

Migrant farmworkers in Spain protest amid COVID-19 surge

By Alice Summers
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Migrant agricultural workers across Spain are protesting their appalling and unsanitary living and working conditions, which are leading to hundreds of coronavirus infections.

Around 100 migrant farmworkers took part in a protest in the northern Castilla La Mancha region near the city of Albacete, after 400–500 workers were forced into confinement in deplorable conditions in an abandoned factory due to a COVID-19 outbreak affecting at least 23 farmworkers. The workers, many from West Africa, had been housed collectively, without privacy or facilities to sleep and wash. The farm which employed them had refused to provide accommodation, and hotels in the area refused to provide the workers rooms.

In the peak of summer, temperatures in the factory reached 40 degrees Celsius (104 Fahrenheit) and electricity and running water supplies were limited or non-existent.

The workers left their forced confinement and blocked traffic on one of Albacete's main roads, demanding information about confinement measures and humane treatment. Police sent to enforce the confinement called reinforcements and attacked the demonstrators.

After the demonstration, authorities in Albacete announced plans to re-house the workers, transferring them by bus to Albacete's IFAB exhibition centre on July 22. The new facilities are wholly insufficient to safely accommodate the workers, however. Hundreds of people are housed in a single hall divided into two by an awning, facilitating a rapid spread of the virus.

The charity Médicos del Mundo (Doctors of the World) wrote that the exhibition centre “does not have the necessary means to guarantee the health of hundreds of people: there is no way to isolate, there are

insufficient bathroom facilities and no health care system in place to monitor positive cases and their contacts.”

It continued, “The response of local and regional authorities is far from guaranteeing health and safety as announced by the Ministry of Health.... The solution to an outbreak is not to shut people up in a space without minimum living conditions and without adequate health control and monitoring.”

A number of workers housed in the IFAB centre have gone on hunger strike in protest, according to Salyf Sy, president of the Albacete Association of African Immigrants.

In another protest, around 30 migrant workers set up camp outside the town hall of Lepe, in the southern region of Andalusia, after the shanty town accommodation in which hundreds of migrant workers lived was destroyed by fire. Three separate fires were registered in these shanty towns in a single week. At least one person was injured, and hundreds lost their possessions and were made homeless.

Authorities offered temporary hostel accommodation for around 70 people, though 200 had been made homeless. “It's always the same,” Antonio Abad of the Collective of African Workers told *Público*. “A solution is offered for a couple of days until things cool down and people start to disperse ... They don't provide real solutions.”

Protesters camped outside the town hall demanded suitable accommodation, carrying placards with slogans such as “They [the agricultural companies] called for workers. They got people.”

Olivier de Schutter, UN Special Rapporteur on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights, denounced conditions facing migrant workers across Spain and called on authorities to “immediately improve the

deplorable working conditions of seasonal migrant workers, before people die.”

Fires destroyed “the only accommodation available for the seasonal workers when they arrive in Spain,” de Schutter stated. “Local authorities have so far ignored the more than 170 people who have ended up on the streets.” These incidents “lay bare the urgent need to regulate the working conditions of migrant workers, and, therefore, to guarantee decent working and living conditions,” he added.

The Spanish Ministry of Defence has sent a military taskforce to oversee the installation of tents, beds and living equipment in a migrant camp in Lepe.

In early July, numerous migrant farmworkers, mostly women from Morocco, also protested in nearby Cartaya, after they were left stranded in Spain when their home country closed their borders to stem the spread of coronavirus. Over 7,000 migrant workers were left without funds and in limbo after their harvesting contracts ended.

Many workers live without electricity or running water, stated the local Andalusian association Mujeres 24h. “The farms that we have been able to access are not suitable for a long-term stay. Many are prefabricated modules, designed for non-extreme weather conditions, with large concentrations of people in very small spaces, which doesn’t meet the rules of hiring in the origin[al] agreement,” it stated.

While local officials claimed to have provided the women with food, the workers dispute this, saying that they have been entirely reliant on meagre charity from their employer.

Morocco’s Foreign Affairs Ministry reopened its borders to citizens and residents on July 14, but many of the women are still stranded: ferries to Morocco are scheduled only from the ports of Sète, in France, and Genoa, in Italy—both over 1,000 kilometres away. Travellers on ferries and flights back to Morocco must provide evidence of a negative COVID-19 test less than 48 hours old. However, most of the workers do not have the money to travel or for coronavirus testing, Mujeres 24h reports.

The appalling conditions facing migrant farm workers in Europe constitute an indictment of the capitalist system. Low-paid agricultural workers are treated as entirely dispensable, forced to work back-breaking days with few rights, in appalling

conditions bordering on modern-day slavery.

Médicos del Mundo report that many employers refuse to give workers contracts, and “mafia middlemen often take off with around 80 percent of their tiny salary... [Workers] labour from dawn to dusk for around 2 to 3 euros an hour.”

With unbounded cynicism, Deputy Prime Minister Pablo Iglesias of the pseudo-left Podemos party, which rules in coalition with the Socialist Party (PSOE), told the Spanish Congress that migrant workers’ conditions “bring shame” to Spain. However, he claimed he is “very proud” of having “contributed to an unprecedented social safety net.”

This crisis is of the PSOE-Podemos government’s making. It enacted austerity and was criminally inactive in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic, leading to death and destitution on an unprecedented scale. The pandemic has had a particularly brutal impact on farmworkers and other highly exploited and vulnerable layers of workers.

Last week, Health Minister Salvador Illa announced that of the 201 coronavirus outbreaks recorded that week, most were linked to temporary workers or gathering places like bars and clubs. María José Sierra, head of the Coordination Centre for Health Alerts and Emergencies, also reported that 34 COVID-19 hotspots in Spain are linked to horticultural companies employing temporary workers, with around 700 cases reported amongst these workers.

At the weekend, *El País* reported that a staggering 44,868 people in Spain have died of coronavirus, far exceeding the 28,434 deaths recorded by the Spanish Ministry of Health. *El País* tallied data for deaths “from COVID or from suspected COVID” registered by Spain’s 17 autonomous regions to arrive at this figure. This death toll makes Spain the second worst hit country in Europe, exceeded only by the United Kingdom.

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