

# Neoliberalism's Newest Product: The Modern Slave Trade

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PARIS, Jul (IPS) Two centuries after the abolition of slavery we are seeing the reintroduction of an abominable practice: human trafficking. The International Labour Organisation (ILO) estimates that 12.3 million people each year are taken captive by networks tied to international crime and used as forced labour in inhuman conditions.

In the case of women, the victims are subjected mostly to sexual exploitation while others are exploited as domestic servants. There is also the case of youths who are taken captive through various scams so their body parts can be sold in the international human organ trade.

These practices are expanding more and more to satisfy the demand for cheap labour in sectors like the hotel and restaurant industries, agriculture, and construction.

The OSCE dedicated two days of its last international conference in Vienna in late June to this subject [i]. Though the phenomenon is international, various specialists asserted that the plague of slave labour is growing rapidly in the EU. Unions and labour groups estimate that in Europe there are hundreds of thousands of workers subjected to the blight of slavery [ii].

In Spain, France, Italy, the Netherlands, the UK, and other countries of the EU, foreign migrant workers attracted by the mirage of Europe find themselves trapped in the networks of various mafias and working in conditions like slaves of past ages. An ILO report reveals that south of Naples, for example, 1200 homeless farm labourers work twelve hours per day in greenhouses without contracts and for miserable pay, guarded by private militias and living in what resemble concentration camps.

This "work camp" is not the only one in Europe; thousands and thousands of undocumented immigrants have met similar fates, victims of a modern slave trade flourishing in any number of European countries. According to various unions, this form of forced labour accounts for almost 20 percent of agricultural production [iii].

Responsibility for this expansion of human trafficking lies largely with the current dominant economic model. In effect, the form of neoliberal globalisation than has been imposed over the last three decades through economic shock therapy has devastated the most fragile levels of society and imposed extremely high social costs. It has created a fierce competition between labour and capital. In the name of free trade, the major multinationals manufacture and sell their goods around the world, producing where labour is cheapest and selling where the cost of living is highest. The new capitalism has made competitiveness its primary engine and brought about a commodification of labour and labourers.

Globalisation, which offers remarkable opportunities to a lucky few, imposes on the rest, in Europe, a ruthless and unmediated competition between EU salary workers, small businesses, and small farmers and their badly-paid, exploited counterparts on the other side of the world. The result we now see clearly before us: social dumping on a planetary scale.

For employment the result is disastrous. For example, in France in the last twenty years this phenomenon has caused the elimination of more than two million jobs in the industrial sector alone.

Certain sectors in Europe where there is a chronic shortage of labour tend to use undocumented workers, which in turn fuels the trafficking of more workers by clandestine networks that in many cases force them into slave labour. Numerous reports clearly evidence the “sale” migrant farm workers.

Despite the many tools of international law available to combat these crimes, and despite the proliferation of public statements by government officials condemning them, the public will to put an end to the practice is weak. In reality, the management of industry and construction and major agricultural exporters exert constant pressure on governments to turn a blind eye to the trafficking of undocumented workers.

Industry management has always supported mass immigration because it depresses the price of labour. Reports by the European Commission and BUSINESSEUROPE (an association of European industries and businesses) have called for more immigration for decades.

But today’s human traffickers are not the only ones exploiting slave labour: now a form of “legal servitude” is being developed. For example, last February in Italy Fiat served its workers with the following extortionate ultimatum: either agree to work more, for less money, in worse conditions, or the company will shift operations to Eastern Europe. Faced with the prospect of being fired and terrorised by the conditions in Eastern Europe, with its rock bottom wages and no weekends off, 63 percent of the Fiat workers voted for their own exploitation.

In Europe many employers, taking advantage of the crisis and brutal fiscal adjustment policies being imposed, are trying to establish similar forms of “legal servitude”. Thanks to the tools made available by neoliberal globalisation, they threaten their workers with savage competition from cheap labour in distant countries.

If we are to avoid this form of corrosive social regression, we will have to begin to question the current workings of globalisation – and begin the process of deglobalisation.

*Ignacio Ramonet is editor of Le Monde Diplomatique in Spanish.*

## Notes

[i] Titled “Preventing Trafficking in Human Beings for Labour Exploitation: Decent Work and Social Justice”, the conference was organised by the Special Representative and Coordinator for the Fight Against Human Trafficking, Maria Grazia Giammarinaro, and her team, as part of the Alliance Against Human Trafficking.

[ii] See the report: Combatting Trafficking as Modern-day Slavery: A Matter of Rights, Freedom and Security, 2010 Annual Report, OSCE, Vienna, 9 December 2010.

[iii] See the report: The Cost of Coercion, ILO, Geneva, 2009.

[iv] Cf. No trabajar solos. Sindicatos y ONG unen sus fuerzas para luchar contra el trabajo forzoso y la trata de personas en Europa (Never Work Alone: Unions and NGOs Join Forces to Fight Against Forced Labour and Human Trafficking in Europe), International Trade Union Confederation, Brussels, February 2011.

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