CHAPTER 9
LABOR, GENDER, AND POLITICAL CONFLICTS IN THE GLOBAL AGRI-FOOD SYSTEM: THE CASE OF THE AGRI-EXPORT MODEL IN MURCIA, SPAIN

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INTRODUCTION

In the midst of the mid-2010s debt and unemployment crisis of Southern Europe, a number of analysts consider that the solution to this dramatic situation lies in the application of an export-led economic model. Orthodox economics explains that the weak competitive position of the peripheral economies of Europe, including Spain, is the result of high labor costs and low productivity. This means that wage restriction policies, labor market flexibility, reduced public spending, and the containment of the domestic demand are required in order to stimulate exports. Increased exports, in turn, are viewed as the necessary condition to achieve enhanced production and increased employment. Given that prices cannot be reduced by devaluating the currency, in economic and political circles, “domestic devaluation”
(i.e., the restriction of public spending and lowering of salaries) is consensually viewed as the solution to the crisis. Therefore, the EU’s anti-crisis strategy is based on the re-launching of the export sector and the restructuring of labor relations.

The new consensus about the desirability of “domestic devaluation” is based on the theory of neoliberalism (Harvey, 2007; Laval, 2013). According to this theory, the most desirable solution to unemployment is to allow private initiative to be unrestrained in the free market. Labor is to be considered as a commodity that is most efficiently allocated through the free play of supply and demand. The function of the public sector is reduced to fostering conditions that stimulate the growth of the private sector (i.e., lowering taxes, reducing interest rates, abating regulations, and cutting welfare spending), and in so doing create employment. Dismissing classical criticisms that unemployment is a purely political problem and different rates of unemployment depend on social conditions (Therborn, 1989), neoliberals insist on addressing unemployment through adjustments in the labor market and the strengthening of competition.

The application of these economic ideas in agri-food in Murcia created an abundant and weak labor supply as the sector expanded. Agri-food in Murcia developed significantly throughout the 20th century. Canned fruit and vegetables and fresh fruit and vegetables preparation represent the two largest agri-food subsectors in the region. The canned sector was particularly affected by the crisis of the late 1970s. A number of companies closed. But those that internationalize their industrial strategies, developed alliances with transnational corporations, and avoided corporate takeovers were able to weather the recession. In contrast, the thriving sector for the preparation of fresh fruit and vegetables benefited from the introduction of specialized packing houses and the concomitant transformation of agricultural products into food products that it induced. This sector grew in importance and added value to agricultural products, especially at a time when Spain entered the European Economic Community, in 1986, and the larger EU internal market was established in 1993.

As the sector thrived on the use of precarious employment, it must be made clear that the creation of this workforce was not the result of a spontaneous trend in production. But it was rather a political construction derived from the specific economic development of peripheral Europe. This situation not only explains the fact that temporary employment expanded during growth periods but also that in recession periods unemployment grew very quickly and reached dramatic levels.

This chapter provides some reflections on the growth of the agri-food sector in Murcia that can be used to assess the effectiveness of the application of the export model. The general assumption is that the insertion of the peripheral economies of Southern Europe into the neoliberal global economy reproduces the South–North dependency that characterizes neoliberal globalization. The chapter illustrates the thesis that domestic devaluation policies promoted a competitive strategy based on exports that reduced salaries and labor costs and severely disciplined the population. This posture contributed to the creation of a vulnerable workforce, which is segmented by gender. This inequality made the creation and recreation of a reserve army of labor possible and allowed it to be an essential requisite for the control of wages and the adjusting of the social organization of labor to the temporary discontinuities of agri-food production. It is held that all these characteristics constitute the basis of the development of the agricultural export sector in Murcia. Finally, we conclude that the sustainability of this type of economic development is highly questionable. We believe that addressing these issues contributes to a critical evaluation of the implications of the application of an export-based model as a solution for the crisis.

Anthropologists Gavin Smith and Susana Narotzky in their study of the regional political economy in an area of in Southeaster Spain correctly argue that “the creation of crises and of general insecurity became basic methods of social regulation” (Narotzky & Smith, 2010, p. 22). Simultaneously, the dense and extensive paternalistic and interpersonal networks made reciprocity a regulating factor: “Throughout time, labor rights, which spread outwards from the immediate family to the entire extended family, neighbors, members of the community, etc., became an institutionalized component of daily life. These complex sets of links also serve to compensate for that regional instability generated in part by the unpredictable climate and in part by commercial cycles, but above all, by the changing character of the firms themselves” (Narotzky & Smith, 2010, pp. 22–3).

