

Moroccan immigrant workers strike in southern Spain

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16 February 2000

Following the outburst of racist violence last week in the Spanish town of El Ejido, Almería, which lasted for three days and nights, [See Racist violence injures 50 in Almeria] Magreb agricultural workers organised a strike on Tuesday, February 8. The spontaneous action, which began when workers failed to turn up for work for fear of being attacked, soon developed into a full-blown industrial stoppage.

The strike ended on Monday, with most of the strikers' demands being accepted. Others are subject to negotiation. The workers described the return to work and the following uneasy peace as "provisional". They will meet on February 25 to review the situation and have threatened to strike again if their outstanding demands have not been met.

The strike marked the first time that immigrant workers in the province had organised themselves into picket lines and committees. They did this through their community organisation, the Association of Moroccan Immigrant Workers in Spain (ATIME). However the Spanish trade unions, the social democratic General Workers Union (UGT) and Communist Party-dominated Workers Commissions (CC OO), joined in later to form part of the negotiating committee.

The strikers have three demands that they say are immediate and non-negotiable:

- * provision of marquees or tents for the accommodation of those immigrant workers whose housing was damaged in the racist rampage and who are at present homeless

- * immediate compensation of both immigrant and Spanish workers for all the losses and damages caused in the disturbances, including religious buildings, vehicles, businesses, hot houses, etc.

- * immediate enforcement of the measures proposed by the government Labour and Social Affairs Ministry

and the regional Council regarding normalisation of residence and work permits.

Other demands include the immediate regularisation of immigrants without official residency and work permits in advance of March 21, the date when it is supposed to come into effect. They are also calling for the creation of offices to deal with immigrants' needs during the process of regularisation; public housing for Spanish and immigrant workers who are homeless; a thorough investigation of the events of last week by the Ministry of Justice; the development of programmes to help the integration of immigrant workers into Spanish society; and the creation of a Permanent Commission made up of those who have signed the agreement in order to guarantee its fulfilment.

ATIME President Kamal Rahmouni explained: "The strike did not start as a protest but out of pure fear. But then we soon realised that we had to do something. Last Tuesday, half of the Moroccan workers had stopped working but by Thursday there was nobody under the plastic sheets."

The full scope of the subhuman conditions suffered for years by the Magrebi workers and the complicity of both national and local authorities, as well as other social organisations in their super-exploitation is now emerging in its full horror.

Local agricultural owners have transformed this previously poor area, mostly made up of desert that served as the setting for "spaghetti Westerns", into an oasis that now produces profits of £1,250 million per year. This "economic miracle" was achieved initially through increased productivity and the intense utilisation of the most advanced technology. This multiplied the number of harvests per year, to the point where the indigenous labour force was insufficient. The arrival of immigrants from Africa provided the

additional labour required.

For the last 10 years, the agricultural employers have been able to pick and choose from an army of men who stand on the streets, squares and cross-roads every morning fighting to be selected for work that day. The wages paid are verbally agreed each day and the migrants' submission is secured by the absence of any legal contracts. As the only means of survival, many of those lucky enough to have documents claim social benefits to top up their meagre casual wages, but risk prosecution if discovered.

According to the Spanish daily *El Pais*, this “black economy” and the migrant workers' fears of being reported for having no papers enable the employers to maximise their profits. Employers can respond quickly to oscillating food prices (determined at the Amsterdam futures market)—either closing down production for a time, or increasing daily working hours.

Many politicians, bureaucrats and their families have benefited from this bonanza created on the backs of cheap immigrant labour. The Popular Party (PP) mayor of El Ejido is a case in point. He and his family own one of the large agribusiness in the area. An avowed racist, he recently stated that the best accommodation for the migrant workers who produce his wealth was in shacks or run-down barns close to the fields, so “that way they can save on transport”. The general secretary of the PP, Javier Arenas, has reiterated his party's unconditional support for the mayor.

Several demonstrations have been held across Spain in protest against the racist attacks on the Magrebi workers and the government's passivity. In Girona, Catalonia, about 200 people occupied the headquarters of both the UGT and CC OO and more than 1,000 demonstrated in Murcia, which borders with Almería. In Madrid, 650 marched to the headquarters of the Popular Party, demanding the resignation of the Minister of the Interior, Jaime Mayor. Further demonstrations also took place in Valencia and other Spanish towns.



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