

European Supermarkets Defend Low Wages To Moroccan Tomato Pickers

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Tomato pickers in Morocco – who supply fresh produce during the winter to big European supermarket chains like Albert Heijn in the Netherlands and Sainsbury's and Tesco in the UK – are paid poverty wages, according to [a new report](#) from Fairfood International.

"If you live here in Europe and you eat tomatoes in winter, there's a high chance that they are from Morocco, often produced under unfair working conditions," Anselm Iwundu, executive director of Fairfood, said [in a video](#) released in June.

And the poverty wages have a major impact on the whole country's economy, since tomatoes account for almost half of Morocco's vegetable exports. The North African country is the third largest exporter of tomatoes to the European Union (EU), after the Netherlands and Spain.

Lahcen Moski, a 38-year-old tomato picker in Morocco, told the authors of the report that [he made 60 dirhams \(\\$6.78\) a day working in hazardous conditions in tomato fields](#).

"What is 60 dirhams going to do for your livelihood? When you think of the children, of clothes, of food, or even to try to save for something bigger, or medicines... it is nothing" Moski said. He says he has to buy groceries on credit to support his wife and son.

Zahra Elbakili, a 62-year-old woman with six children, told Fairfood that she was fired when she attempted to set up a union chapter with 22 other women.

Labor analysts say this is outrageous. "[Must food and clothes in Europe and the United States be so cheap that the migrant workers picking, processing or sewing them on another continent cannot afford their own groceries?](#)" wrote Alisa Tang, an editor at the Thomson Reuters Foundation.

Most of these Moroccan tomato pickers work for a small number of companies like the Azura Group, Agri-Souss, Delassus and Idyl who produce over 90 percent of tomatoes in the country.

But Fairfood points out that the major British and Dutch retailers wield even greater power over Morocco's agricultural workers since 90 percent of these Moroccan tomatoes are eventually sold in Europe, and 76 percent of fresh fruit and vegetables purchased in the Netherlands and nearly 90 percent in the UK are bought at supermarkets.

The burden of these low wages falls disproportionately on women. Some 70 percent of the

agricultural workers in the Souss Massa Drâa region, where most of Morocco's tomatoes are grown, are women, a surprising statistic for a country that has one of the lowest female labor participation rates in the world. Many of these workers are young, single, migrant workers who are looking to avoid social stigmatization and marginalization.

Fairfood says that over a third of the workers that they surveyed were paid below the minimum wage of €147.44 a month for agricultural workers. Indeed Souss Massa Drâa has the third highest percentage of people living in poverty and the highest percentage of poverty severity in Morocco.

In responses to the Fairfood report made to Business & Human Rights Resource Center, however, [the retailers denied that they paid below minimum wage](#).

Tesco said that its own investigation "did not correlate with the generalized findings reported by Fairfood" stating that an ethical trade manager conducted random samples of worker pay slips at each supplier that showed that all their workers were paid above the minimum wage for agricultural workers. Sainsbury's claimed that its supplier "pays not just the legal wage, but more than 20 percent above minimum wage to all workers." Albert Heijn stated that all its workers were paid "at least the Moroccan minimum wage for agricultural workers and higher rates are paid for overtime."

Tesco did acknowledge that [only 30 percent were paid at or above the living wage range](#) of €316 to €497 per household per month.

Fairfood has [started a campaign](#) to lobby these European retailers to pay a living wage to workers in their supply chain. The NGO is working with Fédération Nationale du Secteur Agricole, a local agricultural union in Morocco, to help agricultural workers on the ground to speak up for their rights.

The revelations of poverty wages for tomato pickers in Morocco are just the latest in a series of investigations that have revealed the impact of cheap goods available in Western retail chains. Recently, activists [published details of workers working under slave like conditions in Thailand to harvest shrimp for U.S. and U.K. supermarkets](#). And while the sweatshop conditions under which garments are produced in countries like [Bangladesh](#) and [Cambodia](#) are well known, feminists who launched a T-shirt campaign to campaign for women's rights in the UK were deeply embarrassed [when it was discovered that their products were sewn for low wages by women in Mauritius under poor working conditions](#)

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