States and Migration: The Human Movement Podcast
Episode 30 "Irregular Workers and the Cost of Borders: The Pancyprian Farmers Union Speaks Out – with Christos Papapetrou"

Enhanced transcript

By Emmanuel Comte – with the assistance of Andriana Lagoudes

Abstract: In Cyprus today, migrant workers—many undocumented—form the backbone of its agricultural economy. In this conversation, Emmanuel Comte speaks with Christos Papapetrou, General Secretary of the Pancyprian Farmers Union, about how irregular migration, EU border control, and local labor shortages intersect in the fields and villages of the island. From smuggling routes across the buffer zone to migrants attracted by welfare benefits, the episode exposes how Cyprus' agriculture increasingly depends on migrant labor. A vital listen on how immigration is reshaping the rural Mediterranean.

Disclaimer: *This transcript has been produced for educational purposes to support the understanding and integration of information discussed in the related conversation. It is not intended for use in quoting the conversation verbatim. For accurate quotations, please refer to the original recording.*

Introduction

Emmanuel Comte: In Cyprus, where citrus trees, vineyards, and vegetable farms shape much of the rural landscape, agricultural production increasingly relies on migrant labor, often employed informally or without legal status. This dependency reveals deeper questions at the intersection of agricultural production, labor migration, and immigration control in Southern Europe.

In this interview, we examine how global migration pressures influence everyday practices in rural Cyprus. I'm joined by Christos Papapetrou, General Secretary of the Pancyprian Farmers Union (PEK). With decades of experience leading Cyprus' most prominent agricultural organization—established in 1942—Christos brings valuable insights into how Cypriot farmers are navigating labor shortages, bureaucratic hurdles, and the changing dynamics of European migration policy.

Throughout our conversation, we'll explore the rise of migrant labor in Cypriot agriculture, the role of informal employment, and the social responses of rural communities to demographic and cultural shifts in Cyprus. Christos, thank you very much for welcoming me to your office here at PEK.

Christos Papapetrou: It's my pleasure.

Evolution of Migrant Labour in Cyprus

Emmanuel Comte: Let's begin with a simple question. How did you encounter the issue of migrant labor in your professional career?

Christos Papapetrou: This subject has its positive and its negative facets. This practice began several years ago, roughly in the 1990s, when the government started issuing visas for farmers based on their specific cultivation needs. These permits allowed eligible farmers to bring in agricultural workers from third countries—meaning countries outside the European Union.

When Cyprus joined the European Union in 2004, the situation changed. Many of the workers who had previously come from third countries started coming from within the EU, as their countries joined the Union. This introduced the freedom of movement for labor among EU member states.

However, in specific types of agriculture, such as livestock farming, workers from third countries continued to be brought in. When we refer to livestock, we're talking about all types of farm animals—chickens, mainly lambs, and also cattle for shepherding and dairy production.

What's important is that the government has continued to provide protection for these workers through a collective labor agreement. This agreement is signed jointly by the Ministry of Labor, representatives of the workers—who are the labor unions—and the employers, who in this case are the agricultural organizations. As farmers who hire labor, we are considered employers.

This employment contract, which we review and update every few years in line with wage levels in Cyprus, ensures legal and economic security for the workers. It's designed to prevent exploitation on both sides. It sets the wages, work conditions, working hours, and holidays.

Emmanuel Comte: So, the issue of immigrant workers in Cypriot agriculture began in the 1990s, particularly in the livestock sector, such as shepherding. Initially, this was a form of labor immigration that was regulated, with trade unions in Cyprus playing a role in managing the presence of these migrant workers.

You also mentioned that, after Cyprus joined the European Union, the situation gained more significance, with workers arriving from EU countries—especially from Eastern Europe—during the 2000s.

Since this period, from the 1990s and into the 2000s, how has the importance of immigrant labor evolved? What have been the major waves of immigrant origins? Are workers still primarily concentrated in the livestock sector, or has immigrant labor expanded to other areas of agriculture?

Christos Papapetrou: From the outset, the employment of foreign workers in Cyprus has included both fieldwork and livestock farming. Today, licensed workers from third countries, who arrive under collective labor agreements, continue to be employed across the full spectrum of agricultural activity—both in crop cultivation and in animal husbandry.

