brexit agri-food system with stakeholders making frequent mention of their concerns about the future treatment of soils, plants and animals, but ignoring the human workers involved in the food

production process. Certainly, none of our interviewees came close to Clutterbuck (2017)'s proposal for using Brexit to revalue agricultural labour. Rather than redirecting the new public subsidy system towards environmental public goods produced by farmers, Clutterbuck calls for a more radical switch to the subsidisation of the wages of agricultural workers in an effort to 'encourage more local people to see better prospects in working on the land...If it costs employers less to pay workers decent money, it keeps food costs low, as the savings could be passed to the consumers, thus benefitting everyone in the food chain' (106-7).

While most stakeholders from alternative food organisations were able to identify potential benefits emerging from Brexit, several were sceptical about whether any radical change to the agri-food system would be achieved. As one such person commented, 'there's opportunities there to really improve our food systems but what I don't see is any real will amongst those who wield power to do that' (anti-GM crops group). Others were concerned that the lack of representation of food workers and other vulnerable groups within the food system would mean that their voices would not be heard within dominant narratives of agri-food futures, as can be seen in the following interview extract:

'I think all these [positive] things could come out of Brexit [but] is there a public appetite for that discussion? I don't know ... I think people's consciousness in relation to a lot of these issues is limited. I don't see there is much political agitation around this stuff.' (permaculture organisation).

Since the interviews were undertaken, the UK government's policy on seasonal migrant workers has shifted somewhat. Previously, the Seasonal Agricultural Workers Scheme (SAWS) had operated in the UK since the 1940s with the aim of delivering a sufficient number of agricultural workers during harvest periods. It established a quota of about 3,000 workers per year, which remained constant for the next six decades. In 2004, following a review of the agri-food system, this annual quota was increased to 25,000 workers and four years later eligibility for the SAWS was limited to only those workers from A2 countries. The Scheme was abolished by the UK government at the end of 2013 with this decision linked to the adoption of a new (more restrictive) approach to immigration policy (see Scott, 2015).

Following intense lobbying from conventional agri-food actors, and particularly the large farming unions, the UK government announced in September 2018 that it would be launching a seasonal workers pilot scheme for the horticulture sector, which would allow farmers to employ 2,500 such workers each year. In the government's press release, the Environment Secretary stated that 'we have listened to the powerful arguments from farmers about the need for seasonal labour to keep the horticulture industry productive and profitable' (Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, 2018). Responding to this announcement, the President of the National Farmers Union (NFU) commented that it constitutes a 'major victory for the NFU, its members and the public. It follows two years of evidence from the NFU, growers and MPs that a shortage of workers has been hampering food production' (NFU, 2018). Since its launch, the seasonal workers pilot scheme has been operated by two major labour providers with these recruiting migrant labour on behalf of the horticultural farms involved in the initiative. In February 2020, less than 18 months after the

pilot scheme was launched, the UK government announced that the scheme would be expanded to allow horticultural farms to recruit up to 10,000 workers per year.

Shortly after the expansion of the pilot scheme was announced, the COVID-19 pandemic began to hit the UK, as it did many other countries. What became apparent very quickly was COVID-19's significant impact on the UK's agri-food system. Panic buying in supermarkets exposed the just-in-time distribution methods of the major food retailers as well as their reliance on imports that were becoming threatened by travel restrictions introduced to reduce the spread of the pandemic. It was also evident that these same travel restrictions would impact on the supply of seasonal migrant workers to the agricultural sector. If Brexit had the potential to reduce the supply of such workers over the next few years, then the pandemic achieved this in a matter of weeks. A national *Pick for Britain* campaign was launched in an effort to recruit British workers - and particularly those furloughed or made unemployed by the pandemic - into the fields and food packaging depots. While appearing to capture the national mood of working together at a time of national emergency, *Pick for Britain* not only failed to recruit many UK workers but also highlighted some of the conditions under which agri-food pickers and packagers were expected to work. According to O'Carroll (2020a), labour recruitment agencies reported that less than 20 per cent of UK applicants had actually gone on to work on the farms, with the main barriers to taking up this work being the 'length of the contract, location of the farm, and inability to work full-time because of care responsibilities.' (ibid.) O'Carroll (2020b) also approached this situation from the perspective of the applicants, commenting that:

