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# Romanian Bodies, Irish Berries: A Multi-scalar Approach to Migrant Horticultural Work

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**Abstract:** Previous research has extensively documented the poor living and working conditions experienced by migrant agricultural workers on the island of Ireland, but has failed to fully analyse how the agri-food system relies on that exploitation to continue functioning. This paper uses a multi-scalar approach to analyse the case study of Romanian workers in Irish horticulture. Labour agency is then used to identify ongoing strategies used by workers and their allies to contest their living and working conditions. In the context of the ongoing climate crisis, it becomes critical to form coalitions between environmental justice and migrant rights movements if a just transition is to be achieved.

**Keywords:** Food sovereignty, agriculture, migration, just transitions, Ireland.

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## Introduction

In February 2023, Ioan Lacatus was apprehended at his home in Portadown, County Armagh and given his second deportation order from the UK (Armagh I, 2023). From Romania originally, Lacatus had a history of labour trafficking offenses dating back to 2013. His victims testified that Lacatus recruited them from Romania and that on arrival to Ireland, they were forced to sign over their wages to his bank account. They reported living “like rats” in cramped, unsanitary conditions, being routinely denied food, and working up to 70 hours per week in local food processing factories (Craigavon Court Reporter, 2023; The Irish Times, 2016). For these crimes, Lacatus was imprisoned for nearly four years and deported (once in 2020, before returning in 2023 – hence the second arrest). Presumably, in this case, justice has been served.

It would be easy to treat this as an isolated incident. The villain in this case is “greedy, ruthless, and manipulative” (BBC News, 2016) and unaffiliated with any employers, who can claim—perhaps truthfully—that they were unaware of the situation. Yet decades of research have documented conditions like these for migrant workers across the island of Ireland. Since the early 2000s, studies have been conducted with migrants working in fishing (Murphy et al., 2023), meat processing (Migrant Rights Centre Ireland, 2020), domestic work (Murphy et al., 2020), and horticulture (Migrant Rights Centre Ireland, 2006; Potter & Hamilton, 2014), uncovering clear evidence of exploitation and abuse. The problem here is not one greedy man; the problem is systemic. While it is important to condemn the actions of individual human traffickers, it is important to also understand whose interests are served by migrant worker exploitation.

Numerous factors have the potential to make migrant workers more vulnerable to exploitation, such as lack of English-language skills, lack of familiarity with legal protections, fear of deportation, unemployment or homelessness (Doyle et al., 2019; Murphy et al., 2023; Walsh et al., 2022). Within legal scholarship, there is a growing recognition of the role of state policy in making migrant workers vulnerable to exploitation and abuse, such as the use of

criminal rather than labour law to address labour rights violations for migrants (Murphy et al., 2023). Despite the known links between agri-food and the poor treatment of migrant workers, research has not yet thoroughly examined the role of the agri-food system in shaping migrant worker exploitation in Ireland.<sup>2</sup>

This case study emerged out of a PhD that investigates power dynamics in Irish horticulture and the role of migrant workers in a just transition for Irish agriculture. It deals with Romanians working on horticulture sites near Portadown, County Armagh. Since the early 2000s, migrant workers from Romania have often filled the need for seasonal agricultural labour across Europe (Stan & Erne, forthcoming). Many migration scholars have looked to economic explanations, highlighting instability and poverty in post-socialist countries and the relatively higher wages available elsewhere. However, the push/pull model has been critiqued for failing to account for migrants' agency (Hear et al., 2019), and in any case may not hold true in the case of Romanian-Irish migration as there is not as large of a wealth disparity between the two countries as compared to most sending-receiving country pairs<sup>3</sup>. Other explanations emphasise the role of social networks or recruitment infrastructure (McCollum & Findlay, 2015), which play an important part but do not account for the whole picture.

A multi-scalar approach has been developed in order to begin untangling the flows of people, capital, and products that make up the Irish horticultural system. Scale, defined in this work as simply the spatial reach of actions, has been used by geographers to understand how capitalism builds uneven relationships between space and power (Jones et al., 2017; Xiang, 2013). Geographical scale “defines the boundaries and bounds the identities around which control is exerted and contested” (Smith, 1992, p. 66) and it is both political and social, framing scaled places as “the embo-

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<sup>2</sup> Note that in this work, “Ireland” will refer to both Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland.

