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Bordeaux Wine Industry Faces Human Trafficking Charges

Prosecution seeks three years imprisonment for vineyard employers

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Three years of imprisonment have been requested by the Libourne prosecutor's office against three vineyard employers in Bordeaux in a trial addressing human trafficking in the wine industry. The main defendants are a French couple, aged 54 and 42, who ran a vineyard services company acting as intermediaries between seasonal workers and local châteaux. A 46-year-old Moroccan recruiter is also facing charges. According to testimonies, at least 25 former Moroccan workers reported being exploited under poor working and living conditions.

The prosecution has called for a three-year suspended prison sentence for the man, described as the "de facto head" of the company. His partner, listed as the formal manager, faces one year of actual prison time, while the recruiter could receive a conditional sentence with alternative measures.

During the trial, prosecutor Élodie Blier outlined a systematic scheme that exploited the hopes of migrant workers seeking better lives. Victims reportedly paid between €8,000 and €10,000 to secure employment in France between 2021 and 2024. The payments were supposed to guarantee a four-month minimum-wage contract, housing, and a regular residency permit, instead of the usual seasonal worker permits. However, no contracts were ever provided. Instead, basic administrative documents were issued to justify temporary stays, and no regularization efforts were made.

Victims' accounts describe workweeks of up to 62 hours without overtime pay and unexplained salary deductions. Retained wages amounted to thousands of euros, and workers were threatened with exposure to authorities if they complained. Additionally, the provided accommodations were inadequate, with up to 12 people crammed into small apartments in Libourne that lacked sufficient beds, storage, and basic amenities.

The primary defendant denied the accusations, claiming the workers submitted false documents and that the legal claims were intended solely to secure residency permits. However, he was unable to explain €200,000 in unreported income and the numerous life insurance policies taken out by the company. The couple has been unemployed and without declared income for years, surviving on social benefits.

The defense argued that the case is based on partial accounts without thorough investigation, suggesting the accusations were manipulated. Still, the claimants described the conditions they endured as a form of modern slavery, highlighting the severity of the allegations.

The final verdict is expected on December 17. This case is part of a broader pattern of similar exploitation practices recently exposed in the region's wine sector.