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# Spain's Jobless Find It Hard to Go Back to Farm

By **SUZANNE DALEY**

PUERTO SERRANO, Spain — During Spain's construction boom, Antonio Rivera Romero happily traded long hours and backbreaking labor in the fields for the better-regulated building trades, earning four times as much as a bricklayer. He took out a mortgage and enlarged his house on a quiet side street in this small city in southern Spain.

Now, with the construction jobs gone, Mr. Rivera is behind on his bank payments and eager to return to the farmwork he left behind.

But Spaniards have been largely shut out of those jobs. Those bent over rows of strawberries under plastic greenhouse sheeting or climbing ladders in the midday sun are now almost all foreigners: Romanians, Poles, Moroccans, many of them in Spain legally.

"The farmers here don't want us," Mr. Rivera said with a defeated shrug.

Local officials and union leaders say Mr. Rivera has it right. Farmers have been reluctant to take Spanish workers back — unsure whether they will work as hard as the foreigners who have been picking their crops, sometimes for a decade now.

So far, only 5 percent of the pickers this year are Spaniards, said Diego Cañamero, the head of one of Spain's largest labor organizations, the Field Workers Union, or S.O.C. He said the union was working to keep tempers from flaring and to persuade farmers to employ local people again, but with little success.

“There is a sense of bewilderment among the Spanish workers,” he said. “They say: Why do they let people come 5,000 miles, when we need the jobs?”

The **unemployment rate in the Andalusia region** is now 27 percent, the highest in Spain except for the Canary Islands. Spaniards have always been resilient, helping out one another in hard economic times. But these days entire families like that of Mr. Rivera and his wife, who have five working-age children — most at home — are jobless. Unemployment benefits go only so far, and for those who have house or car payments, not nearly far enough.

Mr. Rivera, 50, gets 420 euros a month, about \$530. His mortgage takes up half of that, he said. His wife, Encarnación Román Casillas, 49, started going to the local soup kitchen.

“At first, I could not do it,” she said. “My sister-in-law went for me. But then we went together, and now I do what I have to do.” In addition to two hot meals, she is given a loaf of bread, a liter of milk and four containers of yogurt.

Soon, the Riveras will borrow a car from a relative and go to France, where they expect to camp while picking beets, asparagus and artichokes, then grapes in the fall. They got work there last year, though the cost of the campsite ate up half their wages. This time, a French farmer has agreed to let them stay on his property.

Mr. Rivera's predicament is hardly unique. Mayors across Andalusia say local residents come to their offices all the time looking for work. Some do not want farmwork, saying it is too hard. But many, says Emilio Vergara, mayor of Paterna del Campo, a small farming village outside Huelva, would gladly take it.

Together with three other nearby mayors, Mr. Vergara began an effort to persuade farmers to hire local people. But, he says, of the 450 people who signed up from his village, none have been offered a job.

“I am concerned about a potential outburst of xenophobia, and hope that it can be avoided at all costs, because Spain is traditionally a hospitable country,” Mr. Vergara said.

Experts say some farmers do hire immigrants to take advantage of them. Mr. Cañamero, the union leader, says 15 to 20 cases of serious abuse are reported each year, in which workers have not been paid or do not have enough food or water.

But in most cases, Mr. Cañamero says, that is not why farmers turn to foreigners. He said hiring was governed by a web of prejudices about who are the best workers. For the very hot work in the summer, farmers prefer to hire Africans. For strawberry picking, they prefer women. "It is not written anywhere," he said. "That would be terrible discrimination. But that is how it works."

Wages vary as well. The Africans tend to be paid 30 euros a day, about \$38. Other pickers can earn as much as 40 euros.

Many farmers argue that they have found a reliable work force and that they cannot afford to jeopardize it. Diego Luis Camacho Rodríguez, who owns a small strawberry farm outside Huelva, has hired some local people. But the bulk of his workers are foreigners, like the Polish woman and her daughter who were delicately placing ripe fruit on plastic trays on a May afternoon.

"Once you start working with people and they know your operation," he said, "you want to keep working with them."

Still, he hired Francesco Gil Barrera, 29, this year, when the young man lost his construction job. He also gave Elena Rosado Pérez, 28, a job. She had been working as a waitress, but the restaurant was doing so poorly that its owners decided to close except for weekends.

Manuel Recio, the regional minister for employment and **immigration**, said the government lowered the number of contracts available to foreign workers this year. But he said he doubted that Spaniards were really interested in the farm jobs. And he was quick to point out that many of those in the fields were citizens of **European Union** countries, and that they were as entitled to the jobs as Spaniards.

Even more than the Spaniards, illegal immigrants, who had flocked to Spain in recent years looking for work of any kind, are suffering. Hundreds of them are living in encampments in the woods. Recently, even immigrants with working papers have arrived at the camps.

Abdoulaye Diallo, who came from Senegal in 2002 and worked steadily until 2008, lives in one of the camps, on a dirt road that divides two farms outside Huelva.

Like hundreds of others living under a patch of trees, he has fashioned a shelter from plastic

sheeting. Most of the men have not worked in 18 months. They survive on handouts from the Red Cross.

Not so long ago, they were sending money home to wives and children.

"We live like animals," Mr. Diallo said. "I keep looking for work. But there is nothing."

*Rachel Chaundler contributed reporting from Seville, Spain.*