

ESSENTIAL WORKERS

THE NEW FRONTLINES
OF GLOBAL WARMING 



Pitch

The years 2020 and 2021 will forever be marked by the violent and sudden eruption of the Covid-19 epidemic. As dire as this pandemic may seem, it has been overshadowing another, quieter, but perhaps even more devastating one: this other pandemic has gripped the world of work, and it was brought upon us by climate change.

Since the world has warmed up by an average of one degree compared to the pre-industrial era, repeated heat waves, floods and droughts have created new risks for workers' health: an increase in accidents, skin cancers, asthma, heart problems, mental disorders, etc. Increased temperatures and high humidity are also believed to be the cause of a new kidney disease that is decimating the agricultural sector in Central America.

The first to be affected by this new climatic burden are the already precarious workers who work outside or in non-air-conditioned places: farmers, construction workers, deliverymen, factory employees. Global warming therefore only accentuates pre-existing inequalities and creates new social boundaries between those who can protect themselves from the climate and those who cannot.

This threat is still little publicized in Europe. In other regions of the world, however, the new climate situation is already forcing us to rethink our work: construction companies in Phoenix (Arizona) are organizing work sites at night to adapt. Also in the United States, Democrat Judy Chu has been leading a fight in the federal Congress for the past two years to include climate change in labor law.

It is perhaps no coincidence that these advances in terms of worker protection are taking place in the world's leading economic power: in addition to causing suffering to workers' bodies, the climate is also impacting on their productivity – the International Labour Organization predicts a loss of working hours equivalent to 80 million jobs by 2030. The resulting economic impact will be resounding: GDP losses are estimated at around 12% for France, 20% for the United States, and over 30% for Malaysia.

Faced with this threat, the business community is trying to reinvent itself: greener, more sustainable finance thanks to investment rating based on their carbon footprint, policies to disclose the climate impacts of economic activities and their associated portfolios. Their aim is officially to preserve the planet, of course; but it is also to save capitalism and ensure that it adapts to the changes imposed by global warming.

We will therefore tell you the story of the men and women on the front line of climate chaos: those who toil in the shadows. But also the struggle of doctors, NGOs, politicians and economists who are fighting to adapt to a new world that is as destabilizing as it is unpredictable. A story in the present, overtaken by a disturbing future.

"The main sectors concerned are agriculture and construction, and, more broadly, all those who work outdoors or in places with little air conditioning. These are already economically fragile sectors, with many poor workers, informal jobs and little social and health protection."

Report of the International Labour Organization (ILO)

"One third of the world's population is regularly exposed to climatic conditions that exceed the human capacity for thermoregulation."

Andreas Flouris, environmental physiologist

"If global warming reaches 1.5° by the end of the century, heat stress is expected to reduce the number of hours worked worldwide by 2.2%, equivalent to 80 million jobs. And global gross domestic product is expected to fall by \$2.4 trillion."