“British applicants for jobs harvesting crops have said farmers have made it virtually impossible for them to secure the work despite a national appeal for a ‘land army’ to save the UK’s fruit and vegetables. Dozens of workers have expressed anger at claims they are too lazy or picky to take the jobs, alleging that farmers are favouring cheap migrant labour.” (no page number)

It was reported by some applicants that the pay and working conditions, particularly the requirement to live in shared on-farm accommodation with other workers, were significant obstacles to them taking jobs, with farmers accused of being inflexible towards British workers. This situation was echoed by some of the participants in our project, as can be seen in the following extract from an interview with a labour supplier:

“it’s incredibly tough work, it’s not terribly well paid, it’s seasonal and you are highly likely to need to live on site because it’s weather-related - you know, it could be that you’re told the day before ‘we’re starting at 7am tomorrow’ and then it could be that at 7, ‘actually we’re starting at 9’, so you really do need to be on site or very very close, which is not something that appeals to our current UK labour force...”

In December 2020, the UK government announced that the seasonal agricultural workers pilot scheme would be expanded again with 30,000 workers now being permitted to travel to the UK in 2021 to pick and pack fruit and vegetables, which represents a 12-fold increase on the original limit announced only 18 months earlier. In the associated press release, it is stated that the expansion of the scheme ‘follows a long period of close working with the National Farmers Union and the Association of Labour Providers, across all parts of the UK...’

(Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, 2020b). The response to this latest crisis then follows a familiar pattern – that of continued and, in this case, increased reliance on migrant labour and the absence of any meaningful consideration of the structural conditions of agri-food work that may be deterring domestic workers from entering the sector.

## CONCLUSION

During the early years of the Second World War, when Britain could no longer easily import food, when domestic food production was not sufficient to feed the nation and when mass hunger and starvation were distinct possibilities, the national coalition government instigated two major policy interventions in relation to food. The first was to increase domestic food production by significantly expanding the volume of land dedicated to growing food in both rural and urban spaces, as well as the number of people involved in agriculture. ‘Dig for Victory’ became a rallying call for the development of radically different relationships between land, agriculture, food and people. The second key intervention was to establish a national commission to examine the future of rural land use and the structure of agriculture in an effort to ensure a reliable supply of cheap and nutritional food to the UK population (see Stamp, 1943).

While war-time conditions are clearly not directly comparable to Brexit, it is the case that the latter has also provided a considerable shock to the UK’s agri-food system, most notably in relation to the sustainability of supply changes and its reliance on imported (and low cost) food and labour. Indeed, Benton et al. (2019) suggest that ‘for no other sectors are the

challenges and opportunities of Brexit as extensive as they are for food and agriculture’, adding that ‘Brexit, for better or worse, means a major structural change in policy and how people think about the food they eat’ (31). Writing in similar terms, Helm (2017) argues that the ‘scope for improvement in designing a British agricultural policy is large. Brexit provides a once in a generation opportunity’ (124). What our study shows, though, is that many conventional stakeholders in the agri-food system are reluctant to engage with this broader agenda for change; largely restricting their discussion to a particular part of this system - migrant labour - and focusing on the problems Brexit presents to the pipeline of imported workers. In many ways, this focus reflects both the significant growth in the number of migrant agri-food workers from eastern and central European countries since the initial enlargement of the EU in 2004 and the reliance of the contemporary agri-food system on migrant labour. Such is this reliance within parts of the system, and particularly among soft fruit and vegetable crop growers, that Clutterbuck (2017) argues we are witnessing a new form of ‘plantation agriculture’, with horticulture now as dependent on the availability of migrant labour as it is on climatic conditions and soil types. In the same way that ‘plantations once defined colonialism’, Clutterbuck suggests that the contemporary ‘temperate plantations [now] define neoliberalism’ (ibid., 92)<sup>6</sup>.