What has changed significantly is the increase in irregular migration flows. Individuals often arrive unexpectedly, sometimes finding themselves on the shores of Cyprus overnight. Many of these crossings are facilitated by the Turkish occupation army, in cooperation with networks operating for profit. Turkish traders—both within and outside the occupied areas—participate in human trafficking. These networks collaborate with the occupation regime, helping migrants cross into the free areas of the Republic of Cyprus.

Others arrive through the legal ports of entry but without proper documentation. This has become a serious problem. These individuals frequently act without regulation, taking advantage of the welfare policies of the Republic.

The model in Cyprus unintentionally encouraged irregular migration: migrants would enter the country, apply for asylum, and begin receiving benefits. I want to clearly distinguish between those who exploit the system and those who are genuine refugees, forced to flee their home countries due to war or persecution. We should not treat these two groups the same.

The Role of Informal Networks

Christos Papapetrou: Today, the situation with migrants has been smoothed out because migration flows have decreased in Cyprus. Let me also emphasize that, here in Cyprus, there are networks that exploit immigrants. Often, the leaders of these networks are themselves citizens of the migrants' countries of origin. Some of those who arrive legally later become involved in these networks, persuading agricultural workers to abandon their legal employment and apply for political asylum.

This raises a serious question for us: if they entered the country legally, why are they seeking asylum? Why are their applications being accepted? In our view, asylum should be granted only to those who are persecuted by their country's political regime.

These networks' leaders lure workers with false promises of better pay. In reality, they take a share of the workers' wages in the form of kickbacks. These workers are illegal. If a farmer is found employing these workers without the proper permits, they are subject to fines and legal action by the Republic.

These networks often take the hard-earned wages of the workers. For instance, a farmer might hire workers for a day, and the network leader collects a portion of the daily wage. The leader knows the amount earned and takes a cut accordingly.

And here's the reality: the workers are being misled. Under the collective labor agreement, legal employment includes food and accommodation provided by the employer.

If workers leave legal employment for these network-based jobs, they have to cover their own housing and food. Let's say, for example, that they earn 30 euros per day legally, and perhaps 40 euros illegally. At first glance, the illegal wage seems higher. But once you subtract the cost of food, rent, and other essentials, they are worse off.

Moreover, legal employers also pay into the Social Insurance Fund for these workers, which provides them with additional protection and benefits.

Emmanuel Comte: Over the years, as you mentioned, immigration has had a significant impact. In the Greek Cypriot agricultural sector, immigrant labor gradually extended across all areas. One of the key trends you've highlighted is the growing reliance on irregular migrant labor.

At the start, legal workers were organized through trade unions. But over time, there's been a noticeable increase in irregular migrant workers. You've described the role of informal labor agencies that place these workers with Greek Cypriot farmers. You've also touched on the involvement of smugglers from the northern part of the island who help migrants cross into the south.

You've said that it's the Cypriot farmers who ultimately bear the penalties when they're caught employing these irregular workers.

So, my main question is: Why do Cypriot farmers continue to hire irregular migrants, rather than employing workers through legal channels?

Why Farmers Hire Irregular Migrants

Christos Papapetrou: Let me explain. As an organization, we condemn this practice because we believe it contributes to the broader problem. If these individuals couldn't find employment elsewhere, they wouldn't be pushed into irregular status.

Often, legal employers are abandoned at critical times—like during harvest periods—when their legal workers leave unexpectedly. This puts the employer in a very vulnerable position.

Now, as for why farmers continue to hire irregular migrants, the first reason is the bureaucratic process involved in bringing in legal workers. It's very time-consuming and burdensome to get the necessary approvals.

The second reason is that there are two categories of labor needs. Firstly, farmers who need workers for the whole duration of a year and secondly, farmers who require workers seasonally—for tasks like harvesting potatoes, fruits, or olives, which may only last from a few days to a couple of months.

For seasonal labor, the existing processes are too slow and inefficient. So, despite the risk of fines, farmers turn to irregular workers because they need immediate labor.