Given this “general insecurity,” agricultural workers organized and resisted. The workers’ struggle was directed to overcoming the uncertainty that dominated labor relations, the creation of stable employment, and the firms’ use of the reserve army of labor as an instrument against workers.

**FOOD PROCESSING: FROM CANNED FRUIT AND VEGETABLES TO FRESH FRUIT AND VEGETABLES PREPARATION**

The specialization in the production of fruit and vegetables in Murcia began in the years between the last decades of the 19th century and 1920
(Pérez Picazo, 1995). Subsequently, the sector grew rapidly and its expansion culminated with the “golden age” of the 1960s. The small, localized fresh fruit subsector for export blossomed and would further expand in the 1980s with the implantation of new forms of intensive agricultural production involving leafy vegetables and new varieties of fruit. The expansion of the food industry in Murcia was closely linked to the establishment of Fordist consumption patterns (Aglietta, 1986). A largely urban group of consumers required a stable supply of inexpensive and easy to transport, store and consume food. In the Fordist industrial division of labor, the task of providing this supply of food was assigned to the new agriculture. Giedion (in Altwater, 1994, p. 23) aptly describes this evolution thusly: “the age of complete mechanisation coincides with the age of canned food.”

In the 1960s, Murcia emerged as a nationally important center of canned food production. New factories opened, production techniques were standardized, and, as historian Domingo Manzanares points out, there was the introduction of “automatic and semi-automatic machinery, including can sealers, sorting machines, apricot and peach cutters and slicers, vacuum concentrators, autoclaves, fruit washers, pre-heaters, pepper roasting machines, automatic soldering machines, automatic packet creation belts, steam generators, electric motors, etc. In other words, the technological organization of production line processes for specific products was introduced. It could be adapted to the different seasons through simple substitution of machines; in some cases these were accompanied by quality control and product enhancement laboratories, etc.” (Manzanares, 2001, p. 57). Accordingly, the production industry in Murcia emerged as a key sector of the regional economy, specializing in three large production lines: canned vegetables, juices, and concentrated and frozen vegetables (Manzanares, 2001). Exports grew and thousands of jobs were created.5

The canned food crisis in the 1980s meant the closing of various plants and thousands of workers losing their jobs. In Fordist terms, it was a crisis that was structurally linked to a breaking of the rules for mass consumption. In fact, almost at the same time as the canned food industry was undergoing this structural crisis and various municipalities in the region were experiencing heavy deindustrialization, the fresh fruit and vegetable preparation industry expanded. This sector was able to adapt to the demand and new regulations for the differentiated consumption of good-quality and healthy food, in line with the prevailing requisites of the “post-modern diet” (Friedland, 1994).

In the context of the massive expansion of the intensive cultivation of fruit and vegetables for the global market, packing houses emerged as a decisive strategic entity. Their utilization supplied the differentiated demand of developed countries’ new consumers and their requirements for healthy and quality food products. Simultaneously, they were able to conform their products to the criteria required by powerful large supermarket chains. Specifically, as supermarkets increasingly dominated the sector and competed on quality and “standardization” of products, packing houses introduced production techniques and control systems that met these standards. In this context, the processing and preparation of the product became the decisive factor, not only for new markets, but also as a primary competitive strategy. It allowed producing companies to maintain their position in the global agricultural production chain through better integration of the three phases of commodity production: field production, packing house production and commercialization. These operations were executed all under one technical-economic unit.

In the packing houses, “the organisation of production processes, conventionally known as the processing and preparation of fruit and vegetables, is set up to achieve the transformation of the agricultural product, considered as the raw material, into marketable food. This transformation adds both intrinsic value and characteristics (i.e., quality, durability, standardization) and extrinsic value (i.e., accessibility, differentiation) responding to both the characteristics of production and market demand. This is achieved through a range of different technologies (i.e., physical and biological) that constitute the technological fix known as ‘postharvest technologies’ and that refers to the global organisation of preparing, packaging and transporting the product to the point of sale” (Segura & Pedreño, 2006, p. 382). Despite large investment in postharvest technologies, the packing houses still demanded a large workforce characterized by a high level of temporary jobs. This organization of labor fit well with the specific requirements imposed by the transformation of the production process that mandated seasonality and high labor flexibility in production and work times and modes of work organization based on Taylorist and Fordist methods.