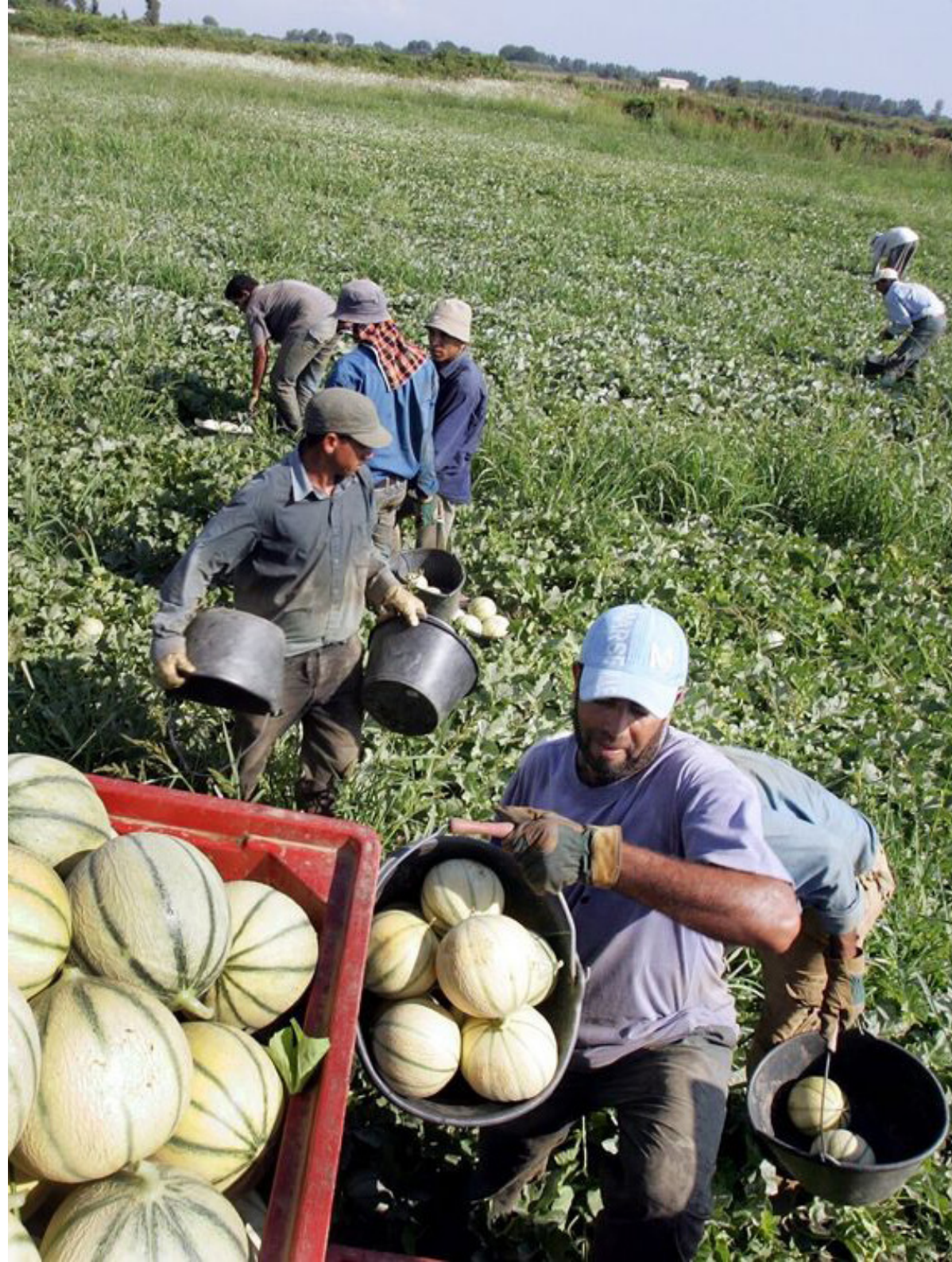
International Labour Organization (ILO) report.

Synopsis

July 2011, in the middle of a melon field in the south of France, under a blazing sun, a farm worker collapses. Four days later, he dies of heatstroke in hospital. Elio Maldonado was 28 years old. He had left Ecuador two years earlier to make a living in Europe. According to his family's lawyer, the young man clinically died of heatstroke, but the climate was merely a detonator in an occupational sector with working conditions "close to modern slavery". This was confirmed by the French Labour Inspection's investigation following the young man's death.

The main grievances raised in the profession are unfit accommodation, excessively long working hours, irregularities in pay and status, etc. And because of these pressing demands, the problems linked to the increasingly hot summers or the increasingly frequent heat waves seem to have taken a back seat for now. They are just added as an extra burden on the shoulders of precarious workers with vulnerable forms of employment.

And this is unfortunately the case for millions of workers across almost the entire planet in the grip of global warming. In July 2019, the International Labour Organization announced in a report that climate change will be the next scourge of outdoor workers: agricultural workers, construction workers, dock workers, airport workers, bicycle delivery workers, etc. It added all those who work in buildings with little or no air conditioning to this ever expanding list. One thinks of the textile workers in South-East Asia who have been dropping like flies on hot days – a news that has been widely publicized for some years now.







Those who toil in the shadows are on the front lines when it comes to the sun's stronger radiation, increased air pollution, toxic smoke from fires, and above all heat stress. "This usually occurs when the thermometer exceeds 35°, which is more heat than the human body can bear without physiological damage."

High humidity aggravates this stress, causing headaches, reduced work capacity and, in the most serious cases, loss of consciousness and even death, as was the case with Elio Maldonado. But for the time being, little attention is being paid to the plight of these precarious workers. And behind the impact of global warming at work lies a struggle against inequality.

While not all countries in the world have yet turned their eyes to this threat, there is one region that was forced to do so very early on: Central America. Wedged between the tropics, it is one of the places in the world where global warming is the most severe, and where a climate-induced epidemic has been raging for several years now among the workers in the shade: CKDnt (chronic kidney disease of non-traditional origin). This kidney disease is on the way to becoming the new silicosis of outdoor workers.



Jason Glaser, a former documentary filmmaker, was confronted with this disease for the first time while filming in Nicaragua in 2007. Outside a sugar cane processing factory, he met protesting workers, some of whom were dying in hammocks hung on the railings. These patients are suffering from a previously unknown kidney disease, which specifically decimates sugar cane cutters. Jason Glaser mobilized scientists to investigate the origin of this disease, which has become the second leading cause of death in Nicaragua.

