

Farmworkers fighting deadly working conditions in Washington state

Our reporter
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Some 70 agricultural workers have made history by becoming the first workers under the H-2A visa program to walk out on strike. The contract workers, also known as *contratados*, refused to come to work at Sarbanand Farms in Sumas, Washington on August 4. The work stoppage was sparked by the death of 28-year-old and father of three, Honesto Silva Ibarra. On August 2, Ibarra complained about intense headaches to his supervisors who then told him that if he stopped working, he would be fired for “abandoning work”.

After collapsing in the field, Ibarra was taken to a Bellingham hospital where he collapsed again. Ibarra was then transported to Harborview Hospital in Seattle where he died on August 6.

Sarbanand is claiming that Ibarra died from meningitis, which they said he had before coming to work there. Those close to the farmworker doubt that meningitis was the cause of Honesto’s death, but also assert that the grower failed to provide adequate medical attention.

In their official statement, CSI Visa Processing, the recruiter for Sarbanand, claimed on their web site, “The companero who is hospitalized, the cause was meningitis, an illness he suffered from before, and is not related to his work.” There has been no explanation of the exact cause of Ibarra’s death by Harborview Medical Center or the King County medical examiner.

Some 600 workers at Sarbanand have been harvesting blueberries under intense heat and breath-stifling conditions caused by wildfires that have been raging just across the US-Canada border in British Columbia. The agricultural laborers have been forced to work 14-hour days for the H-2A required minimum of \$13.38 per hour, but \$20 is subtracted every day for water that is rationed out in small amounts and is dirty. A further \$12 is subtracted per day for food that is

minimal and poorly cooked at that. In addition, Sarbanand has threatened workers with deportation back to Mexico for failing to meet performance standards.

Upon the workers were fired for what Sarbanand described as “insubordination”, the *contratados* joined a farmworkers union new to Washington state known as Familias Unidas por la Justicia. FUJ describes itself as an independent labor union and has secured a bargaining agreement with one grower in the area.

Sarbanand gave the strikers just one hour to remove their belongings and themselves from company property and left them penniless, without valid visas, and no way to work for another employer. In refusing to pay the fired workers immediately, Sarbanand claimed that they would send a check for their last four days of work to their address in Mexico.

Such action is in violation of H-2A regulations. CSI Visa Processing, the largest such recruiter in Mexico, did take some of the workers to a nearby bus station, but refused to buy their tickets home, another violation of H-2A regulations.

When 100 workers marched on August 6 to Sarbanand to talk to management about their conditions, Whatcom County Sheriff’s officers along with Sumas city police dispersed them after telling them not to block the roadway, telling the workers they needed a permit to march.

Support for the strikers has been abundant. Local residents Joaquin and Lucy Suarez have invited the strikers to stay in their backyard in tents. Donations of food, freezers, refrigerators, and generators to power them have been forthcoming from literally hundreds of local citizens, farmers, restaurant businesses and churches. Advocacy volunteers stated that five of the workers were sent to hospitals for dehydration and that

others were suffering from ear and throat ailments. Dehydration has been so bad as to induce paralysis in the faces of some of the workers.

The workers at this point have managed to avoid deportation. However, Sarbanand has put them in a difficult position. If they return to work, they face the same conditions that caused them to walk out in the first place. If they return to Mexico—Sarbanand is legally obligated to pay for their airfare—they face blacklisting by recruiting firms or being forced to work in Mexico for one-eighth of what they were currently being paid, starvation wages.

Sarbanand workers have charged management with deliberately refusing to renew their visas in order to turn them into virtual indentured servants where they can threaten them with deportation at any time and make them unable to reapply for visas for 10 years, the penalty for “overextending their visas.”

Sarbanand is owned by Munger Farms, which is headquartered in Delano, California, the site of bitter struggles of the United Farmworkers Union. Munger Farms, in turn, is part of a larger group of growers known as Naturipe. The banner for the Munger Farms web site home page ironically reads, “Spreading Goodness Around the World.”

As a cosmetic gesture, the US Department of Labor’s Wage and Hour Division has initiated an investigation into Sarbanand Farms while the Washington State Department of Labor and Industries has also launched an investigation of health and safety dangers, pay, rest, meals and working hours.



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