Food processing is a very complex process, which varies according to the activity (fresh, canned, or frozen production), the type of food produced (vegetables, citrus, or non-citrus fruits), the firm, and the area. However, in general terms, several common phases can be distinguished in the food processing processes (see Figs. 1 and 2):

1. **Reception.** It refers to the tasks of transporting the product in containers from the fields to the plant and its placing on conveyor. Specific tasks include unloading, identification of items, weighing, and allocation to points of production.
2. **Preparation.** It includes tasks such as unloading from pallets and cleaning.

3. **Selection.** This is one of the most important phases of the food-processing process in order to increase the quality of the product. It includes sorting, classification, and calibration.

4. **Packaging.** This is the primary phase of processing. Products are prepared for transport and marketing. They are packaged, labeled, quality controlled, covered with plastic, and placed in boxes to be loaded onto pallets.

5. **Palleting.** The finished product is weighed; boxes are placed on a pallet and secured.

6. **Storage.** Until the time for delivery, the pallets are moved to storage chambers.

7. **Delivery.** The pallets with the finished product are loaded onto the transport fleet, which carries them to the sales points.

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**LABOR REGIME AND SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF THE MARKET: FEMINIZATION AND TEMPORARY WORK**

Employing a perspective that stresses the social construction of labor markets, it can be argued that the labor regime that characterized the agri-food production in Murcia is based on an extreme flexibilization of labor. While family-based work and proximity relations defined agri-food production process at the beginning of the growth period, progressively, production intensification, the concentration of firms, and the integration of production tasks were accompanied by the utilization of wage labor as a fundamental element for the development of sector. Simultaneously, this industry — both
the canned and fresh fruit and vegetable preparation subsectors – now is organized to use a very flexible wage labor in order to meet the seasonality of work and the intensification and the extension of working days during the higher seasons. Consequently, the agri-food labor market is characterized by the search for a large supply of labor during peak work periods and the flexible management of this labor to control it and make it amenable to production requirements. In addition, this flexibility is required to participate in supermarket controlled global production and distribution chains. Competitiveness in the sector depends on increasing productivity that is sought through the introduction of technological innovations, the restructuring of productive processes, and the reduction of labor cost.

The development of agri-food in Murcia is based on a sophisticated combination of these strategies. On the one hand, it is a very dynamic sector in terms of technological and biological innovations. Proof of this is the constant introduction of new varieties with the objective of expanding the production season and reducing biological limits to cultivation. On the other hand, although the production season has been expanded, firms maneuver to maintain the temporary character of the labor. This is partly due to the fact that labor demand still varies greatly according to the season. Firms, therefore, deploy formal and informal employment strategies in order to carefully match labor utilization with seasonal production requirements. This is nothing more than a sophisticated application of the just-in-time principle adjusted to agri-food work. It can also be seen as a reproduction in the new agriculture of the old patterns of labor relations typical of traditional farming (i.e., temporary, highly flexible, informal employment, paid per day, and administered paternalistically) employed as a tool to reduce labor costs (Pedreño, 2003).

While agri-food production and processing companies significantly benefit from the use of a large and flexible labor force, the requirement to maintain this flexibility generates some issues. In effect, its flexible nature makes predictions about workers’ availability difficult to assess and generates an undesirable level of uncertainty for management. To address this uncertainty, management promoted the creation a new labor structure predominantly based on women and immigrants (Segura, de Juana, & Pedreño, 2002, p. 87). Accordingly, flexibility is implemented through the selection of workers from the most vulnerable sectors of the labor force. Only those who are politically and/or socially vulnerable are considered for the degrading working conditions offered by the agri-food sector.

The vulnerability of these segments of the labor force is related to their unequal position in the social structure, a position that depends not only on labor but also primarily on gender (women) and citizenship (immigrants) inequalities. Accordingly, the structure of the agri-food sector’s labor relations has been constructed on the reproduction of inequalities in gender and citizenship (and ethnicity). In this sense, “women and immigrants make up a workforce which is available, flexible and vulnerable and in which members occupy a weak position in society” (Segura et al., 2002, p. 88).

To be sure, the various agri-food subsectors (the canned and the fresh product preparation subsectors) present different forms of labor remuneration. The canned food sector employs a labor remuneration system of the Fordist type. In fresh fruit preparation, labor remuneration resembles that traditionally common in farming with the use of precarious and highly flexible wage labor. Simultaneously, there are important commonalities from the point of view of the workers employed: an overwhelming use of women that generated an intense feminization of work and working conditions, predominance of temporary employment, long working days, and demanding labor tasks. In effect, the commonalities that characterize labor relations in food preparation can be synthetized in terms of flexibility of employment, working hours, payment system, and also limited formal specialization, feminization of work, devaluation of skills, gender segregation, and high labor risks.

