

Spain: Immigrant worker claims boss threw his severed arm in bin

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At the end of May, 33-year-old Bolivian Franns Rilles Melgar Vargas lost his left arm while working in Horno Rovira Safor S. L., an industrial bakery in Valencia, Spain. From his hospital bed, Melgar Vargas accused his boss of abandoning him 200 metres from the hospital and throwing his arm into a rubbish bin. The bakery is run by brothers Juan and Javier Rovira.

Melgar Vargas's sister, Silvia, explained that her brother was trying "to do his job like every day". He was kneading 40 kilograms of dough when he lost a bag into the machine. When he attempted to recover it his arm became stuck in the machine. She added that "he had lost his arm, but the machine could have swallowed him if he hadn't been able to stop it himself".

According to Melgar Vargas's sister, one of his employers put the injured worker into a van to take him to the hospital. But 200 metres away from the hospital, he bundled Melgar Vargas out into the street, where he was left in a desperate state bleeding heavily. Melgar Vargas was threatened, "If they ask, tell them you had an accident, but don't say anything about the company".

If it had not been for a passer-by who helped Melgar Vargas reach the hospital, he would have certainly died. Traumatized and fearing for his and his co-workers legal status due to the Socialist Party (PSOE) governments' campaign to expel illegal immigrants, he initially tried to make up a story but he soon explained what had happened.

It was reported that his employers, together with others, cleaned up the blood and all evidence of the accident. To complete the cover-up, the severed limb was thrown into a rubbish bin. Juan Rovira, who is responsible for the family bakery, admitted to *El País*

that the severed arm had been disposed of. "My son told me that it was in such a bad state that they put it in bags and threw it in the bin".

Surgeons tried to reattach Melgar Vargas's arm, but gave up due to the time lapse between the incident and the poor condition in which his severed limb was found in a bin mixed with rotting dough.

The sister, Silvia, stated that the reasons behind these events were that "the employer had no permits or licenses and did not draw up any contracts". Workers faced conditions of "pure and hard exploitation". According to reports, Melgar Vargas was employed irregularly, without cover of any kind and worked 12 hours a day for a salary of less than 700 euros a month.

The Civil Guard arrested the bakery owners but only charged them with employing "illegal" labour.

The employers accepted no responsibility and sought to lay the blame on Melgar Vargas. They admit he had no contract, but denied allegations concerning his wage and working hours. They also denied dropping him in the street and, in an attempt to blacken his character, claimed that "he was drunk" when the accident occurred.

A subsequent labour inspection revealed that Melgar Vargas and the other five employees worked in terrible conditions. It seems that the automatic safety system on the dough mixing machine had been turned off, apparently in order to increase its speed and produce more bread. Other protective devices had also been removed. Inspectors found shoddy electrical installations, as well as appalling hygiene conditions. According to reports none of the workers had basic social security protection.

Labour inspectors said "the full weight of the law" would be brought down on the small firm. Yet Spain is the country with the most non-fatal industrial accidents

in the European Union and the third most fatal accidents. Most of the victims are those working in temporary and casual jobs, for which the trade unions bear a high responsibility. However, the statistics refer to people who work legally. The ministry of employment has no figures for workplace accidents for “illegal” immigrants.

While recovering in hospital, Melgar Vargas explained to reporters that he arrived in Spain toward the end of 2006 to make a better life, but found himself in “near-slavery” conditions. On the actions of his boss, he said, “I never thought he could do something like this, that he would be capable of it”.

In order to assuage public horror at the incident the PSOE government has now given Melgar Vargas’s legal rights of residence for “exceptional reasons”, because he is disabled and will never work again. His mother travelled from Bolivia to take care of him. Melgar Vargas and his sister are now in a fight to allow his family residence status.



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