

The Fate of Greece's Refugees and Migrant Workers: Picking the Grapes or Getting Swept Up

By [Chris Jones](#)

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The grape harvest is now underway on Greece's Samos island in the eastern Aegean Sea off the Turkish coastline. The vineyards on the lower slopes are now being picked and this will continue through to the end of September as the grapes mature higher up the mountain. The mountainous terrain of Samos is such that both the major crops of grapes and olives cannot be cultivated or harvested by any significant mechanical assistance. Human labour alone, as it has been for hundreds of years, is the only way to farm on most of the island.

The harvest itself is hard physical work and for many involves carrying 20 kg crates of grapes up and down mountain slopes to the pick up vehicles that will take them off to be pressed. The crates we use are plastic and alongside the pick up truck these are probably the main differences between the harvest of today and that of 200 hundred years earlier.

The hard work is made more difficult by the summer temperatures currently in the low to mid 30's. Even though we start picking as soon as it is light, within 2 hours the sun is ferocious.



On a number of the vineyards you will see large family groups ranging from children to grandparents bringing in the grapes. Women far outnumber the men in many of these groups and this transforms the process such as on our neighbour's vineyard where the picking is accompanied by much banter, jokes and singing amongst the women.

But this is no longer the way in which most of the grapes are harvested. As the young have migrated away from the island over many decades the average age of the Samos farmer has grown to over 60 years. The young who do stay are not generally interested in working the land, even if they might lend a hand in the harvest.

This has had many consequences, not the least being the gradual abandonment of vineyards and olive orchards, especially where access is difficult. Untended they quickly revert to a 'jungle' of weeds and shrubs, which in turn heightens the fire risk during the summer – a major threat every year. One of the reasons why the fires in 2000 devastated about a third of Samos was due to the neglect of the land which allowed grasses to flourish which by August made for the most inflammable hay.

The island is littered with abandoned terraces. Using the bountiful supply of stone previous generations of farmers covered the island's mountain slopes with terracing for olives and grapes. Any walk in the mountains reveals the remnants of this extraordinary achievement, with sections of the dry stone terraces still standing amongst the trees and shrub. This is by

no means unique to Samos but is true for much of rural Greece especially where the terrain does not permit the use of tractors and other farm machinery.

However, over the past 2 decades the rate of abandonment has undoubtedly been slowed down, first by the arrival of the Albanian exodus through the 1990s and more recently by refugees. If it were not for these sources of mainly young, highly vulnerable and therefore cheap labour many more farms would be abandoned, and certainly in the case of Samos, most of the olives and grapes would be left unpicked. So one of the most significant differences between the grape harvest of today compared with earlier times is not only the presence of pick up trucks as against donkeys and plastic crates instead of wicker panniers, but above all the background of the pickers. Family groups are now far outnumbered by migrants and refugees on the vineyards.

All over rural Greece, refugees and migrants are doing (hard, physical) work without which many villages would simply not survive. Their role and contribution is crucial as my drive from the coast to the village this morning revealed as I passed African and Pakistani workers collecting the grapes.

But in Athens at the very same time the Greek state has launched and is continuing its biggest ever police mobilisation against refugees and migrant workers. The program, for this is what is happening, has been named by the state as Operation Xenios Zeus which in itself reveals the utter cruelty and contempt of the state for these most vulnerable of the population. For Zeus is the god of hospitality and the protector of guests! Under this benign name 2,000 police have been deployed in Athens and 2,500 police on Greece's eastern border with Turkey. On Saturday 4th August in Athens alone, over 1,100 refugees without appropriate papers were arrested and detained and a further 4,900 held temporarily for questioning. These numbers have grown as the sweep operation continues (see <http://clandestinenglish.wordpress.com/2012/08/05/operation-xenios-zeus-in-athens/>).