There has traditionally been a noticeable difference between the production and processing phases. Under traditional production, labor relations rarely followed Fordist forms of employment. They were carried out in terms of classical agrarian labor relations based on seasonal, underpaid, and precarious employment. In the canning industry, conversely, labor relations developed in a way that more closely resembled that of the Fordist regime. However, in the early 1990s, the development of the canned food industry began to be characterized by the implementation of labor relations based on temporary flexible employment.

Below are some of the primary characteristics of labor relations in the fruit and vegetable preparation subsector. In general, this subsector’s labor relations are affected by the strong seasonality of tasks and the constant need to coordinate the rhythms and processes of production.

Recruitment

The seasonal nature of labor demand implies that firms are very careful in the selection of recruitment methods to ensure the availability of labor during peak periods. Recruitment is often carried out through direct hiring from a list of available workers. This list is only composed of workers who
performed “satisfactorily” in previous years. Satisfactory performances are measured not only in terms of productivity but also in terms of docility and conformity to the firm’s requirements. An alternative form of recruitment consists of using local informal networks both inside and outside the area. These informal networks are primarily accessed through the use of the firm’s bus drivers. These drivers are asked to recruit workers among their acquaintances, friends, and family members. Contrary to the case of production on the fields, recruitment of workers through intermediaries is not frequent. In essence, the search for labor flexibility affects the types of jobs available. Although there are differences according to the types of production, areas, and companies, official data (Rosas, Pérez, & Segura, 2001) indicate that temporary employment (50%) and periodically fixed employment (41%) predominate. The rest are permanent contracts and are reserved for staff with better formal qualifications.

Work Time: Seasonality and the Working Day

Job seasonality remains one of the fundamental characteristics of the sector. Also according to official data (Rosas et al., 2001), approximately 65% of all workers in the food-processing sector are employed for at least 9 months of the year. This percentage, however, varies according to the type of production (longer periods of employment are recorded in vegetable production than in citrus fruits, for example). Twenty-eight percent of all workers work between five and eight months per year, and only seven percent of them work under five months (Rosas et al., 2001, p. 471). The length of the workday also varies according to the demand. During the peak season, 64% of all workers work between 11 and 15 hours, while in the mid-season, 95% work 5 to 10 hours, and in the off-peak season, 71% work between 5 and 10 hours (Rosas et al., 2001, p. 472). During the peak season, the length of the workday is determined by the specific tasks dictated by the deadlines that distributors impose on production firms. Workers do not oppose longer hours as they wish to earn more in order to offset limited work opportunities during the off-peak periods. These additional hours are often paid at the regular minimum rate.

Wages

Wages paid by the hour constitute the most common form of labor compensation involving 86% of all workers (Rosas et al., 2001, pp. 476–7).

Occasionally, they are augmented by production incentives paid for achieving specific tasks. Other less frequently used forms of payment include piecework — used as an exception during peak periods — and monthly salaries that are reserved for highly qualified jobs, which are mostly occupied by men. An indication of the limited informal employment in the processing sector is that 86% of all remunerations are paid with recorded compensations. Only occasional incentives are paid outside of this system. Salary differences within each job category are negligible, even though there are differences among categories.

Safety and Hygiene

The food quality and safety standards required by retailers and domestic and European Union regulations have fostered significant improvements in the conditions of food-processing facilities. These are large, well-lit, and well-ventilated facilities. However, they normally lack common areas such as dressing rooms, showers, or cafeterias. Work risks vary according to the job category. Machinists, pallet operators, and loaders are often prone to injuries due to hits and falls. Women in charge of the selection and preparation processes often develop dizziness, back pain, tendinitis, and cervical, back, and leg problems. In addition, even though the facilities may be in good condition, in order to slow the fruit maturation process, the temperature in working areas is also kept uncomfortably cold.

Packing Houses: A Work Space Structured by Gender Inequality

Official data show that in 2001, 75% of all packing house workers were women, and 60% of them were between the ages of 21 and 40 (Rosas et al., 2001). Virtually all of them were local. Since the outset of the decade, while the overwhelming majority remained women, the influx of migrant women engendered a process of substitution of immigrants for local workers. The feminization of work is justified through an established view that sees women’s work only as a complementary addition to the family’s primary income. Because of its complementarity, women can and should easily adjust to the labor flexibilization requirements introduced by firms. In this context, these precarious and underpaid jobs are described as desirable and advantageous for women as they allow women to maintain their double
role of workers and housewives. Ignored is the fact that promoting these jobs as desirable is an effective strategy for promoting a sexist interpretation of gender roles to justify the subordination of women in the workplace in three different ways (Pedreño, 1999).