<sup>3</sup> According to International Labour Organisation statistics, Ireland is ranked the lowest in Europe for labour income share as a percentage of GDP, while Romania is second-last. Its unemployment rate is slightly higher than Romania's (5% vs. 4.5% in 2021), though it performs better in other metrics such as job stability and average wage overall. See more at <https://ilostat.ilo.org/>.

diment of social relations of empowerment and disempowerment and the arena through and in which they operate” (Swyngedouw, 1997, p. 169). In this work, scale is used as an epistemological tool to unpack capitalist relations around agri-food and migration, rather than as an ontological reality (Moore, 2008).

Multi-scalarity in migration research recognises that migration is shaped—or rather, constructed—at multiple geographic scales by institutions, policies, and governments (Williamson, 2015) as well as by migrants themselves. It emphasises the importance of the place-based and the local in creating alternative imaginaries (Escobar, 2001) and acknowledges that “scaling up” strategies to contest capitalist relations at the global level should be complemented by “scaling down” strategies which reaffirm local particularities (Leitner & Miller, 2007). Multi-scalar ethnography is explicitly radical, seeking to “detect cracks in the established systems, identify rising opportunities for changes, and thus envisage possible paths of change and points of entry for intervention” (Xiang, 2013, p. 285).

This paper aims to construct a multi-scalar snapshot of contemporary Romanian-Irish horticultural labour migration and to identify new ways of building a more just agri-food system. It first discusses the context at the micro, meso, and macro scales before situating Irish horticulture and Romanian migrant labour within the global agri-food system’s networks of capital accumulation. The scales to be discussed are:

- **Micro:** bodies; e.g., personal experiences of various stakeholders
- **Meso:** sites; e.g., Portadown and surroundings or home communities
- **Macro:** processes; e.g., migration patterns/governance or global agri-food

The concept of labour agency is then used to identify what strategies are currently being used by migrant workers to improve

their situations and/or challenge capitalist relations. The findings are situated in the context of the ongoing climate crisis and the need for a just transition for Irish agriculture.

## **Micro-scale: Migrant workers and recruiters in Irish agriculture.**

Irish agriculture companies often find it difficult to recruit locally because the working conditions are harsh and the pay is low (Teagasc, 2018). Since Romania joined the EU in 2007, Romanian migrants have often filled this labour gap. Public data on intra-EU migration is lacking, but a 2018 Teagasc (Irish agriculture development agency) report estimated that 77% of the Irish agricultural workforce were non-Irish (Teagasc, 2018). Keelings, Ireland's largest producer of fruits and vegetables, has been cited in the *Irish Mirror* as admitting that the business was fully dependent on migrant workers, mostly Romanian or Bulgarian, with a need for 1,500 workers for the 2020 growing season (Roberts, 2020). However, that same year, a mushroom grower reported that recruitment in Eastern Europe had been largely unsuccessful and that their business had been forced to recruit from Thailand instead (Healy, 2020). A preliminary review of Central Statistics Office data has not revealed any remarkable changes in numbers of non-EEA employment permits issued to agriculture companies in the past few, but this may change moving forward.

Previous research has extensively documented the poor living and working conditions sometimes faced by migrant agricultural workers in Ireland. Exploitation can occur in the form of extremely low wages, rates of pay based on units picked/processed rather than per hour (which is preferred by some workers), late or incomplete payments, or even human trafficking/forced labour, as in the case outlined above (Migrant Rights Centre Ireland, 2006; Murphy et al., 2023; Potter & Hamilton, 2014). There are high rates of workplace injury, usually from machinery, or respiratory illness from working in cramped, poorly ventilated spaces. Living conditions are also a concern, as housing is typically

provided by the employer and can be overcrowded and unsanitary (Bell et al., 2004; Murphy et al., 2020; Potter & Hamilton, 2014).

In a recent systematic review, Rye and Scott (2018) identified four risk factors that make migrant workers in Europe more likely to experience exploitation: employment duration (seasonal workers are more at risk), degree of informalisation (i.e., verbal contract), indirect employment (e.g., subcontracted through an intermediary), and form of remuneration (with piece-rate workers experiencing more intense and difficult conditions). Others have focused on the role of legal status or housing precarity in increasing risk (Potter & Hamilton, 2014). Some may also be subjected to racialised abuse or harassment from supervisors and the general public. These injustices are exacerbated by the fact that migrants face barriers in accessing healthcare and legal and social supports (Potter & Hamilton, 2014).