There's another group worth mentioning—part-time farmers who make up the majority of the farming population. These are individuals who have other jobs but also work their land. Because farming isn't their main profession, it's difficult for them to get permission to hire legal workers, except in rare cases.

These part-time farmers still need help for a few days or weeks. So they, too, turn to irregular workers for short-term labor.

Emmanuel Comte: Okay, so I understand that the main issue for farmers with the current scheme is the excessive bureaucracy involved in hiring immigrant workers. It takes so long that workers often don't arrive in time for the harvest or other essential tasks. This seems to be primarily due to slow administrative processes related to regulations.

I'm wondering if there's also a cost-related reason for relying on undocumented workers. Let's imagine a scenario where bureaucracy works efficiently and delivers workers exactly when needed. Would there still be an incentive for farmers to employ undocumented workers simply because they are cheaper?

For instance, in the case of undocumented workers, I assume farmers do not pay social security contributions. You previously mentioned that they also don't have to provide additional benefits that regular workers receive—like housing and meals. Is the minimum wage also an issue? Do undocumented workers get paid less than the legal minimum wage?

So, apart from the slow bureaucratic process, are there other cost-related advantages that drive farmers to hire irregular migrant workers?

Christos Papapetrou: On the contrary. The daily wage for undocumented or illegal workers is much higher than for legal ones. This is because they are hired at the exact moment they are needed, and they can negotiate higher pay due to that urgency.

Let's say a farmer realizes that potatoes must be harvested within two days. If the legal workers they applied for six months ago haven't arrived yet, they'll hire undocumented workers. These illegal workers know they're in demand and will ask for higher wages. Because firstly, they are illegal, secondly, they understand the urgent need of the farmer and take advantage of that, and thirdly, they work for fewer days.

If, for example, someone earns a thousand euros per month for full-time legal work, that equates to a consistent salary regardless of daily hours. But if the same person works just a few hours a day on an ad-hoc basis, the daily pay will be higher. Even if the overall monthly income is lower, the cost per day to the employer is higher.

The only real cost-saving for the farmer is the avoidance of social security contributions.

Emmanuel Comte: Right, but you also mentioned that farmers don't cover certain extras—like accommodation and meals. So, while the nominal wage of undocumented workers may be higher due to urgent demand, farmers still save money by not providing housing, meals, or paying social security.

Christos Papapetrou: Yes, this is what seems to be the case in theory. They don't pay social insurance, of course, because these workers are not officially registered. As for meals—well, they won't leave them hungry. This is Cyprus, after all. Farmers will bring food from home or get it from elsewhere to feed them in the fields. Of course, there are exceptions, but we're discussing the general rule here.

We are currently in discussions with the Ministry of Labor. We're requesting permission to use migrants who are already in Cyprus for short-term agricultural tasks, without going through the full bureaucratic process each time. Not everyone is suited for harvesting potatoes or picking olives, so we want the flexibility to find suitable workers ourselves.

For example, a farmer could prepay the government for one month to cover the employment of 5 workers. Once paid, they could then hire any available workers during that month without additional paperwork. One day, I might find three workers. Next week, I might find three different ones. As long as the coverage is prepaid and the period is defined, it should be allowed.

Because also another issue we have to deal with is that some of these workers are not reliable. Some workers say they'll come, but they don't show up. Others ask to be picked up and then disappear. Even workers legally contracted under collective labor agreements sometimes leave unexpectedly. They may demand a release form to go to another employer, often on the very day you need them most. If you refuse, they leave anyway.

Most of the time, even if you sign their official release, the majority don't go to another registered employer to continue their obligations as workers. They end up working illegally on their own terms. We don't want that; we don't want migrants to continue coming aimlessly.

The migration issue is a humanitarian issue as well. But we're specifically referring to third-country nationals who are here legally—those who arrive with permits to work in agriculture, ones who are fleeing war or those granted refugee or asylum status. We are not referring to individuals who enter illegally or irregularly and attempt to exploit the country's immigration system. That distinction must be clear.

National Origins and Breakdown of Recruitment

Emmanuel Comte: There's a lot in everything you've just shared. Now that we're speaking, I think it's important to specify where these people are currently from. You mentioned older migrants who arrived legally and now help organize networks for newer regular migrants. Could you clarify the origins of both groups? That is, the older migrants—those leading the networks—and the undocumented migrants who are currently doing much of the fieldwork. Where do they come from? What are their profiles?

