

‘Dances with Daffodils’: Life as a Flower-picker in Southwest England

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Abstract

Physically demanding and low-paid, work in the agri-food sector has been described in the literature as equal measures precarious and exploitative. In order to investigate the everyday realities of a flower-picker’s job, we trace Ivan’s journey from a Bulgarian university to the daffodil fields of Cornwall, UK. Following two rounds of successful promotions, Ivan’s work is no longer governed by the seasonal rhythms of the flower-picking industry. However, as a welfare manager, he now faces hidden and open resistance from other migrant pickers whose work he oversees. Speaking to us at the height of the picking season and having worked seven days a week for months, Ivan is struggling. He has no time to complete his application to remain in the UK and is becoming mindful of the gap between the expectations placed on him by his employer, and the recompense offered in return.

Keywords

agri-food work, everyday, migrant work, precarity

*. . . And then my heart with pleasure fills,
And dances with the daffodils.*

—William Wordsworth, *I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud*

*Ivan is a pseudonym

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Introduction

Cornwall's daffodil-covered hills may invoke the bygone charm of Wordsworth's famous poem, yet the reasons why acres of flowers remain unpicked have little to do with romantic aesthetics. The Duchy's daffodil market is in trouble. Some of the problems are industry-wide and have been brought about by the global, COVID-19 pandemic. This famously led Prince Charles to issue a call to the UK population, asking individuals to help make up the 90,000 shortfall in fruit and vegetable-pickers (Middleton, 2020). Other issues are specific to flower-picking and stem from the UK Government's post-Brexit arrangements. Those currently allow only fruit and vegetable producers (but not flower farms) to use temporary labour as part of the seasonal workers pilot scheme (Evans, 2021). There are also wider concerns of a much more historic nature. Specifically, although offering convenient access to entry-level jobs with little to no skill-requirements, agri-food work carries the risks and dangers of secondary labour makers with limited scope for skill-development, remuneration and progression (Böhm et al., 2020; Rye and Scott, 2018). Sector innovations such as the introduction of digital technology in order to improve efficiency and productivity have further commodified and quantified workers, subjecting them to surveillance and body-movement tracking (Lupton, 2013; Moore and Robinson, 2016).

Thus, expectations placed on workers, in terms of flexibility, discretionary effort, emotional regulation (Hochschild, 2012) and even identity control (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002) seem at odds with the limited security and promotion opportunities offered by employers (Thompson, 2013). This is the key premise of Paul Thompson's 'disconnected capitalism thesis' (DCT) which warns of the destabilising impact which modern, financial economies have on labour markets. In this sense, the levels of expected worker performance and dedication are 'disconnected' from the reality of declining job security and limited employer investment in human capital (Thompson, 2003). This has been associated with a rise in precarious work, which has permeated the UK's labour markets since the 1980s (Gilmore et al., 2018; Manolchev et al., 2018), reducing employment security, progression opportunities and worker protection (Armano et al., 2017). As a result, precarious workers can, at times, adopt an instrumental attitude to their 'lousy' jobs (Campbell and Price, 2016; Kässi and Lehtonvirta, 2018). This is perhaps unsurprising, given the negative experiences, poverty and physical harm encountered in low-pay work (Hoggart and Mendoza, 1999; Lloyd and James, 2008). Entry-level migrant jobs, such as those offered by the agri-food industry (Ciupijus, 2011; Pajnik, 2016), are also highly exploitative (Axelsson et al., 2017; Nobil Ahmad, 2008). In certain extreme cases, they have caused worker deaths, as was the case with the 21 Chinese cockle-pickers who drowned at Morecombe Bay in 2004 (McCollum and Findlay, 2015). The coronavirus pandemic is likely to have compounded this further, and it is currently unclear how many undocumented migrants have died since its start (Bulman, 2020).

Yet, to fully understand the everyday realities of migrants in the agri-food industry, we must consider the totality of their working experiences. This requires us to take into account not only the formal characteristics of precarious work (Hudson et al., 2017; Kalleberg, 2011, 2018) but also the meanings, motivations and experiences of precarious