While economic drivers may influence some peoples' migration decisions, research has also highlighted the importance of third-party recruiters and social networks in determining who and where is able to migrate for work. Xiang (2013) in their study of migration within China makes visible the role of "middlemen" recruiters in managing the movement of money, information, and contracts between sites and in negotiating relations between migrants and the state apparatus. When establishing new migration networks, employers typically go directly to other countries in order to recruit workers, but as networks are established employers are more likely to use existing employees' social networks or third-party recruiters. Labour providers/gangmasters who recruit, pay, and manage the entire migrant labour force are particularly common (Findlay & McCollum, 2013)<sup>4</sup>.

They are usually from the same country of origin as their employees, are themselves mobile, and often have a mono-

<sup>4</sup> Anecdotally, horticulture producers in Ireland perceive smaller farms as more likely to recruit (typically well-off young adults) through programmes such as World Wide Opportunities on Organic Farms or Workaway, while larger producers are more likely to recruit using labour providers and social networks. Exploitation is considered to be rampant amongst the latter group, while the former are understood to be gaining valuable knowledge, skills, and travel experience; however, research has not yet assessed the validity of this claim.

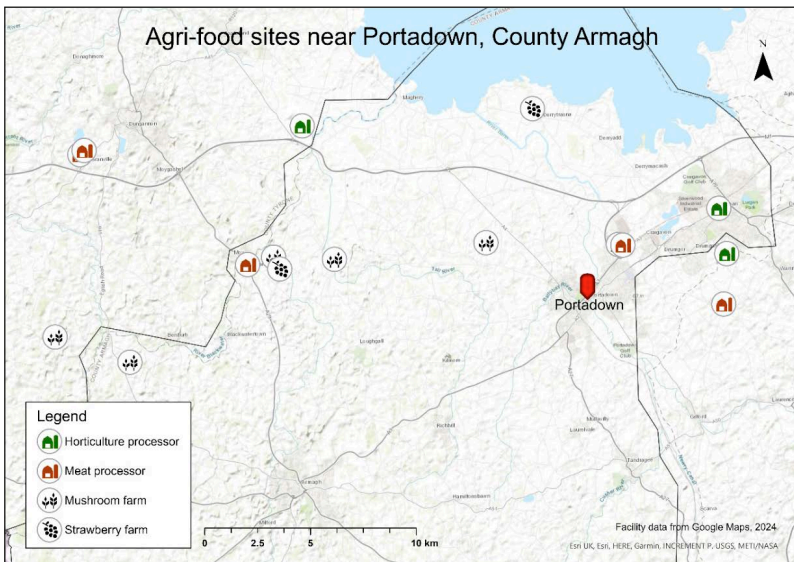
poly over information flows between migrant workers and the employer. The use of gangmasters has been linked to an increased risk of worker exploitation (Findlay & McCollum, 2013). Within the Irish context there is a need for further research on the role of recruiters and in particular their role in shaping migration patterns and experiences by linking migrant labour markets and potential employers.



Figure SEQ Figure \* ARABIC 3. Completed large-scale land deals in Romania and surroundings.

## Meso-scale: Agri-food sites in Portadown, Co. Armagh

Several Irish agricultural sites with high numbers of migrant workers have been identified: mushroom farms in the border counties (Monaghan, Cavan, Armagh), soft fruit farms in the Southeast (Wexford and Waterford), and meat-processing across the island (Migrant Rights Centre Ireland, 2020; Potter & Hamilton, 2014). This case study focuses on Portadown, County Armagh, for its high concentration of agri-food industry and migrant workers. Portadown is a former market town located about 40 kilometres southwest of Belfast and 45 kilometres north of the border with the Republic of Ireland (see Fig. 2). In the 2021 census, the normally resident population was 32,933, 8% of whom were immigrants (Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon Borough Council, 2021). The area has been a part of the Belfast industrial complex since the 18th century when it emerged as a centre for linen production. Currently, its industry is dominated by food processing with other major employers in steel and carpet manufacturing.