(1) Lower pay. From the point of view of the functional division of work in packing houses, there is strong gender difference between manual work and clerical or administrative work. Most women carry out manual jobs. Their presence is virtually nonexistent among clerical and administrative jobs. In essence, they perform the most labor-intensive tasks in the production process. This division of labor, however, is also accompanied by clear differences in remuneration and job stability. Stable employment and higher salaries characterize administrative and clerical jobs. Manual jobs are mostly assigned to temporary workers who are paid by the hour, sign flexible contracts, and have unstable jobs. There are a few men who perform manual jobs and are concentrated in a few areas such as unloading trucks and moving produce within the facility.

(2) Tasks. In terms of the horizontal division of labor, the gender line is also clear. The primary tasks carried out by men are loading and unloading, transporting boxes, and the maintenance of machinery. Women deal with preparation, packaging, selection, and calibration of the product. Work is masculinized when it involves physical effort (loading, unloading), handling machinery, and/or transport. It is feminized when it involves smaller, handling tasks whose rhythm is marked by the conveyor belt. In general, it can be stated that women have been excluded from the use of tools and machines and are assigned to the more repetitive and intensive jobs. Jobs assigned to men require movement over the whole length and breadth of the packing house. Tasks performed by women involve standing still in front of the conveyor belt.

(3) Social construction of labor. The recruitment, the need to combine stability with extreme flexibility, and its implications motivated the creation of work that is defined to be for women. In essence, this social construction of work identifies fruit and vegetable preparation as being done for and by women. In this way, firms not only control recruitment through geographical proximity, family, and/or networks of friends but also create a steady flow of flexible, inexpensive, and docile labor.

RESISTANCE

Because of their highly labor-intensive tasks, canned food plants and packing houses achieve competitiveness through the use of inexpensive labor. To generate low labor costs, firms implement a variety of strategies centered on the availability of a large reserve army of labor and temporary, informal, and poorly paid jobs. In this context, labor resistance in agro-food in Murcia can be summarized as the continuous struggle to resist these strategies. Historically, this struggle that has taken different forms depending on the economic and socio-political contexts. However, three periods can be identified. The first dates from the end of the 19th century to the 1960s. During this period, conflict was regulated through paternalistic social relations. In the second period from the 1960s to the 1980s, labor relations were regulated through the actions of unions and labor organizations. The third and more recent period, from the 1980s until the present, is characterized by the crisis of the previous model.

The Control of Conflict

As indicated above, the canned food industry developed at the end of the 19th century as a sector formed by small and medium-sized family firms with low levels of mechanization and traditional forms of production. This system was based on the intensive use of inexpensive labor that was seasonal, feminized, and local. Typically, employment relations were paternalistic social relations in which labor conflicts were limited and latent. Three aspects characterized this situation.

First, the sector developed under conditions that featured a strong inter-connection between community life and family survival strategies. In essence, work was intrinsically seasonal, a complement to farming and its cycles, and fitted the organization and rhythms of the local rural family. In this context, the seasonal and temporary involvement of women in production processes responded to the pluriactivity strategies of farm families in their efforts to earn additional income. Moreover, the feminization of the work responded to firms' attempts to justify the temporary nature of work and the instability of pay and employment as functional to the roles played by women in the local society. The definition of women's work as complementary to the farm family's primary income legitimized the understandings of these jobs as unqualified and of women as easily dismissible workers.
Second, the above permitted a “relative social cohesion that prevented the community from recognizing the exploitative relations inherent to the social division of labor and, above all, the patriarchal oppression derived from the sexual division of labor. This was a fundamental pillar for the social stability of early patterns of industrialization” (Pedreño, 1998, p. 165). The lack of employment opportunity favored the control of resistance. The poor farm income forced workers to implement strategies of sectorial and territorial mobility. Assigned to domestic work, women could not migrate, and adjacent work in the canning and processing industry represented an opportunity to find work while continuing the role of housewives.

Finally, these relatively pacified labor relations in the local agri-food industry were largely the outcome of the local institutional context. Spain was ruled by the Fascist regime of Francisco Franco. Under Franco dictatorship, trade union membership and the right to strike were outlawed while negotiations between labor and management were de facto eliminated. Franco’s regime established a corporatist system based on the creed that it was possible to harmonize the interests of management and labor without conflict by allowing the pro-management state to establish rules. In this system, any act of disobedience or questioning of the state set rules was severely repressed. In the 1940s and 1950s, these regulations legitimized salary differences between men and women and maintained workers’ wages at subsistence levels. Along with food rationing, these conditions engendered the pauperization of the working class (Manzanares, 2006).

