

The exploitation of alien labourers by strawberry producers in the region of Ilia was brought to the attention of the Greek Ombudsman through a series of media reports. Despite the absence of any relevant complaints submitted to our Authority, an ex officio investigation into this matter was initiated. *(It should be noted that the Greek Ombudsman has the right to carry out investigations on its own initiative in cases that fall within its competences, when the seriousness of the case dictates it).*

The Greek Ombudsman's investigation confirmed that a large number of immigrants, from other E.U. countries as well as non member countries, are illegally employed in strawberry cultivation in the region of Ilia, working in conditions that are inhumane and, in some cases, even life threatening. There are reports that suggest that this might not be a locally observed phenomenon, or a recent one. In fact, it seems that there are labour trafficking networks that operate in various agricultural areas throughout Greece.

In the course of this investigation the Greek Ombudsman found a series of human rights violations. Least important amongst these, considering the extent and magnitude of the violations observed, was the fact that the wages were far below the minimum set by the State. More alarming were media reports concerning the living conditions of these workers. It was suggested that most are kept "imprisoned" by their employers in camps, in which they have to pay rent and fees for the "protection" from Greek Authorities. These camps are unsafe and unhealthy, posing a threat not only to the life of the alien labourers that inhabit them but also to the surrounding natural environment given the lack of standard living provisions, such as the regular collection of garbage, placing litter bins nearby and installing chemical lavatories within the camp. Furthermore it has been reported that, within these camps, the employers allow the operation of illegal markets which have the monopoly in the supply of necessity goods such as food. Last, but not least, a large number of children appear to live in these camps and work in the fields. The rights of these children, including the right to an adequate standard of living, health care, education and the right to play, are denied, while at the same time illegally employed and paid even less than adults.

In a letter dated April 22nd, 2008, addressed to all the relevant ministers and the regional police department, the Greek Ombudsman alerted the competent authorities to the alien labourers' exploitation in this area and called for a thorough investigation and a series of measures to be taken in order to safeguard the human rights of these people.

Specifically, the Greek Ombudsman invited all pertinent authorities, according to their jurisdiction, to take appropriate steps and coordinate their activities or monitoring in order to ensure that:

- the legality of working relations is not exhausted during the check for residence legality of foreign workers but also includes employers who hire illegal employee workforce
- in particular, the terms of foreign employees fulfill the conditions provided by local legislation; if they do not, the pertinent monitoring mechanisms are obliged to impose the corresponding sanctions on the employers

- foreign workers are classified under the appropriate social welfare carrier (including, naturally, illegal where this is provided for by local social welfare regulations) with corresponding medical cover
- the foreign population will have the usual monitoring and welfare, in accordance with the protection regulations of public health
- foreign workers will be informed of their rights so that no-one, legal or illegal, or even about to be deported, does not risk losing his/her wages and insurance cover for days worked
- premises rented by foreigners provide basic conditions for a hygienic and dignified existence, with adequate and suitable living space and infrastructure for plumbing, sewage and electricity.
- controversial encampments do not create serious problems from the point of view of health and pollution of the environment
- foreigners may develop free financial exchanges within the framework of legality and that the provision of consumable goods to them is subject to the usual tax, health and buyer monitoring.
- any kind of illegal employer monitoring of foreigners via private “protection systems” is avoided.