**Figure 2.** Agri-food sites near Portadown. Site data from Google Maps; map created using ArcGIS.



Since the early 2000s, foreign workers have travelled to Co. Armagh for seasonal jobs in horticulture (strawberry and mushroom picking) and food processing (Bell et al., 2004; Eaton, 2008). Earlier generations were predominantly recruited from Portugal, but since the accession of the A8 countries to the European Union in 2004 and Romania and Bulgaria in 2007, the number of workers recruited from Eastern Europe has increased. Migrant workers, defined in this paper as people who arrive in a host country either with a job to go to or with the intention of finding one quickly (Bell et al., 2004), have been concentrated Portadown and the nearby towns of Lurgan, Dungannon, and Craigavon. Figure 3 shows a map of horticulture and food processing sites in the area. Many migrants work on multiple sites, living either on-site or in rented accommodation in the villages. Interactions with permanent residents can be limited due to linguistic and cultural barriers, existing geopolitics (e.g., Catholic and Protestant divisions, xenophobia), or other factors like long working hours (Bell et al., 2004; Eaton, 2010), though some workers have reported positive integration experiences (Migrant Rights Centre Ireland, 2006).

## **Macro-scale: the agri-food-migration nexus**

Former colonies, including Ireland, have had export-oriented agri-food systems for centuries, but recent agri-food development has been marked by a global shift from small-scale subsistence farming to state-led industrialisation to market-led intensive agriculture (Fraser, 2017; Weis, 2007). In the 1960s, the Green Revolution, financed by the Global North, disseminated packages of credit, fertilisers, and high yielding seeds that were dependent on machinery and irrigation. Globally, and most famously in Mexico and India, agricultural production increased dramatically. From 1970 to 1990, total food available per person globally increased by 11%. However, there were a number of drawbacks: increasing inequality in rural areas, dispossession, environmental degradation, and pollution. Additionally, while global hunger levels

decreased, many countries, particularly in South America and South Asia, experienced a significant increase because their people were too poor to buy food, despite its increased availability (Holt-Giménez & Patel, 2009).

In the post-war era, states were considered the appropriate body through which to advance development, but starting in the 1980s, the rise of neoliberalism meant that the free market became considered the key pathway to prosperity. Lenders such as the World Bank and International Monetary Fund took a new approach to agri-food, requiring governments to implement structural adjustment programmes (SAPs) in order to receive loans (Holt-Giménez & Patel, 2009; Wittman et al., 2010). SAPs cut government spending on agriculture and liberalised Global South economies, opening them to investment by multi-national corporations. The impacts have been beneficial for Global North economies, but for much of the Global South, the impacts have been a growing dependence on cheap imports, displacement of agricultural production of food for local consumption in favour of cheap exports, and the consolidation of land by agri-business. The 1990s and 2000s also saw the rise of North-South free trade agreements, which have heightened the Global North's market dominance and decimated local food systems in the Global South (Holt-Giménez & Patel, 2009).

Farming modernisation, regulation, and integration with vertically-integrated supply chains have led to a cost-price squeeze (when the costs of inputs increase more quickly than the price received for outputs) and the economic failure of many small farms across the world. This has been linked to the rise in migrant agricultural labour, leading to some scholars to conceptualise the “agriculture-migration nexus” wherein agri-food production and human migration are co-constructed (King et al., 2021; Palumbo et al., 2022). At the same time as agri-food companies demand cheaper workers, ever-more-stringent migration policies increase migrants' legal and social precarity. The COVID-19 pandemic brought to light both global agri-food's dependence on migrant workers and their vulnerability, particularly around unsanitary

living and working conditions and lack of access to healthcare and social protection (Kleine-Rueschkamp & Ozguzel, 2020). Migrant workers' vulnerability is no accident; in fact, the creation of an "edge population" that is to exploitation is "instrumental to the functioning of economic systems globally" (Palumbo et al., 2022, p. 186).