The feminization of labor, the absence of job alternatives, and the fascist regulation of labor relations reinforced the maintenance of precarious labor conditions and the availability of a reserve army of labor while guaranteeing the control and disciplining workers. The latter were achieved through the threats of firing and/or ostracism. As pointed out by Bayona (2006), the availability of a surplus workforce and the ease with which workers could be fired led to a general feeling of helplessness and insecurity among workers. Simultaneously, as Narotzky and Smith indicate: “Management control ordinary people through induced insecurity” (2010, p. 23).

Fordist Regulation of Labor Relations

Delayed by the Spanish Civil War and its consequences, the growth of the canned food industry acquired momentum in the 1960s propelled by fascist-style modernization plans. This phase transformed not only the structure of the sector but also its production processes, labor relations, and conflict management. Between the 1960s and 1980s, the size of industry grew substantially and facilities were modernized through the introduction of mechanized production lines. Simultaneously, new varieties and products were introduced that extended the growth period. Although production remained labor intensive, mechanization made the labor structure more complex, featuring the creation of new categories of workers and the inclusion of a greater number of qualified technicians (Manzanares, 2005). These transformations ignited a process of distanciation between the canned food industry and the changing local communities. Pedreño explains: “the tight bond between industry and community that permitted the exploitation of rural labor and the early growth of the canned food industry dissolved. Plants grew considerably larger propelled by patterns of mass consumption while labor markets massively expanded through the influx of workers coming from distant regions. The establishment of new institutions allowed the return of unions, labor negotiations and conflicts as regulating factors of the consequences of competition and the economy on the local community” (Pedreño, 1998, p. 168).

In the new institutional environment, Franco’s policy of economic liberalization fostered important changes in the sphere of labor relations, including the 1958 Collective Agreements Act and the establishment of the Guaranteed Inter-professional Minimum Wage (SMIG). These measures were driven by international pressures and domestic actions, such as workers’ nationwide strikes, the reorganization of unions, and the pro-labor actions of religious organizations. It is important to mention that the new minimum wage act establishes a minimum wage for all workers regardless of their gender (Manzanares, 2006).

During the 1960s and 1970s and especially with the end of the fascist regime and the return of democracy in the mid-1970s, trade unions forcefully acted to replace the informal, patriarchal system with formal rules. This move brought labor relations in the canned food industry closer to those of other industries. To be sure, agri-food remained subject to special regulations. In 1971, it was re-regulated through the Social Security Agrarian Special System (REASS), which discriminated against agri-food workers by treating them differently than other workers. Eventually in 1991, labor in the canned food and processing industry was covered by the Social Security General System.

At the time in Murcia, agri-food trade unions were organized through the General Union of Workers (UGT), the Land Workers’ Federation, and the Rural Federation of Workers’ Commissions (CCOO). One of the most important claims of the first wave of union negotiations was
the establishment of the discontinuous-fixed labor contract. This contract formalized the labor—management interaction, ended the informal regulations of the sector, and recognized job seniority. In effect, the discontinuous-fixed contract recognized the continuity of employment for seasonal work. Accordingly, agricultural firms were compelled to hire workers that were employed during previous seasons. The signing of the contract formalized an established practice. Yet, it lessened the power of firms over workers in the re-hiring process. Similarly important during the 1960s and 1970s was the formal ratification of wage levels and the inclusions of benefits, such as paid vacations and overtime compensations, as part of hiring packages. These benefits were already available for workers in other sectors. To be sure, a significant portion of workers continued to be employed informally. For the significant number of women that claimed membership in the informal economy, this situation signified no social security and benefits such as health coverage, unemployment, and retirement. They were, therefore, excluded from virtually all of the entitlements recognized through participation in the sphere of labor.

With the implementation of these measures, unions attempted to influence recruitment methods and respond to firms’ strategies to replace undesired workers and create a reserve army of labor. Eventually, firms accepted the fact that, in the new context, they had to negotiate with unions. However, they continued to oppose measures that improved working conditions and wages for permanent workers and their extension to the significant number of temporary workers (Manzanares, 2006).