The presence of migrant labour across the full spectrum of the agri-food sector has led conventional stakeholders – within and beyond our research - to claim that without migrants, the farming and food industry would rapidly move into crisis mode. Brexit and, more recently, the COVID-19 pandemic, have been viewed as key threats to the continued supply

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<sup>6</sup> Guthman (2017) makes a similar point in relation to strawberry farming in California, suggesting that growers are threatened more by labour shortages than political challenges to their use of chemicals.



of migrant labour, pushing the agri-food sector into such a crisis mode<sup>7</sup>. We want to suggest, though, that elements of this 'crisis' are being manufactured by key actors in the food sector who are promoting particular narratives of agri-food work(ers) in order to serve particular interests. There is certainly little robust statistical evidence on which to base narratives of a migrant labour crisis following the EU referendum in 2016. Our analysis of government survey data raises questions about the *centrality* of (seasonal) migrant labour to agriculture. EU migrants accounted for just one-fifth of the agricultural workforce in Northern Ireland in 2017 and in horticulture, the sector most dependent on migrant workers, only about one-third of farms in England employed seasonal migrant labour in 2018. Our work also questions the narrative of a *migrant labour supply crisis* given that just one-third of horticultural farms making use of seasonal migrants reported any shortfall of workers and the average quarterly labour shortfall in 2019 was only five per cent. Furthermore, very few farms reported being significantly impacted by any shortfall of seasonal migrant workers in terms of harvesting crops or meeting customer contracts. In fact, the only major impact of labour shortages appeared to be an increase in employment costs, which, from the perspective of migrant (and domestic) farm workers, could be viewed as a positive development in terms of its potential to improve wage levels.

Given that the existing official statistical evidence appears to complicate the narrative of a migrant labour crisis, it is surprising that this narrative has not been questioned by other actors, including those from national government, the alternative food movement and mainstream news organisations. Perhaps the key reason why such a narrative continues to

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<sup>7</sup> Similar statements were made by the same agri-food actors within the consultation process prior to the closure of the previous seasonal agricultural workers scheme in 2013.

dominate lies in the political economy of the contemporary agri-food system. We agree with Sbicca (2018) that the continued reliance on migrant workers needs to be understood as a state- and corporate-led mechanism for devaluing labour and maintaining inequality within the agri-food sector. Expressed more crudely, the production of cheap food on British farms requires cheap labour and a workforce that is characterised by sufficient flexibility and compliance to meet the shifting demands of the global food corporations. In increasing numbers, food producers have turned to labour providers and workers from lower income EU countries to supply such a labour force. The UK's more restrictive post-Brexit migration policy, limiting the number of low-paid, low-skilled migrants (including those from the EU) able to enter the UK, has challenged this recruitment strategy but, rather than use this challenge to address the structural conditions of work in the agri-food sector, the UK government's proposed fix has been to accede to the demands of (or perhaps threats from) the conventional farming lobby and exempt parts of the agricultural industry from this new migration policy by (re)introducing and then massively expanding a seasonal agricultural workers scheme. As has been the case with other global North countries, the UK's agri-food labour problem (and its solution) is constructed in relation to the (in)adequacies of *workers* rather than the structural conditions of *work*.

More generally, opportunities provided by Brexit to critique the state of the contemporary agri-food system in the UK and develop a new policy framework that is better able to address issues of sustainability, resilience and equity have been largely shunned by key actors. As we have seen, conventional stakeholders have been mainly concerned with protecting the status quo and future pipelines of cheap (and compliant) imported labour. The UK government's decision to redistribute existing public funding to farmers on the basis of public

environmental goods rather than size of landholding has arguably produced a fairer funding regime, but it has avoided any more radical / progressive restructuring of the agri-food sector. Alternative food organisations have been more vocal in raising broader questions about the ways Brexit could be used to develop a more holistic approach to food and farming that engages more with agricultural sustainability and food sovereignty. However, reflecting findings from research in North America (Brown and Gertz, 2011; Minkoff-Zern, 2014; Sbicca, 2015), they have been largely silent on issues of inequality, injustice and labour precarity within the agri-food system.