Further, responses to exploitation at the national and international levels have focused on punishing "bad" employers/labour providers, thus contributing to the idea that exploitation is "contingent, exceptional and produced by pathological individual relationships" (Palumbo et al., 2022, p. 185). Recently, Article 14 of Regulation 2021/2115 was introduced. Under this new regulation, farmers in receipt of EU Common Agriculture Policy subsidies will be required to meet minimum labour standards or risk a reduction in their support payments. While this represents a promising acknowledgment of the fact that exploitation is rampant in European agri-food, it does nothing to address the differential vulnerability of migrant workers in particular. Legal scholars have argued that changes are needed to both state immigration policy and labour policy in order to meaningfully address exploitation within Irish agri-food (Murphy et al., 2023)

## **Multi-scalar understandings and new pathways for resistance**

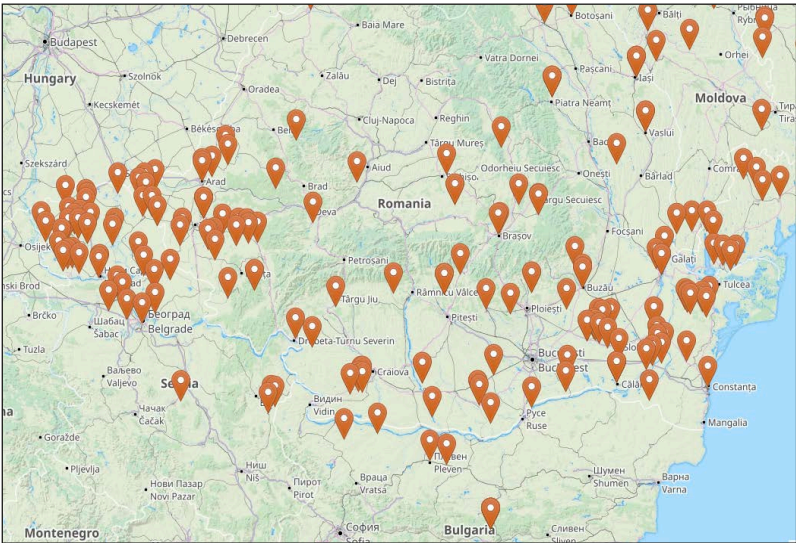
Stan and Erne (forthcoming) argue that labour migration from post-socialist countries is due not to different levels of development between Western and Eastern Europe, as is typically assumed, but by the development regimes adopted after 1989 and how post-socialist countries were integrated into international markets and production circuits. A few scholars have begun conceptualised labour migration as a fundamental component of globalised capitalism, rather than as one of its unfortunate side effects (Sassen, 2007). This section applies this approach to the seasonal movement of Romanians to work in Irish horticulture (growing and/or processing fruits, vegetables, and grains), high-

lighting the role of global agri-food in producing both vulnerable workforce on one hand and a need for precarious workers. Horticulture was selected as the area of interest because many tasks within horticulture production cannot be mechanised, meaning labour will remain a major input indefinitely, and because it offers some of the highest potential for expansion within Irish agriculture as governments work towards climate targets.

## **Romanian bodies: Land grabbing and labour migration**

In 1989, 90% of Romanian agricultural land was either state- or cooperative-owned. Under communism, agriculture was based on large-scale production which drove rural-urban emigration; this was seen as favourable because urban workers were needed to support industrialisation. Following the revolution of 1989 and the transition to capitalism, land was privatised and either returned to former owners or transferred to private corporations (Attila et al., 2015; Franco & Borras Jr., 2013). While in some ways the transition was good for small farmers who could return to their lands, the government's support for agri-business expansion and industrialisation since has led to an agrarian structure that is highly polarised, with very small family farms on one hand and large agricultural holdings on the other (Attila et al., 2015; Popovici et al., 2018). In 2013, large holdings used 48% of agricultural land while representing only 0.45% of farms (Popovici et al., 2018).

In 2014, the land market was opened for EU investors under the Romanian EU accession agreement. While land grabbing had been ongoing since the 1990s, its pace has accelerated since 2014 due to the low cost of Romanian land compared to elsewhere in Europe, favourable government policy, availability of subsidies under the EU Common Agriculture Policy and the economic fragility of existing small-scale farms (Attila et al., 2015; Franco & Borras Jr., 2013). As of 2015, transnational corporations and foreign investors owned approximately 30% of Romanian agricultural land (Kay et al., 2015); activists report that these companies often use coercion or intimidation to force people to sell or give usage rights. Most of this land is then used



Filtering for deals in Romania only, top purchasers include agri-business Al Dahra Agricultural Company, headquartered in the United Arab Emirates (for farming), Swedish furniture company Ikea (for timber), and Canadian mining conglomerate Eldorado Gold Corporation (for mining).