workers. Doing so highlights a number of paradoxes. For example, precarious work emerges as a source of *both* satisfaction and alienation, fulfilment and exploitation (Brisman et al., 2016; Cutcher et al., 2016). This is recognised by a number of scholars who propose that worker experiences in conditions of precarious work are neither uniform, nor fully negative (Arnold and Bongiovi, 2013; Standing, 2011). Thus, precarious contexts can be facilitators of social interaction (Mittal et al., 2009; Warr, 2007) and do not preclude the possibility for a sense of reward, satisfaction, even ‘love’ for work to arise (Corby and Stanworth, 2009). Studies recognise the presence of oppression and uncertainty, typical of secondary labour market segments (Gumbrell-McCormick, 2011); but also opportunity and mobility, allowing workers to ‘job-hop’ in order to advance their socio-economic position (Alberti, 2014). Precarious jobs may limit the collective bargaining power of workers (Gumbrell-McCormick, 2011), yet they do not fully take away the latter’s ability to resist top-down control. James Scott’s seminal scholarship into the resistance of subordinate groups has pointed to the existence of ‘hidden transcripts’, which may include narratives, behaviours or practices utilised by the ‘weak’ when there is no possibility for direct retaliation (Scott, 2008). In this way, precarious workers may adopt instrumental and ‘satisficing’ attitudes towards work, and view it as a means to an end (Corby and Stanworth, 2009; Manolchev et al., 2018). However, they can also experience satisfaction – even when it closely borders on resignation (Léné, 2019). As a result, the context of the UK’s agri-food industry is a space of complex interactions, social relations, legislative provisions, working patterns and personal experiences (Harvey, 2018). It is a nexus of subordination but also worker agency (Alberti, 2014), at times empowered and at times held back, by an intersection of gender, class, ethnicity and other worker characteristics (McBride et al., 2015).

Consequently, in this ‘On the Front Line’ article, we introduce Ivan (pseudonym), a Bulgarian migrant and a former daffodil-picker based in the Duchy of Cornwall, south-west England. We join Ivan for a week at a Cornish farm (‘the Farm’) as part of an ongoing project studying the experiences of migrants at opposing ends of the UK’s job spectrum. For Ivan, the Farm is both a place of work and home for over a decade. He started work here as a daffodil-picker and did this for two years – from 2008 to 2010. Flower-picking is a manual job and workers move from one line of daffodils to another, collecting bunches of flowers and placing them in plastic trays. Thus, the ‘tray’ quantifies (cf. Lupton, 2013) and orders a daffodil-picker’s working day. Consequently, each day is measured not in hours and minutes but in trays and flower bunches. Each bunch can consist of 10 or more daffodil stems, depending on the needs of the client for which the daffodils are picked, usually one of the Big Four supermarket chains in the UK: Tesco, Asda, Sainsbury’s or Morrison’s. When a client changes their requirements for the number of stems in a bunch, and this happens at least once a week, flower-picking stops, workers are reallocated – from the field to the warehouse – and instructed to ‘re-bunch’ the flowers in line with the changed requirements. Although the majority of workers come from Bulgaria and Romania, they have adopted the English term for a ‘bunch’ and use the Anglicised ‘bandgy’, rather than the Bulgarian ‘buket’, or the Romanian ‘bucet’ (both derived from the French ‘bouquet’).

Despite the hardship of manual labour, Ivan enjoyed flower-picking and the connection with the land it offered, something which reminded him of life back home. However,

having been promoted, first to a team leader in 2010 and then to a welfare manager in 2013, Ivan has become aware of a different side to the job. He now encounters and has to manage employee resistance, some ‘offstage’ (Scott, 2008) and away from the field, some direct – such as workers refusing to pick flowers in the rain. It is in his current role that Ivan has started to experience a ‘disconnect’ (Thompson, 2003), between the pressures and demands placed on him by his employer, and the lack of progression opportunities offered in return. It seems that while legislative interventions have ameliorated working and living conditions in the agri-food industry, precarity remains ever-present in the sector – despite the best efforts of employers and the apparent value of workers. Thus, for the first time in 12 years, Ivan seems unsure of what the future holds for him. He will address this question at the end of the article; however, before we let Ivan tell his story, it is worth establishing the centrality of Cornwall in the UK’s daffodil industry. Cornwall is described as one of the best places in the world to grow daffodils, with the climate being suitable for several flower varieties (Bradbury, 2015). The Cornish daffodil industry is also particularly affected by the loss of migrant labour post-Brexit (Zorzut, 2021). Therefore, the choice of geographical location seems a particularly suitable backdrop for the tensions and challenges played out in Ivan’s narrative.

