

Michigan migrant workers face deportation after exposing abusive conditions

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Two migrant workers are facing possible deportation to Mexico after exposing abusive conditions at the Pontiac, Michigan landscaping firm Torre and Bruglio. They are being defended by the Michigan Migrant Legal Assistance Project, which is aiding migrant workers in a lawsuit against the landscaper.

The men are now unemployed and homeless after coming forward. Under terms of their temporary work visas, known as H2Bs, they could be deported since they have no work or residence.

In July the workers approached Pontiac officials to denounce overcrowded conditions at eight company-owned houses in the city. According to press reports, the men were packed in, with as many as 26 to one house and only one bathroom. Every inch of living space was covered with mattresses, including the kitchen and basement. Many houses did not have functioning smoke detectors.

As a result of the workers' allegations of mistreatment, a local television station, UPN Channel 50, ran an expose of Torre and Bruglio, raising the ire of many local businessmen and politicians who have close ties to the firm, including Detroit Mayor Kwame Kilpatrick.

Surprise inspections by city housing, fire and police personnel resulted in all eight houses being condemned. Torre and Bruglio could face fines of up to \$500 per day if it does not begin work to correct code violations. The company has meanwhile relocated the workers to apartments in the Detroit suburb of Southfield. However, workers complain that they have no access to groceries or laundry facilities.

Landscaping firm Torre and Bruglio is notorious for its exploitation of immigrant workers, whom it busses in from Mexico on temporary work visas. The company employs about 250 Mexican immigrants in the Detroit

metropolitan area. The firm has major contracts with the city of Detroit and built the playing field at Comerica Park, the new stadium of the Detroit Tigers professional baseball team.

"We're probably guilty of overcrowding," said Tony Porter, the firm's CEO. He claimed company officials regularly inspected the houses. "I don't think they are that bad," he said.

Porter said that the "low cost" housing provided by the company holds down the workers' expenses so they can send more money to families living in Mexico. However, despite Porter's claim to be motivated by altruism, the firm netted a tidy profit from its slum landlord operation. Torre and Bruglio deducted \$30 a week to cover housing from the workers' meager pay of about \$7.54 an hour. With as many as 26 crowded into a residence, that totals more than \$3,000 a month in rent.

According to the Michigan Migrant Legal Assistance Project, which had been investigating conditions at Torre and Bruglio, management took money from workers' pay for such things as mattresses, furniture, tools and uniforms. Some were left with as little as \$2 per hour after deductions.

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to a Detroit community activist involved in the defense of migrant workers, who commented, "They wanted to deport one worker because he got injured on the job. He was a spokesman for the group. The H2B is a visa that employers can petition the government for if they claim they can't get enough American workers. The workers have absolutely no rights; it is government-sanctioned slavery.

"These workers were brought by busloads from Puebla. The Puebla people are very savvy about their rights. They are very militant.

“Torre was able to bring powerful people to bat for him. He had a contingent go to Channel 50 to intimidate the management. He’s got the Macomb County prosecutor and the Wayne County prosecutor on his payroll. He also has the support of Mike Illitch, the owner of the Detroit Red Wings hockey team and the Detroit Tigers. They tried to bully the manager of Channel 50 into backing off.

“His biggest contracts are public money. Torre gave Kwame Kilpatrick \$50,000 for his inaugural party as mayor of Detroit. He also gave him the maximum allowable campaign contribution. Torre has got the contract for cleaning up after downtown festivals. They gave the contract to Torre without a bid. He essentially bought the contract. Illitch gave Torre the Comerica contract, getting rid of the Service Employees International Union members.

“So Kilpatrick will obviously be silent on the issue. And, it turns out, seven out of nine Detroit city council members also received substantial campaign money from Torre.”



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