for natural resource extraction or industrial agriculture, at great cost to people and environments (Attila et al., 2015). Using publicly available data from Land Matrix, Figure 3 maps recent large-scale land deals<sup>5</sup>. Filtering for deals in Romania only, top purchasers include agri-business Al Dahra Agricultural Company, headquartered in the United Arab Emirates (for farming), Swedish furniture company Ikea (for timber), and Canadian mining conglomerate Eldorado Gold Corporation (for mining). Land grabbing in Romania has resulted in widespread dispossession and the degeneration of rural livelihoods, leading to a growing class of people in seek of waged work either as employees under the new landowner, in cities, or abroad (Attila et al., 2015; Rizzo, 2021). This process of de-peasantisation has sometimes been considered a natural part of development as

<sup>5</sup> The Land Matrix defines a land deal as any intended, concluded, or failed attempt to acquire land through purchase, lease, or concession for agricultural production, timber extraction, carbon trading, renewable energy production, industry, mining, oil and gas extraction, conservation, tourism, and land speculation in low- and middle-income countries.

it supports urban industrialism (McMichael, 2015). However, more often than not it results in urban slums when cities lack the industrial capacity to absorb the influx of additional workers (Popovici et al., 2018).

At the global level, land grabbing has been defined as one of the new drivers of migration (Rizzo, 2021), but there is no evidence as of yet to support a direct connection in the case of Romanian-Irish labour migration (i.e., studies have not systematically asked migrants about their experiences before coming to Ireland). It is possible that many Romanian agricultural workers are themselves former farmers or peasants, or (more likely) that land grabbing has a range of consequences for Romanians, and that some of these consequences then factor in individuals' decisions to migrate. Migrants generally have a heightened level of access to information and resources (de Haas, 2010) and previous studies have identified that Romanians who migrate have at least a secondary-level education and come from "areas better connected to modern infrastructure" (Sandu, 2005). Future work should explore this area in more detail while highlighting the importance of migrant workers' individual experiences and autonomy.

### **Irish berries: Agricultural intensification and the need for exploitable workers**

Globally, agricultural producers participate in the only sector where inputs are bought at wholesale prices and outputs are sold at retail ones (Weis, 2007). Large companies monopolise the sale of inputs (seeds and chemicals) to farmers, while supermarkets are often the only way farmers can access consumers. As a result, food producers must sell their outputs at a fraction of the cost of production—or not sell at all. This is done in the name of consumer affordability and food security, but realistically it concentrates power and profits in the hands of input companies and supermarkets (Fraser, 2017) and increases demand for a precarious, flexible, and exploitable workforce in food production and processing (Findlay & McCollum, 2013).

As in Romania, Irish agri-food development has resulted in the destruction of rural livelihoods and widespread rural-urban migration. Irish agriculture now is defined by industrialisation, extreme income inequality and ever-decreasing numbers of farmers (from 250,000 in 1973 when Ireland joined the European Union to 85,000 in 2022). Horticulture is the smallest sub-sector, covering just 2% of arable land in the Republic of Ireland (Central Statistics Office, 2020) and 2.6% in the UK (Department for Environment Food & Rural Affairs, 2023).<sup>6</sup> Horticulture producers experience some of the most adverse conditions due to a lack of structural supports, relatively poor weather, degraded soil after generations of industrial farming, and competition with cheaper imports, for example from Spain and Morocco. Most horticulture producers struggle to make a living or break even, and with labour being one of the most expensive inputs, they are under constant pressure to minimise its costs (O’Hagan et al., 2021; Weis, 2007).

The intensification of British horticulture coincides with a shift to migrants as the main workforce, especially in labour intensive tasks such as harvesting and packing (Rogaly, 2008). Daly (2016) connects Irish growers’ cropping choices from the 1990s onwards to the sudden availability of cheap Eastern European labour, noting that labour-intensive production is in some ways protected from external shocks because it does not require high capital investment in machinery. Concurrently, consumer habits shifted to favouring pre-packaged produce and the availability of migrant workers allowed for the expansion of on-farm food processing facilities (Daly, 2016). Most horticultural products in Ireland, with the exception of mushrooms, are sold domestically, and it has been suggested that migrant workers have acted as a subsidy to keep consumer prices low without sacrificing company profits (Geddes & Scott, 2010).

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<sup>6</sup> Note that Northern Ireland is not measured separately in these metrics.