Dances with daffodils – Ivan’s story

I am never going to forget my first day in the field. It was January 2008 and I had just arrived in the UK. I was an Economics graduate in Bulgaria and here I was, in the middle of a field, knee-deep in mud, waterproofs stuck to my back and freezing my butt off. I remember looking at the line of daffodils ahead of me and thinking to myself, ‘What the hell am I doing here?’ I decided that if I didn’t try, I would never know, so I bent over, picked up my first daffodil stem and kept going until the end of the field. That day I made £16. The following day I increased my earnings to £26 and set myself the target of reaching £50 a day. It took a week, but, on the last day of my first week, I not only met but exceeded my target and earned £72. This is what kept me going in the first few weeks – setting a target and passing it – first £72, then £75, £80, and so on. My personal record was £136 a day or, approximately 400 Bulgarian levs. At the time, the average Bulgarian salary was 900 levs per month, which I could earn in approximately three days. This always appealed to me – the ability to be self-sufficient, to be earning enough not only to support myself but also my family in Bulgaria, should they need my help. This is why I came here in the first place, to earn some cash. In 2008, UK legislation allowed students to apply for a three-month work permit and, since friends of mine had done it, I decided to try it out, too. It was fairly straightforward, you filled in an application with one of the two main agencies in Bulgaria which managed the process and you came to the UK. You could not choose the industry or the region, though – this was up to them. Some students were sent to work in factories while others, like me – in the agri-food industry. I had no prior experience of flower-picking at all; back in Bulgaria I was a barman and a waiter. I had tried working in a bank but, ironically, I found that working in cafes paid more. When I told my mother that I was coming to the UK to pick flowers, she thought I was insane. ‘See you in a week’, she said as I waved goodbye at the airport.

Well, here I was, and I had lasted more than a week. I was earning good money but I could not wait for the season to end. Daffodil-picking is hard work and you do not fully appreciate the strain until you get back to your trailer at the end of a day in the field and you cannot take your trousers off because they are stuck to your legs from the rain and sweat. You can be in the field from eight to 12 hours and you have to pick at speed. You work as part of a gang with 50 or 60 others and if you are too slow, others will pick the flowers ahead of you and there would be nothing left. Your endurance is tested, not only physically, but mentally as well. Some cannot do it. They leave quickly. Others leave after the first downpour because they cannot face another day in the rain. If you make it past the first three weeks, you are ready to face anything – cold, wind, rain, sun. You get it all down here in Cornwall, four seasons in a day. In my early days as a picker, the repetitive motion of reaching down, picking, making a bunch, placing it in a tray, then reaching back down and doing it again used to make my wrist swell. Many workers here have suffered carpal tunnel syndrome. Some workers don't take time off, though. If they are right-handed they just use the other hand. Picking daffodils slower is better than staying in the caravan and staring at the walls. No daffodils, no money. In fact, there is a saying here, among the pickers: you are not picking flowers – you are picking pennies off the ground.

I did come back to the UK after my first season, even though I had promised myself I would not. In fact, I returned for three seasons and was a successful picker, working quickly and making good money. After each season I would go back to Bulgaria and work there as well. This continued until 2010 when a team leader position became available and I decided to apply. Being a team leader is not an easy job and I have seen plenty of workers who have been promoted to team leaders, only to give it up and go back to picking. Being a picker is much less hassle. When I was promoted, I became responsible for planning the work of a gang of workers, or around 60 people. This is more challenging than you imagine. Each morning a tractor would drop a trailer full of empty trays and, as a team leader, you'd be responsible for choosing the best position for the trailer. As the workforce had grown to around 500 pickers at the time, with an approximate 70/30 male to female split, and the Farm was operating over 600 acres of fields, the tractors would move around, picking up full trailers and dropping off empty ones throughout the day. You have to be able to assess not only how many trays each of the fields would yield but also to know the speed of your gang. If the trailer was dropped off too far from the end of the field where the pickers were, workers would have to constantly walk back and forth, carrying heavy trays and wearing heavy waterproofs while wading in mud. That is a sure way to annoy your gang and make them not want to cooperate. Some workers don't need much of an excuse to complain, or slow down, or refuse to go out in the field altogether. 'It's too cold', they say, or too wet, or they are unhappy because I have placed them in a line with not enough flowers. So I am there, in the field with them, rain or shine. I go to each group of pickers and pick a few bunches of flowers for each worker, to build trust and to encourage them, especially those who are new and slower. You have to motivate them, especially towards the end of a cold or wet day. This is when workers can simply stop and refuse to pick any more, even if there are a few lines of daffodils left. Most have reached their personal targets and don't care anymore. However, you cannot leave produce in the field or ask the daffodils not to come out until the next day when the workers are rested, so I have to encourage and nudge. I have resorted to buying pizza for the workers on more than one occasion.