The COVID-19 pandemic presented another chance for the UK government to make a significant intervention in relation to farm labour conditions. The *Pick for Britain* campaign provided some early encouraging signs that the government, working with key farming organisations and labour suppliers, was keen to rebalance the agricultural workforce by actively encouraging more British workers into farming. The campaign attracted several thousand applications although a much smaller number of applicants actually took up harvesting jobs. Instead of *Pick for Britain* becoming a platform from which to think more critically about labour constraints in the agri-food sector and to develop a longer-term strategy to encourage more British workers (back) into the agricultural sector, it is evident that key agri-food actors have gone on to dismiss it as a well-intended but failed experiment, repeating now familiar criticism of British workers – for not being prepared to undertake such work, for being more likely to leave the job early and for having lower productivity rates than migrant workers. Indeed, *Pick for Britain* has helped to expose some of the harsh realities of harvesting work and the embeddedness of migrant labour within the agri-food sector, with British workers being expected to conform to the conditions accepted by and the

productivity standards achieved by migrants. Yet again, the focus is being placed on the attributes of particular groups of *workers* rather than the structural conditions of *work*<sup>8</sup>.

While migrant *labour* has featured prominently within discussions of the post-Brexit agri-food system, the same cannot be said of migrant *labourers*. Working in remote locations and being required to live in on-farm accommodation have awarded migrants a largely hidden presence within the rural landscape. Official statistics have provided migrant food workers with only a little more visibility given that government surveys continue to undercount the true scale of their presence, existing evidence is collected from farm owners rather than workers, and very little information has been captured on the profiles<sup>9</sup>, let alone the aspirations and experiences, of migrant food workers by government or academic researchers in the UK. There has also been a noticeable political invisibility of migrant workers. Unlike the situation in North America, migrant food workers in the UK lack any meaningful political presence or representation – whether within or beyond the food system - and their ‘vital’ roles are presented by other, more powerful, actors rather than by themselves. Indeed, the actual voices of migrant agricultural workers (and food workers more generally) have been absent from recent discussions of post-Brexit agri-food issues (although see FLEX (2021) for a notable exception), providing yet another example of how ‘the voices of those on the frontline of food systems injustices – from farmworkers to the food insecure - are often neglected to the margins of dominant food narratives’ (Gordon and Hunt, 2019, 14; see also Verdon, 2017).

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<sup>8</sup> Submissions by the NFU and labour suppliers to a recent UK Parliamentary inquiry into immigration policy and the food supply chain reinforce this narrative (Food, Environment and Rural Affairs Committee, 2020).

<sup>9</sup> In terms of gender, age, ethnicity, qualifications, employment conditions, housing situations, etc.

It is clear then that migrant labour occupies a rather ambiguous position within the UK's agri-food system: its presence has been normalised, perhaps even institutionalised, by dominant actors but the unpleasant realities of migrant work and the voices of migrants themselves remain conveniently absent from mainstream agri-food narratives. It is important that researchers and activists in the UK (and elsewhere) work together to make the case for a reevaluation of the role of agri-food work(ers), ensuring that workers are paid a living wage, feel respected and acknowledged for the tasks they undertake and are able to engage with decision-making processes on the issues that affect their lives. What this suggests to us is that questions about agri-food work(ers) in the UK need to be positioned within a more critical justice framework; viewing (migrant) farm work(ers) as bound up with redistributive, recognitional and representative forms of injustice (Fraser, 2008). Without more critical research and political activism on food labour, it will be difficult to disagree with Newby's conclusion of more than 40 years ago, that the chances of the farm worker's poverty being 'relieved in the near future seem hardly less remote than they have ever been...[and]...the farm worker will remain ignored and caricatured as he (sic) was in the past' (1977, 438).

Table 1: Average quarterly need for and shortfall of seasonal labour per horticultural farm, 2018 and 2019 in England

	Q1 2018	Q2 2018	Q3 2018	Q4 2018	Q1 2019	Q2 2019	Q3 2019	Q4 2019
Percentage of farms reporting a need for seasonal labour	36	36	33	25	30	35	44	37
Percentage of farms needing seasonal labour reporting a shortage of such labour	30	34	34	26	20	28	30	27
Average percentage shortfall per farm	11	5	9	5	4	5	6	5

Source: Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (2020a)

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