Christos Papapetrou: Egypt and India. The controversial cases of irregular migrants are more complex, and it is not possible for me to know about them. Some of those don't work. They don't come to Cyprus to work but to take advantage of the asylum policies and the benefits offered by them.

When it comes to irregularities, I must admit that I don't have detailed knowledge, because it's a more difficult area. These are individuals who come, receive welfare support,

and don't engage in meaningful work. This issue has been significantly reduced now, but in the past, it was more prevalent.

Regarding legal workers—those who arrive with contracts—most are from Egypt. There might be law firms supporting these arrangements behind the scenes.

What's important to note is this: often, a farmer will go to the airport to meet and greet a worker they've arranged and paid for—according to the official agreement—but the worker never shows up. Someone else picks them up. These are the networks we were talking about. Many employers never actually meet the workers they've financed to bring in. The employer pays all the expenses for the worker's arrival. If the worker is not from Egypt, but from more distant countries, the expenses are even higher. And this happens often.

Thankfully, the situation has improved, especially with the enforcement of laws and increased inspections. In the past, when people applied for political asylum, their cases weren't examined thoroughly due to institutional and procedural deficiencies—particularly within the judicial system. Authorities may have perhaps even ignored applications to avoid legitimizing them by acknowledging them.

Now, the procedures are clearer. Applications are examined, and rejections are issued more consistently. Many asylum requests are now outright rejected. This particularly applies to individuals who arrive legally and then try to seek asylum afterwards.

That problem of foreign labor arriving in Cyprus with all the bureaucracy paid by Cypriot farmers and then disappearing upon arrival used to be very common. I haven't received complaints about such cases in the past year. It happened until about last year, but most frequently over the past five years—especially right before the COVID pandemic. During the pandemic, arrivals ceased, but before 2020, this happened often. Now, it might still occur occasionally, but I'm not aware of any recent incidents.

Legal workers—those with proper work permits—are the ones we're discussing here. There are also many Asians involved—not just from Egypt or India. Migrants from countries like Vietnam, Nepal, and others in Asia come for domestic work, but also in significant numbers for agricultural labor. Wherever we go, we see the same pattern: the fields are filled with Asian and Egyptian workers.

Some irregular migrants come from Syria and pass through Turkey. Most of them eventually leave, either with the help of Turkish networks or by moving on to other European countries, like Greece. But many Africans arrive here and also attempt to move on—often heading toward Italy or Greece. Lately, we've seen more of these from African countries. However, we haven't seen Asian migrants arriving just to use Cyprus as a transit point. That hasn't happened.

In terms of current developments, we've had discussions with the Minister of Labor and the Labor Office, whose services are located nearby. The Ministry is working to finalize an agreement with Egypt to formalize labor migration.

The plan is to establish a registry of Egyptian workers coming to Cyprus, with the Egyptian Government providing their details. This aims to improve processes and ensure safety and transparency for both parties. The idea is to eliminate the possibility of exploitation—by employers, employees, or any intermediaries involved in these labor networks.

Bureaucracy vs Legislative Blockages

Emmanuel Comte: You mentioned earlier that the bureaucratic process is too slow to provide the necessary workforce in time. You've also highlighted the significant cost employers incur when bringing in workers. I understand that part of that cost is related to transportation, but I

believe another part is due to the bureaucratic framework—perhaps fees or procedural expenses involved in hiring workers.

From your experience, what do you think are the main legislative or regulatory changes that have made hiring foreign workers more difficult? I'm particularly interested in what contributes to the slowness of the bureaucratic process. Sometimes it's not inefficiency, but rather the burden of complying with numerous regulations.

So, in your view, what changes have made the recruitment of workers more time-consuming? For example, could it be the four-year limit on work permits or something similar?

Christos Papapetrou: I don't believe it's a matter of legislation. It's primarily a procedural issue. For instance, there may be too many applications and not enough staff to handle them. A ministry office responsible for these processes might be severely understaffed—maybe it has two people when it actually needs five.