## Labour agency, scale jumping, and a just transition for Irish horticulture

Even in the era of globalisation, capital remains to some extent dependent on physical spaces where labour and technology are combined to extract value and in which workers engage in efforts to reshape workplace conditions and power relations (Ackroyd & Thompson, 2022; Merk, 2009) and in associated struggles over social reproduction (Merk, 2009). To overcome this dependency, labour geographers (Merk, 2009; Peck, 1996) have argued that companies will constantly seek to upscale their own operations while simultaneously downscaling workers' struggles, allowing them to continue relocating production to the most favourable areas while sidestepping questions around working conditions. In many industries, branded companies use labour contractors in order to recruit and control workers who are "flexible enough and cheap enough to absorb required changes in production, that is, to externalise to them possible costs of adjustment" (De Angelis, 2007, p. 107) or, more bluntly, make them somebody else's problem (Merk, 2009). In Irish horticulture, this outsourcing happens twice: first, large companies outsource the actual horticultural labour of harvesting, processing, and packaging to independent suppliers; second, those suppliers outsource the task of recruiting and managing migrant workers to labour providers. Outsourcing represents a major challenge to workplace organising in the modern era (Merk, 2009).

Scale jumping can be used to understand how workers translate their claims for power from the local to the global—how they move "up" the power gradient (Smith, 1992). Historically, workers' rights movements have done so by using collective action to appeal to the state or to force employers to change their behaviour. For example, in the 1960s, Mexican table grape harvesters in California expanded their movement horizontally (to include white middle class consumers) and vertically (to appeal to the state's regulatory authority and to threaten industry profits) through strikes and boycotts. Their narrative linked the use of harmful



pesticides to the health of their bodies, the fruits they harvested, and the eventual health of people who ate those fruits, and they were successful in banning some of the most toxic pesticides. Yet despite the success of the table grape strikes, most strategy has been developed for the factory floor, not the strawberry field, and rely on understandings of industrial relations between workers, employers, and the nation-state which are outdated when considering the contemporary politics of globalised production and precarious work (Lier, 2007). Traditional (union-centred) organising strategy may still be effective in some food processing contexts, but farmworkers in general and seasonal migrant workers in particular face heightened barriers to collective organising (Theodoropoulos, 2021).

Worker organising is mediated by unions, NGOs, the state, and sometimes social networks and family, religious, or kinship ties (Merk, 2009), but in the case of migrant workers in Ireland, social movements and social movement organisations (SMOs)<sup>7</sup> are central (Magill, 2014). For example, Migrant Rights Centre Ireland not only provides advisory and litigation services to migrant workers, but also aims to bring about immigration policy change through migrant-led activism (Magill, 2014). It is often the only structure with which migrant workers interact while in Ireland. Pipers' (2015) analysis of the global migrant rights movement, which outlines how grassroots activism has been scaled up through the strategic collaboration of migrant rights associations (such as NGOs) and trade unions, is useful for understanding how Irish SMOs such as MRCI can be linked to broader transnational efforts. In the global rights movement, political struggle has been translated into calls for a rights-based approach to global migration governance (the right to decide whether to migrate) representing a bottom-up and politicised challenge to the traditional top-down and apolitical approach (Piper, 2015). While a full discussion of what qualifies as migrant activism

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<sup>7</sup> SMOs are formalised organisations that align their goals with those of a social movement (McCarthy and Zald 1977), which in this case represents a subcategory of migrant-related NGOs.

and what its impacts are or can be is out of scope for this paper (Lentin & Moreo, 2012) it nonetheless may represent a potential multi-scalar approach to improving conditions for Romanian horticulture workers.

Alford et al. (2017) use labour agency, defined as the proactive activities of workers in contesting their conditions, to better understand the range of actions that contributed to the success of the 2013 farmworker strikes in the South African fruit sector. Labour agency can be split into three categories of action: resilience (getting by), reworking (improving conditions), and/or resistance (directly challenging capitalist relations). The concept emerged out of labour geography's attempts to explain how workers create their own organisations and challenge the demands of capital, typically focusing on the role of trade unions (Coe & Jordhus-Lier, 2010). Table 1 adapts labour agency to the Irish context, outlining what

