

12 immigrant workers killed at Spanish railway crossing

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A human catastrophe has once again struck the immigrant community in Spain. At 7.40am January 3, a suburban train in Lorca, southeast Spain hit an overloaded van carrying 14 agricultural workers from Ecuador as it drove across a railway crossing. Twelve of the occupants—eight men and four women—were killed as the vehicle was dragged 200 meters along the line and destroyed. The fatalities included a mother and son and a father and son.

Identification was difficult as the workers were not carrying any documentation, but relatives later identified eight of the deceased, seven of whom came from the Ecuadorian province of Oro. The only survivors were the driver, 46-year-old Noelio Elías León, who was seriously injured, and 13-year-old Nancy Porrás, who escaped with minor injuries. She said later that as she “had to help bring money home,” she had been standing in for her mother who had broken a leg a few days prior to the accident. One of the bodies identified was that of a 16-year-old boy. Although the three carriages that made up the local train was derailed in the collision, its 30 passengers were only slightly hurt.

The unmanned railway crossing is one of hundreds that still exist in Spain. These have no barriers and only have posts holding a STOP signal.

The circumstances of the accident are not yet clear. It is reported that the van was travelling parallel to the railway line in the opposite direction to the train before turning to cross. Nancy Porrás said later in hospital that she had first alerted the driver to the approaching train. “I don't think that he had seen it,” she said.

The vehicle in which the workers were travelling was a ten-year-old, 8-seater, Fiat Talento Supercombi van bought second-hand by the driver to transport workers to the fields. According to the UGT trade union, the driver made several trips a day—verbally contracting workers who were employed at piecework rates. He was the only

Ecuadorian in the van with proper work and residency papers.

On the morning of the accident, Noelio Elías picked up the workers as usual to go to Puerto Lumbreras to begin a day's work gathering broccoli, something that thousands of Ecuadorians do everyday in the region of Murcia. The workers were allegedly on their way to work for Greensol S.L., a small firm that is part of an agribusiness conglomerate. The company had been declared provisionally insolvent, but continued trading under a different name and the workers had not even been paid their miserable wages. No manager or contractor appeared at the scene once the news of the accident was known and the owners of Greensol are now on the run.

Murcia lies next door to Almería, the site of several racist attacks on Magrebi immigrant workers last year. It is part of Spain's south eastern region that has been converted into an extremely profitable vegetable garden. This is due to the development of hot house methods that enables two, three and even four harvests a year, as well as utilising a foreign work force employed on a seasonal casual basis who are paid extremely low wages and enjoy no rights whatsoever.

Non-Governmental Organisations put the number of Ecuadorian workers in Lorca alone at 12,000, with some 20,000 in the province of Murcia as a whole. Sixty-five percent of the population in Ecuador are reported to be unemployed or under-employed. Nearly half a million people are believed to have left the country in the last couple of years, with many making their way to Spain. In Murcia, they appear to have replaced all but a few North African workers. Employers are reported as saying they prefer Ecuadorian workers because they speak the language, work harder and are more “docile”.

Early every morning, they gather in their hundreds in the Plaza del Ovalo in Lorca, waiting for the small agricultural managers and middle-men for the big

agribusiness to select them for a day's work. They are then huddled onto the vans that transport them to the fields, greenhouses and warehouses where the broccoli and lettuces are reaped and processed, working up to 11 hours for around \$3 an hour. Alternatively, they are contracted on a piecework basis paid 10 pesetas (less than 1 US cent) a kilo of broccoli. Often they are forced by the employers to work at night to avoid the labour inspectors and are continuously under threat of being reported to the authorities for working without permits if they protest.

Mercedes, the sister of one of the dead women, Gladys María Loayza Capa de León, emphasised that her sister would be alive today if she had had work and residency papers. “The van left Lorca before daylight, because none of them had papers, and at night all cats are grey. The driver did not choose the safest or shortest route to go to the plantation, because it is very dangerous to drive on the motorway where there is usually Civil Guard patrols. So they take secondary roads with low traffic”. She added that if they had taken the motorway—the shortest route—the van would not have had to use the railway crossing. “I am not kidding you, my sister Gladys was not only killed by the train.”

The accident has again brought to light the inhuman conditions which foreign workers are subjected to in Spain. Nancy Porras, the 13-year-old girl injured in the accident, had travelled to Spain 11 months ago with her 8-year-old sister to join their parents who had arrived months earlier. The family lived in a two-bedroom house along with four other adults to help pay the rent. They were forced to mortgage their home in Ecuador and have left a debts there of about \$30,000.

A similar situation affected Norman and Alberto, the father and son killed in the accident. Standing over their coffins, their friend Alfredo Javier said: “Norman had been in Spain for eight months and he leaves a wife and five children in Ecuador. His 21-year-old son Alberto arrived only on December 28 and it was just the second time he had worked. He died having mortgaged his mother's house in order to get here.”

The president of the National Coordinator for Ecuadorians in Spain, Guillermo Imbaquingo, said, “The minimum debt for each one of us is around \$2,500—\$1,600, to pay for the air plane ticket and the rest to be shown at Barajas [Madrid airport], because otherwise they don't believe that you are coming as a tourist”.

Despite their protests at the scene of the accident, both the social democratic and Stalinist trade unions—the

General Workers Union (UGT) and Workers Commissions (CC OO)—are fully aware of the situation confronting immigrant workers and have turned a blind eye for years. They have responded to the present tragedy by asking the government to establish whether the companies employing the dead Ecuadorian workers had “administrative responsibility for the labour irregularities and illegalities in their employment”. In an article published on the CC OO website, the union admits that in the last two years it has been involved in several cases against Greensol S.L of complaints of low wages and unfair dismissals. The union says the company does not provide its workers with “contracts and Social Security payments, wages are below those established in labour agreements, with lengthy working days, etc. This is the reality detected in this company, which fulfils all the conditions of illegality and all the factors of risk that guarantee workplace disasters...”

Given that these workers problems are largely caused by their difficulties in obtaining proper documentation for work and residence in Spain, the union's demands that the regional authorities “exercise an exhaustive control of the transport, living and working conditions endured by the immigrant workers in our region” are pure demagoguery. Moreover, after finding out that one of the passengers was 13 years old and another 16 years old, the CC OO trade union admitted that it knew around 12,000 minors worked in the agricultural business in Spain.

Ever since the right wing Popular Party came to office in 1996, the unions' main concern has been to preserve its privileged position in the tripartite agreements concluded with government and the employers. These have served to implement changes in the labour market facilitating lower wages and the destruction of the working conditions of Spanish and immigrant workers alike.



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