Just last night, a potato farmer called me about uprooting potato plants. He told me he submitted his application in December and only received approval in June. In the meantime, he had to rely on temporary help from people working here and there. So again, it's not the legislation that's the problem—it's the way the offices function.

There's also the bureaucracy itself, which is too complex. The procedures need to be streamlined because the current process involves too many steps and too many people handling the same file.

Emmanuel Comte: Let's go back to the example you just gave. This farmer applied in December and received a response in June. What exactly was he applying for? Was it a work permit? And during those six months, what did the administration actually do? Which departments were involved? What were they checking?

Christos Papapetrou: I don't know the process in exact detail, but I can give you a general idea. Once someone submits an application, it first goes to their local office or regional administration. Then it's forwarded to the central office, where it gets in the queue for review. Officials there assess the application, verify whether the person is eligible, and evaluate if the number of requested workers is reasonable and not excessive.

Regardless of the steps involved, the timeline is simply unacceptable. That's why we keep saying: the process must be simplified.

Let me add another point. If one of my workers leaves, I get penalized and it's very difficult for the authorities to allow me to bring someone else. When I say I, I am referring to agricultural employers. If someone leaves, I can't easily get a replacement for him. Which is tied to a broader concern by the authorities of penalising us to prevent constant turnover of new labour force, which could lead to the system being flooded with migrant workers. But at the same time, the current approval processes are inexcusably slow.

Either the responsible offices must be properly staffed, or the procedures must be simplified—ideally both.

Because there's more. After the permit is approved for a worker, we still have to sign the contract, register it with the insurance funds, and pay all the required fees. Everything needs to be in order before the worker even arrives.

And as I mentioned before, even if everything is in order, just when I go to pick up a new worker, someone else picks them up and leaves. There's no centralized coordination or oversight in the implementation of this program. It seems like the application is logged somewhere in the economic department of the local office, then it's passed to the city's central administrative unit—not the ministry itself, but some central office, perhaps in Nicosia.

So, all of this takes a significant amount of time.

Irregular Migrants in Rural Communities

Emmanuel Comte: That's interesting. With the numerous controls in place, the procedures don't seem to effectively meet the actual needs of farmers on the ground.

You mentioned a growing presence of irregular migrants—from Africa, Syria, and possibly Egypt. How does this population of irregular migrants, often organized by networks and working informally, fit into the rural landscape of Cyprus? How do locals coexist with them?

We're on an island already affected by geopolitical tensions, including those stemming from historical divisions between Greek Orthodox and Turkish Muslim communities. How is this evolving demographic absorbed into rural communities?

Christos Papapetrou: First of all, regarding the Cyprus issue, it's important to clarify: this is not a matter of Greeks, Orthodox Christians, and Turkish Muslims. It's about Turkey's invasion and the ongoing occupation of Cyprus. Before the outbreak of conflict in 1963, Turkish Cypriots and Greek Cypriots coexisted peacefully. Today, many Turkish Cypriots still cross the border daily to work in the free areas. The division was not born from the people themselves, but from external forces. The root of the problem is the occupying force, Turkey—not the Turkish Cypriots. Also note that in the occupied areas, most Turkish Cypriots have emigrated. These regions are now primarily populated by settlers from Turkey.

Now, when we talk about immigrants in general, we refer to the legal ones—and with them, there is no issue. Broadly speaking, they are respected and accepted. Of course, there are exceptions, as in any community. We are not racist or intolerant, we collaborate with them.

As with any workforce, there are both good and bad employers, just as there are good and bad employees. But the real problems arise with those who come to Cyprus purely to collect welfare benefits. Some of them, when their payments are delayed or denied, go so far as to assault the ministry employees who handle benefits. By contrast, about 90% of the legal migrants working in agriculture present no problems. We live and work together without conflict.

Emmanuel Comte: What are the problems with irregular migrant workers, as opposed to regular ones? Could you explain what issues are associated with them?

Christos Papapetrou: The main challenges come from those who enter the country illegally, without refugee status or work permits. These individuals often arrive solely to benefit from the welfare system. They cause disturbances, incite unrest, and sometimes engage in criminal behavior. When they do not receive their expected allowances, they go to ministry offices and threaten or attack staff.

