

Spain: racist violence injures 50 in Almeria

Paul Bond
11 February 2000

Three days of racist attacks in the southern Spanish town of El Ejido in the province of Almeria have left up to 50 immigrant workers injured. Many of the town's mainly Moroccan agricultural workers are in hiding.

The violence started after a young Spanish woman, Encarnacion Lopez, was stabbed to death—apparently by a young Moroccan with a history of psychiatric illness. In the immediate aftermath of the death, immigrants' shops and bars were attacked and looted. Gangs of youths armed with iron bars and lumps of wood started attacking North African workers in an apparently organised action. Homes and shelters of Moroccan workers were torched, and the offices of the immigrant support group *Almeria Acoge* (Almeria Welcomes) were ransacked. Furniture and computers were destroyed, and racist slogans were painted.

Local police looked on as armed gangs took control of side streets and main roads. In contrast, the police were quick to break up a peaceful demonstration against violence on Sunday by immigrants in the Las Norias district of El Ejido. Shortly afterwards the area was swamped by racists wielding blocks of wood, who chased the immigrants through the agricultural buildings.

The attacks were preventing immigrants from obtaining vital necessities. In some cases Spaniards taking food and water to the Moroccans were themselves verbally abused. Neo-nazi groups are openly calling for further violence in the area. Web sites are urging fascists from across Spain to participate.

The funeral of Encarnacion Lopez took place on Sunday. It was attended by the right-wing People's Party (PP) government delegate for Almeria, Fernando Hermoso. He was separated from the other functionaries and attacked by Lopez's neighbours, who threw him to the ground punching and kicking him. It

was only after this attack that the police started to make arrests.

Trade unions and political parties have criticised the police's lack of action over the weekend. Minister of the Interior Jaime Mayor Oreja denied the accusation, saying "Our objective was to stop the clashes degenerating into full-pitched battle." The general secretary of the Professional Union of Uniformed Police, Francisco Javier Santaella, contradicted this, reporting that his officers had received "strict orders" not to intervene.

El Ejido is a largely agricultural area, which has developed intensive harvesting under plastic sheeting using cheap immigrant labour. Hundreds of small producers have enriched themselves from the two or three annual harvests of fruit and vegetables. The PP mayor of El Ejido, Juan Enciso, is representative of this layer, having made his money in fruit, horticulture and transport. He made his name evicting migrant workers and bulldozing their shanties, and portrays himself as the champion of an immigrant-free "Fortress Europe".

The government is introducing a new Law of Alien Status (Ley de Extranjeria). This provides for foreign workers to be given residence after two years. Farming employers have reacted angrily to having to register immigrant workers, who are now employed unofficially and on slave wages and conditions.

A study in March 1998, in collaboration with the trade unions, stated that there were 20,000 foreigners in the province of Almeria, 14,000 of them economic migrants from the Third World. Of these, 64 percent were Moroccan, and some 92 percent worked in agriculture. One-third of the total, 5,540, worked in El Ejido, giving the town an almost entirely Moroccan agricultural workforce.

The conditions of these immigrants are appalling. Only one-third live in accommodation similar to that enjoyed by Spaniards. Over half live in warehouses,

barns or derelict buildings. The study reported that 42 percent of accommodation had no dividing walls between rooms, confirming the widespread use of farm buildings not built for human habitation. Over half had no running water and a third lacked electricity. Many of the buildings are overcrowded.

Immigrant workers are paid roughly half that of Spanish workers. The population is mostly young and barely literate, a problem exacerbated by a discriminatory local education policy. North Africans are also refused service in bars and restaurants. It is little wonder that one immigrant support group called El Ejido “a time bomb waiting to explode”.

Encarnacion Lopez was the third Spaniard to have been killed in El Ejido in recent weeks. Jose Luis Ruiz and Tomas Bonilla Romera were killed on January 22, apparently after an argument about a dog. There was high tension around their funerals, and the following Sunday saw a large demonstration in support of their families. Feelings against immigrants in the province have been stoked up by market gardeners, angry at the EU's decision to eliminate controls over fruit and vegetable exports from Morocco. Demonstrators at an Almeria port last week broke open trucks and destroyed thousands of boxes of clementines from Morocco.



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