Empty, or under-utilised military camps in the north of Greece have been commandeered to house those detained pending their eventual deportation as well as a new detention centre in Athens. Moreover, in their characteristically authoritarian fashion, the police action is indiscriminate and inhumane. No distinction is made between the majority who have the appropriate papers and those who do not; the main criteria for being swept up seems to be skin colour; no account is given to minors, to those traumatized by their flight and escapes, to those who have been tortured and raped. All this is now well documented as being the norm for the Greek state in numerous reports coming out of Amnesty, Human Rights Watch and many other national and international NGOs (a recent example being Human Rights Watch's July 2012 report 'Hate on the Streets' (<http://www.hrw.org/reports/2012/07/10/hate-streets>)). But on the ground it is not that nothing changes but it gets worse almost day by day.

The emergence of Golden Dawn following the June general elections adds impetus to the fascistic tendencies of the state. The New Democracy led coalition is desperate to avoid haemorrhaging its right wing support to this populist and openly fascistic party which now has state funding following its success in gaining a presence in the Greek parliament. This in turn has allowed it to gain wide coverage for its racist stunts like giving out food to the poor in Syntagma Square with the vicious condition that they must possess a Greek I.D. The dynamic on the right is like watching a dance of death evolve and grow. If nothing else it ignites the most massive 'green light' to a Greek police force half of whom it has been

estimated voted for Golden Dawn. It is a green light for violence, cruelty, and neglect all with impunity.

There is no subtlety involved. The Greek government with extreme disregard for the truth is seeking to persuade that the real and most pressing crisis facing Greece is not the 'debt' or the Troika but illegal immigration to the country. "Two days after a massive sweep operation in which Greek police netted over 1,000 clandestine immigrants in central Athens, Public Order and Citizens' Protection Minister Nikos Dendias defended the campaign saying failure to crack down on illegal immigration would lead to social 'collapse'. "Our social fabric is in danger of unraveling. The immigration problem is perhaps even bigger than the financial one," Dendias told Skai radio on Monday. He said the "invasion of immigrants" was the biggest Greece has faced since the invasion of the Dorians...." (*Ekathimerini*, August 7th 2012).

Many people here are shocked and frightened by these developments. The current program heightens these fears, despite active resistance on the streets from both the communist party (KKE) and the left social democratic, Syriza. But it is the small developments that are perhaps more insidious and reveal a more fundamental process of normalizing xenophobic nationalism with its attendant racism. Greece and Greek are increasingly being used as adjectives in much the same way as in the early days of Hitler, when fascist supporters took to talking about German this or that as a means of indicating that they were not Jewish. Same here, being Greek now also means not being a refugee or migrant or anything remotely associated with the so-called sub-humans who have no place in the cradle of western civilisation. As one commentator noted, the very name of the latest program 'Xenios Zeus' is an appeal to classical authority, part of an attempt to assert a perceived difference between 'western civilisation' and 'oriental barbarity' going all the way back to Ancient Greece. According to the public order minister, Nikos Dendias, "the country is being lost. Not since the coming of the Dorians, 4000 years ago, has the country seen an invasion of such scale... This is a bomb at the foundations of society and of the state." (Yannis Hamilakis, August 8th 2012; <http://greekleftreview.wordpress.com/2012/08/08/hospitable-zeus/>)

As these terrible events unfold in Greece I am also reading that the recently elected 'socialist' government in France is launching an unprecedented attack on the Roma population in France.

As with operation Scoupa earlier this year in Athens the French are justifying their action on the grounds that the Roma pose a severe threat to public health. Of course health is threatened when states deny people any benefits, decent housing, jobs, respect and basically herd them into ghettos of neglect and abandonment. This is where the health threat comes from and not from its victims. But with the right adjectives - not least being called illegal - and with the right skin colour - state after state from the USA, to Israel through to Greece are trying to reinforce an unquestioning association between refugees/migrants and danger and threat.

We simply cannot afford to stand back and allow capitalist states in the midst of its most serious and enduring systemic crisis to continue along this trajectory. It is, to use an inelegant phrase, 'frightening as hell'.

Chris Jones. Now living on Samos Island Greece after leaving England 5 years ago. His Samos Diary is published on ZNet: <http://www.zcommunications.org/zspace/Chris%20Jones>.

With Michael Lavalette he wrote 'Voices from the West Bank' published by Bookmarks, London , September 2011.

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