Because clearly this category of migrants come to benefit from the welfare state and the migration benefits. Did you know that some of these immigrants get approval to come work, and they refuse to be officially registered at their full salary, fearing it will affect their state benefits? On the one hand, employers are stuck to either comply with this request or risk losing access to available labor, and on the other hand, some workers insist on being registered as part-time workers with reduced hours to continue receiving state aid.

The truth is simple. Many of these individuals come for the benefits, not for protection. Smugglers mislead them with false promises of opportunity. Some don't even know where Cyprus is; they're told they're being taken to "Europe," and end up here. It's all driven by profit.

And I repeat, we are not talking about genuine refugees. Those who are truly persecuted, they are welcomed here. Cypriots had to flee once themselves and become refugees. But they fled their homes through legal channels and obtained proper work permits in the countries where they sought refuge. They didn't arrive demanding handouts. The Cypriot people understand what it means to be a refugee, with the main difference that in Cyprus, Cypriots are refugees in their own homeland.

The other group of immigrants involved in illegal networks are, in the majority, ones who used to be legal workers and left their employers. Some individuals take on work just to stay busy, but the main concern is with those who are not authorized to work or change employers unlawfully.

Those who receive political asylum are permitted to work. Even those who apply for asylum are entitled to seek employment while their applications are being processed. The state gives us the option as agricultural employers to hire asylum seekers. However, there's a process in place, and it has its complications. Many of these individuals, even if they enter legally, are quickly absorbed by illegal networks. They are picked up from the airport and taken elsewhere; they are encouraged to leave their registered employers by the illegal network leaders to work in other sectors. And although it is forbidden for them to work outside their permitted sector, they are often found doing so where the wages are supposedly higher. This creates significant problems for regulation and enforcement.

Routes, Entry Points, & Processing Sectors

Emmanuel Comte: When you were referring to people from Africa and Syria, are they irregular migrant workers, or are they irregular migrants who do not work?

Christos Papapetrou: The situation is different for each group. Migrants from Africa often enter the country illegally—it's part of a broader network of human trafficking. They don't arrive via standard routes like airports or ports. Instead, they land along Cyprus's coasts or enter through various points, particularly via Turkey.

In contrast, many Syrians come as refugees due to the war. That's understandable. But even before the recent conflict, many were already leaving their countries via Turkey, entering Cyprus through unofficial routes. So, while some are genuine refugees, others exploit these channels. The situation is quite complex. Some come via Turkey and through the green line and the occupied areas on this side of the island.

Source: Wikimedia Commons

For example, there's a village in Cyprus—Potamia—where Greek Cypriots and Turkish Cypriots live side by side. The issue of entry points and uncontrolled borders becomes particularly visible in such areas.

Some employers are granted permits to hire migrants in specific sectors—especially in agriculture and processing. Processing includes areas like food production, such as bakeries. You'll often see migrants—many of them visibly identifiable by their skin color—in those jobs. Again, I say this purely descriptively, not in a discriminatory way. These workers are often from countries like Bangladesh, Malaysia, Indonesia, or African nations such as Guinea.

Looking Ahead - The Future of Agriculture and Migration

Emmanuel Comte: That was a thorough overview of the Cypriot countryside, agriculture, and the various immigration-related challenges facing the island.

Let's conclude with one final question: How do you see the future of Cypriot agriculture and immigration? Are you optimistic or pessimistic?

Christos Papapetrou: I want to remain optimistic, but the issue of migration presents serious challenges as far as agriculture is concerned. My hope is that the root causes of migration—such as hunger and war—are eliminated, so people can live and thrive in their home countries.

All those who spend money and cause environmental destruction by throwing bombs, all of them should allocate resources to help developing countries—by providing food and support—so people can live in their country rather than be forced to give in to dishonest traffickers who promise them a better life in exchange for their life savings.

As for agriculture, its future in Cyprus will depend heavily on how well we adapt to climate change through innovation and how immigration is managed through government policy. We must follow state policy, of course, but also contribute to it by shaping it in any way we can, big or small.

My wish for migrants is that they survive and can live in dignity because unfortunately, most fall victim to exploitation and human trafficking.