As a team leader, you are also responsible for keeping track of your gang's productivity. When I first started, team leaders would give workers money tokens in exchange for completed trays, similar to 'Monopoly' money. However, some workers found a way to hack the system, duplicate the tokens and claim more cash than what they had earned. So, you have to know not only what your gang is capable of, but be constantly vigilant. Now we issue workers with rolls of sticky labels, and each roll has the worker's payroll number on it. When a worker fills a tray, they stick their payroll label on it and the team leader scans it with a handheld scanning device. We use a software called Crop-Picker for this and it is a way for the Farm to track worker productivity. I do spot checks to make sure workers are collecting the required number of stems per bunch. If a worker fails to pass, that is strike one. Three strikes and the worker is dismissed and has three to five days to make arrangements to go home. Once dismissed, a worker will not be allowed to come back and work for the Farm again. This is a matter of trust, and trust is like a plate, once smashed you cannot put it back together – we depend on them to help us, as much as they depend on us to look after them. I have always believed that this is a joint operation and I have done my best to make workers' welfare my priority. After two seasons as a team leader, I was given an evening job as well – I became the campsite manager and the person responsible for resolving any day-to-day problems workers had. This is a massive source of stress for me. Once, I had to talk down a worker waving a knife in my face while waiting for the police to arrive, but, thankfully, such displays of aggression are rare. More often, workers would try and do things behind my back, like, for instance, taking the batteries off the carbon monoxide alarms so they can smoke in the caravans. Others would put the batteries the wrong way around or even wrap them in clingfilm. If I come across something like this, I issue a strike for everyone in the caravan. I never take chances – I would not be able to live with myself if someone died. We care for those pickers who have chosen to work for us, but the three strikes policy is implemented with extreme prejudice, legally speaking.

In August 2013, a new role was created for me and I became the welfare manager for all our sites. What this means in practical terms is that when we are at peak season, I am the least important person in my life and everyone else's needs come before mine. It has taken me three years to find time to start the application for my British citizenship and I am yet to find time in order to book the Life in the UK Test. During the three months of the daffodil season, I work seven days a week making sure everyone is ok. The workers are my responsibility. It is not easy for them, either. They are in a foreign place here and I know very well what that is like. I am their main connection with the world outside the Farm. Our induction tells them what to do in the event of an emergency but what use is dialling 999 or 111 if they do not know the language and cannot explain what the emergency is? So, in addition to English, I have taught myself Romanian and can speak a little Polish, so that I can help when they need me. I have driven people to dental appointments and taken them shopping many times. I have introduced a loyalty scheme where trusted staff have their travel organised for them and we pay for their flights and transport them from the airport to the Farm, and back. When the world went under lockdown due to the coronavirus, we allowed workers to stay in the caravans rent-free. We also bought a ton of potatoes from a nearby farm, and each caravan could have a portion for free.

Little gestures like this matter. For instance, I was the one to convince the Farm to put in place free Wi-Fi across the whole campsite area two years ago. There is an on-campus shop selling East-European products now so that workers can top up their shopping in

between their weekly grocery trips. We operate a laundry and dry-clean service at a symbolic cost of £1 per load and I think all of this is good and right. Looking after our people matters and I myself have been looked after – this is why I have stayed here for 12 years. I do wonder if this is too long, sometimes. I wonder if it is, perhaps, time to move on. I have dedicated my life to this job and I have always felt that this is worthwhile. The hardship, the struggle against the elements, the battle with yourself always gave me a sense of purpose. Yet, there is little else in my life outside of work. Looking ahead, all I can see is work-related plans. For instance, we need to somehow weather the restrictions imposed by Brexit and the coronavirus. We need to adjust our procedures in line with the sponsorship agreement [seasonal work pilot scheme] required to hire temporary workers. We need to think about our caravan living arrangements, and decide whether we isolate workers on arrival so we can let them work side-by-side in a field.

I don't regret my choices. I also think that, if I could go back in time, I would do it all again. If I lost my job as a manager tomorrow, I would also happily go back to working in the field. I wouldn't want to do anything else but maybe this is because there isn't anything else I can do. This job has become a part of me. I even justify the time I have spent on applying for my UK settled status as a work-related activity, as something I need to do, so I can continue to fulfil my duties. I do this willingly but I am not sure about the next step. I am driven to improve myself, to learn, to develop. A new position has recently become vacant – that of a payroll officer. Until two months ago, I was involved with aspects of payroll but only occasionally and only when I had time. Given my degree, this is an area in which I would like to move and have indeed approached the Farm to discuss this. They have been unwilling to commit. This is also a source of major frustration because, guess who has been baby-sitting the job and paying the workers' wages for two months since the previous role-holder left? Me. I am deemed good enough to do it temporarily but not good enough to be allowed to perform the role permanently. I try not to let my frustration show but I am getting increasingly impatient while waiting on the Farm to decide, one way or another. I need to keep moving forward and if I can't, at least I can choose to do something which I enjoy. I wouldn't mind dropping all my current duties. I can cope with going back to daffodil-picking, but can the Farm cope without me?

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