The improvement of labor conditions in agri-food was not simply adjudicated through negotiations. The 1980s were the theater of intense labor conflict characterized by a number of actions, including protest against the shutting down of plants, new intensive practices in the fields and packing houses, claims to expand the discontinuous-fixed contracts and unemployment insurance rights, and attempts to abolish the Social Security Agrarian Special System and include agricultural workers in the Social Security General System. As Pedreño indicates, “Agricultural temporary workers were central to the large-scale protests of 1976. They struck for wage increases above the minimum wage and the end of wage differences between men and women” (1999).

From the End of the 1980s

The crisis of the canned food and processing sector at end of the 1970s and the advent of neoliberal globalization marked the rolling back of pro-labor regulations. As stressed by pertinent literature (Pedreño, 1998; Segura, 1995), the canned food industry encountered problems in reacting to the new consumption patterns and enhanced competition of the time. The result was a series of recurrent crises that affected small family firms, first, and larger companies later. Management reacted through the informalization of labor relations that involved greater use of unregistered workers and the precarization of working conditions. In essence, firms eliminated most of the gains that labor achieved during the previous years and significantly eroded the power of unions (Pedreño, 1998).

By the end of the 1980s, fresh fruit and vegetable preparation acquired increased importance, replacing canned food production as the principal sector of agri-food in Murcia. As the sector grew, unions’ strategies centered on extending the benefits obtained for canned food workers to those of the packing houses. The primary claims consisted of the establishment of discontinuous-fixed contracts and the recognition of workers’ rights. Both claims were the subjects of a series of strikes and protests that took place in the years between the end of the 1980s and beginning of the 1990s. Relevant were the strikes of 1986 and 1989 (that were instrumental in the achievement of significant wage increases and the establishment of discontinuous-fixed contract) and the so-called “marches against unemployment,” which called for the creation of an unemployment compensation program for agricultural workers and the elimination of differences in benefit programs between agri-food and other sectors’ workers (Pedreño, 1999).

The recognition of qualifications and job specialization were other important claims of the time. Agricultural work has been traditionally seen as unskilled. This was part of a business strategy that permitted the easy replacement and rotation of workers as well as low wages. Central in this struggle was the issue of gender. As indicated above, the division of labor in canned food plants and in packing houses assigned different roles and wage levels to men and women. In the 1990s, the largest unions in the sector (the CCOO and UGT) submitted a petition to the Spain Constitutional Court seeking that agri-food jobs traditionally occupied by women receive the same recognition than jobs often occupied by men. Eventually, the Court rejected the petition. Unions interpreted this defeat a proof of the strength of gender discrimination in the sector and the difficulties that the struggles to address it encountered in the country.

Management addressed unions’ action through a variety of strategies. The strategies included the replacement of workers who were active in protests with more docile labor and recruitment processes that weaken the position of labor as illustrated early in the chapter. They also acted to limit
CONCLUSIONS

Agri-food production in Murcia experienced rapid growth throughout the 20th century. During the Fordist decades, the canned fruit and vegetable industry grew through the centralization and concentration of capital, exports, and mechanization. The structural crisis of the 1970s halted this model, and a new form of development initiated in the 1980s. It was based on the expansion of postharvest fruit and vegetable preparation in packing houses. The success of this model derived from its insertion into global production and consumption networks based on the differentiation and quality of products. Because of this growth, Murcia became known as “the garden of Europe.” It is, therefore, a successful model of global agri-food production.

The temporary and seasonal character of agri-food production introduced specific patterns of labor relations in both these subsectors of the food industry but with more pronounced effects for the packing houses. This process generated a labor market characterized by an institutionally-induced uncertainty and the persistence of a reserve army of labor. Originally formed by local labor pools, this reserve army of labor was later augmented by domestic migrants from Southern Spain and more recently by international immigrants from Africa, Latin America, and Eastern Europe. Following Beverly Silver (2005), it can be argued that in Murcia, resistance has taken the forms of both the Polanian and the Marxist types of struggles. The Polanian types of struggles oppose exploitation in terms of dispossession and violence while Marxist types of struggles oppose economic domination and associative restrictions. These two types of struggles were employed to respond to firms’ moves to increase the use of temporary forms of employment and the reserve army of labor. Additionally, in the 1980s workers were able to eliminate the patriarchal system of labor regulation and replaced it with a modern union-based system. The recognition of the discontinuous-fixed contract and the abolition of the different legal administrative regime for agri-food workers qualified early struggles against the growth of precarious and uncertain employment.