Table 1. Labour agency and scale in Romanian-Irish labour migration

	Micro	Meso	Macro
Resilience	Workers access advisory supports to understand their rights	NGOs support migrant access to healthcare, housing, and other supports	
Reworking	Workers take legal action to regain missing wages, obtain contracts, punish bad employers etc.	Unions/NGOs support workers in collective action (rare)	Social movements/SMOs advocate for immigration policy changes  European Union changes CAP subsidies to be dependent on good treatment of workers
Resistance			Social movements/SMOs advocate for the right to migrate or not to migrate, potentially transforming migrants' relation to capital

is currently being done at each of the three scales discussed earlier based on the current literature. It identifies a lack of resistance, compared to resilience or reworking. More research is needed to determine whether that lack is due to a research gap, as well as into what workers themselves perceive as resilience vs. resistance.

This table can be instructive in directing future strategies for migrant workers and their allies. Not only is there clear potential to expand on strategies that are centred around challenging capitalist relations a bit more explicitly, but there is a need to build better connections across scale. For example, to the researcher's knowledge, there are few, if any, well-established links between workers pursuing litigation to regain lost wages and social movements working in global arenas to change what it means to be a migrant. However, a multi-scalar analysis reveals that the two are inextricably linked, and that justice at one scale requires justice at the other.

The elephant in the room throughout this analysis is, of course, the climate crisis. We live in the era of global climate catastrophe and it is clear that dramatic reforms are needed to make agri-food more sustainable. Irish agricultural policy reflects the growing importance of ecological sustainability to development agendas. It pursues what could be termed a green transition by aiming to make beef and dairy farming more efficient and to expand horticultural production, while not sacrificing continued economic growth or export expansion. Horticulture offers high potential for low-carbon expansion, in particular mushroom farming (Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, 2023; Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine, 2021).

However, both activists and scholars have argued for a just transition rather than merely a green one, which emerged out of environmental justice and labour movements and aims to centralise the concerns of workers and marginalised groups (Stevis & Felli, 2015). Since its inception, the focus has expanded from protecting workers in vulnerable sectors (e.g., energy, mining, manufacturing) to analysing how the costs and benefits of a green transition are distributed (Dekker, 2020). When it comes to Irish horticulture,

that means taking into account the costs to migrant workers, not just to beef and dairy farmers. A just transition means involving migrant agricultural workers in climate and agriculture policy moving forward. Some environmental justice movements have been working tirelessly towards a just transition, but thus far there has been little dialogue between these movements and migrant rights activists. The agri-food-migration nexus offers a critical site of resonance between movements and it is important to consider by and for whom these visions for the future are written. Plans for achieving ecological sustainability must also uplift and support those upon whose labour our food system is built.

## Conclusions

Contemporary agri-food depends on the systematic exploitation of migrant workers to continue functioning. While the state can attempt to limit the harm caused to migrants by punishing bad employers or recruiters, it has thus far failed to address, and in many cases worsened, the institutionalisation of migrant workers as an “edge population” willing to work in precarious, low-paid jobs. While changes to immigration and labour policy are warranted, in the context of global agri-food, national-level policy change may simply re-shape migration patterns or drive companies to re-locate production, rather than ending exploitation and abuse altogether. In fact, a common argument *against* improving working conditions is that it will encourage more local people to work in horticulture, and migrants will be forced to work in other countries where conditions are much worse. While recognising that this argument is flawed (just everyone else is exploiting migrants doesn’t make it right), a multi-scalar approach does allow for more nuanced and mindful identification of interventions. A range of other strategies become relevant—for example, improved access to land, stricter regulation of land purchases at the international level, targeted supports for farmers that guarantee living wages for workers, or imposing limits on the power of large supermarkets.

This case study attempted to untangle some of the ways in which the agri-food system creates both a need for cheap workers in Irish horticulture and an exploitable workforce in Romania, thus driving Romanian-Irish seasonal migration to work on farms and in food processing facilities in rural Ireland. Further, it identified some of the ongoing ways in which migrant workers and their allies are contesting the conditions under which they live and work. Labour agency happens in many ways besides traditional workers' unions/collective action, but research thus far has been limited on how this happens in Irish horticulture. This ties in to the researcher's ongoing PhD on power dynamics within Irish horticulture, and a more thorough integration of labour agency and migrant worker autonomy, combined with the planned qualitative analysis, will be useful for identifying additional pathways for resistance.

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