A decade later, epidemiologists claimed that rising temperatures and high humidity are partly responsible for this new occupational disease. The form of employment (sugar cane cutters are paid by the weight of the crop, not by the hour, so they have no incentive to take it easy) also plays an important role. Nowadays, Jason Glaser is campaigning for sugar cane farmers to better protect their workers from the harsh climate. But his fight has also shifted: he realizes that this new kidney disease affects other workers in other parts of the world: orange pickers in Florida, miners in Pakistan, or construction workers in Nepal.

There, dialysis centers are increasingly overcrowded. They welcome those who toiled in the shadows to build the motorways in Saudi Arabia, the Malaysian high-rises, or the World Cup stadiums in Qatar. The latter made the headlines worldwide because of the excess mortality in their sector: even today, an average of five coffins arrive at Kathmandu airport every day. From now on, the country will also have take care of those who return with this new kidney disease.

The dramatic situation of these Nepalese workers in the shadows, relayed by NGOs and the international media, is forcing Qatar to review its labor law. Notably in terms of protecting workers from heat stress: a new law should prohibit working from 10am to 3pm between 1 June and 1 September.







And Qatar is not the only country to change its law, the United States have been well on the way to legislating on the issue of heat stress. Democrat Judy Chu is championing the legislation in the federal Congress. Fifteen years ago, she was the one who passed a very protective law in her state, California. It was named after a farm worker who died after 10 hours of harvesting in over 40°C in 2004: Asuncion Valdivia. The new law, which is to apply to the whole country, bears the same name. It was already presented to Congress in 2019, but under the Trump presidency, the private sector had its vote blocked. In 2021, under the Biden era, its chances of passing are better.

Another factor may be the business community's awareness of the impact of climate change on growth. Long deaf to climatologists' dire warnings, the economic world has recently realized that the effects of climate change are inevitable: the famous consultancy firm McKinsey published a report in 2020 listing the damage to worker productivity, the destabilization of entire sectors such as tourism, for example, and to GDP in general. So it would be better to prepare for these impending dooms, as Michael Bloomberg defends. Together with the former head of the Bank of England, Mark Carney, he is campaigning for green, responsible and sustainable finance. Another world may be coming into being. But it's too early to tell if the shift is real and if it will bear fruit in terms of changing capitalism and limiting the effects of climate change.

Finally, discover a city that may be a grim illustration of our common future: Phoenix, Arizona. It is the hottest city in the United States, and in the span of a few decades it has become a laboratory for studying the urban heat island (UHI) phenomenon and for thinking up adaptation solutions. Here, construction work takes place at night. Tarmac is being replaced with materials that do not retain heat. The roofs of bus shelters are being changed. Because of global warming, we work and live differently.



Director's notes

Two certainties guide our intentions:

Firstly, it is a matter of bodies, of calloused hands, of sweaty brows. The first stage of the investigation will therefore be devoted to meeting these workers. We will study the effects of global warming on their bodies and their lives. On the filmic level, we will seek humanity with shallow shots that isolate glances and technical gestures.

We will also pay particular attention to the way we film the natural elements (heat, rain, wind) that constrain these workers. For example, we will use low-angle shots to materialize the oppression exerted by the sun. Our intention is to show the power of this new climatic situation that is falling on the workers' bodies. To complete some of the portraits, we will take the time to move into their intimacy. It is in this intimate setting that we wish to conduct interviews in order to capture the deepest states of mind and to take a step back from this new work environment.

The other certainty that emerged from our survey is its prospective dimension. Each discussion with a scientist projected us into the future. Nowadays, the world they study is in constant flux, and their job is to warn of a darkening future or to find solutions for tomorrow. That's why we think it's important to punctuate this film with maps and animations that project us into that future. We also plan to present each destination with its average temperature today, and that projected for 2100 by the IPCC.

This "prospective" layer in the writing of the film aims to contextualize the workers' specific situations in a more general and, above all, ever shifting worldwide climate. But it also has an educational purpose: climatology applied to the world of work draws as much from the "hard sciences" (mathematics, physics, biology) as from geopolitics or macroeconomics. We therefore deemed it important to bring these complex elements to the viewer's attention in a didactic manner. Absolutely all the data and diagnoses we quote in the film come from the work of specialists. Their words will constitute the third stage of our film: after the victims' testimony, the analysis of the present and future context, the experts' words will shed light on this silent revolution imposed by the climate on workers. We want to interview them with a double camera set-up, in as neutral a setting as possible.

In the editing process, our wish is to advance the investigation through the words of these experts. And to limit the commentary to informative data. It will not repeat what's in the images shown or the interviews, but it will intervene sparingly to serve the drama of this investigation. This narrative will also make good use of music as it unfurls. We are used to working with a composer whose sensibility seems to correspond to the "naturalist" universe we want for this film. His name is Julien Revel Andersen.

Camille Robert



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