As this struggle continues, gender inequality remains a central issue in the social organization of agri-food production, both in canned food and, particularly, in the packing houses. In the explanation of the feminization of agri-food work and its organization, we followed Pierre Bourdieu’s model of masculine domination and its systemization of the practical principles through which the traditional structures of the social division of gender operates (Bourdieu, 2000, p. 117). We have shown that agri-food firms construct women’s work as a complement to the primary source of income of the family. In this construction, women’s work is seen as a form of “help” to the family. Therefore, employment that is characterized by temporality, low salary, precarious working conditions, and political weakness is justified as desirable and convenient. Control comes under the terms of restricted physical mobility and the fulfillment of traditional gender roles. As women should be housewives but also workers, poor, exploitative jobs that are locally available are defined as “good” for them. This situation is constructed as presenting women with the opportunity of fulfilling these two roles.

This perspective, however, faces the risk of confining us, as Norbert Elias argued, to polarized views in which emphasis on the statics (“the primary generators of gender division at work”) may undervalue change. Elias’ reading of the “changing balance of power between the sexes” makes clear the importance of endogenous and exogenous changes in gender relations.

The social composition of labor is changing due to the progressive influx of young and immigrant women. This presence generates pressure to end women’s traditional jobs and roles and the understanding of women’s work as “help” to the family. Emerging is a more individualized and professionalized view of women that coexists with technological and organizational changes. This combination makes the progressive rupture with the traditional seasonal character of agri-food work possible.

The end of fascism in the mid-1970s and the creation of a democratic state promoted the crisis of traditional and paternalistic patterns of labor relations and gender segregation. In addition, the massive influx of women into the job market altered social perceptions and sensitivities about gender differences and the role of women in the spheres of work and domestic life.
The agri-food export model still contains important embedded contradictions that become explicit in its class, gender, ethnic and citizenship relations. It is a model of open competition that is supported by the use of precarious jobs and low salaries. The current structural crisis of capitalism and its serious consequences on the societies of Southern Europe emphasize the neoliberal drift of state policies and management’s opposition to the improvement of working conditions. In the agri-food sector in Murcia, workers’ rights have been rolled back and the reserve army of labor is employed to generate the widespread availability of weak an over-exploited labor. The study of the growth of this export-oriented industry alerts us of the limits of anti-crisis strategies based on exports. The challenge, therefore, is not so much to review the limits of these strategies, but it is rather about how to construct socially sustainable models of development.

NOTES

1. For a presentation of this “new consensus,” see the articles published by the Professor of Economics at the University of Barcelona Josep Oliver Alonso in the specialized publication Cinco Dias (http://www.cincodias.com/columna/Josep-Oliver-Alonso/62/). For a critical assessment of the “new consensus,” see the writings of Professor Vicenç Navarro (http://www.vnnavar.org/) of the Autonomous University of Barcelona.

2. In Murcia, the rate of temporary employment did not fall below 40% of the working population in the growth period between 1995 and 2005.

3. According to Eurostat, the Spanish regions of the Canary Islands, Andalucia, Ceuta, Melilla, Murcia, Valencia Community, Extremadura, and Castille La Mancha, and the overseas French departments of La Reunion, Guadeloupe, Guayana, and Martinique registered the highest levels of unemployment in the EU in 2010. Specifically, the French overseas department La Reunion had the highest level of unemployment with 28.9%, followed by the Spanish regions of Canary Islands (28.7%), Andalucia (28%) and Ceuta (24.1%), white Melilla (23.7%), Murcia (23.4%), Valencia Community (23.3%), and Extremadura (23%) occupied positions six to nine, and Castille La Mancha (21%) shared tenth place with French Guayana and Martinique.

4. Despite significant advancements that allowed the compression of production time, agriculture still strongly relies on nature’s rhythms and temporalities. In Capital Marx argues, “... the countryside, despite its ‘relative overpopulation,’ is also underpopulated. This can be seen not only locally at different points where people abound in villages, mines, railways under construction being built too quickly, etc. but everywhere, during the spring or summer or the harvest — the many different times in which English agriculture, painstaking and intensive, requires extraordinary arms. There are always too many workers for its average needs and too few for its exceptional or temporary needs. It is from there where

the official register the most contradictory complaints relating to both a lack of work and an excess of work at the same time in a single location” (Marx, 1976, pp. 867–868). Marx clearly emphasizes the structural functional dynamics of the agricultural sector that bases its production on wage workers. This alternation between a lack of work and an excess of work determines a specific management of production relations that requires a reserve workforce.

5. According to Martínez Carrión (2002, p. 520), in 1973, about 25,000 workers were employed in the industry with thousands of others indirectly employed in the accessory sectors.

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