

# Romanian harvest worker in Germany dies of COVID-19

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On the night of April 11, Romanian harvest worker Nicolae Bahan died. He had been working as an asparagus picker in Bad Krozingen since March 20 and had recently complained of severe coughs and chills. Only after his death was he tested positive for COVID-19.

Another sick harvest worker was initially identified among Bahan's colleagues. In the meantime, at least four other workers from the immediate vicinity of the deceased have fallen ill with COVID-19. The health department in Breisgau-Hochschwarzwald claims that all carriers of the coronavirus and those they had been in contact with have been quarantined. However, the World Health Organization order to "test and isolate" was obviously followed far too late and only in a very rudimentary manner.

After Bahan's death, it was not considered necessary to interrupt the asparagus harvest.

The health authority issued assurances that the hygienic conditions at the asparagus farm had met the requirements. But Bahan became infected in Germany, most likely from colleagues from Romania who lived and worked closely with him over the last weeks.

The deceased was one of thousands of harvest workers currently employed in Germany. As seasonal workers, they are poorly paid for their work in the asparagus harvest, as well as in the fruit, vegetable and wine harvests, where wages are so low that few German workers accept the jobs. According to the Ministry of Agriculture in Baden-Wuerttemberg, about 4,900 seasonal workers are needed in this state alone in April.

Shortly before Easter, the German government had decided to fly in 80,000 seasonal workers from Eastern Europe in April and May, despite the rampant spread of the coronavirus. Following this decision, hundreds of

workers crowded the small airport of Cluji in northern Romania on Easter Saturday to be flown to Germany for harvest work.

The company in Bad Krozingen, where Bahan was working, had engaged its harvest workers earlier this year. Almost all of them come from Suceava, the district in Romania most affected by the coronavirus. This, however, did not concern anyone when hiring cheap harvest workers. Nor did it bother anyone that where they were headed in southern Germany had a relatively high rate of infections and deaths, with a largely unknown number of cases initially. In Freiburg, almost a thousand people have tested positive and 65 have already died of COVID-19. In the district of Breisach-Hochschwarzwald there are well over a thousand infected and 47 dead.

"Those who work in these times need special protection," said Federal Minister for Social Affairs Hubertus Heil (Social Democratic Party, SPD), when he outlined the government's coronavirus protection rules for seasonal workers. His words are the height of cynicism. A documentary on ARD television April 23 showed how the rules are implemented in practice. The programme, "The harvest is safe—only the harvest workers are not," documents the appalling working and living conditions for workers.

In order to comply with the quarantine, the government demands that harvest workers do not leave their farms and fields for 14 days after their arrival in Germany. This means that they live in cramped conditions in stuffy multi-bed rooms, with an inevitably high risk of infection. For field work, they are driven in large groups of several dozen on flatbed trucks, in crowded trailers or buses. The "quarantine" consists of a camp-like sealing-off. The area in Bad Krozingen is sealed off with fences, tarpaulins and meter-high

hedges, and the entrances are guarded.

This type of sealing off—Federal Minister of Agriculture Julia Klöckner (Christian Democratic Union, CDU) calls it “de facto quarantine with the possibility of working”—protects the local population, at most, but not the workers themselves. It is true that not all farms are affected by the same catastrophic conditions. But sometimes they strongly recall the Nazi era, when “Eastern workers” were forced to work in Germany, strictly isolated from the population, treated much worse than the latter and often put in danger of death.

Today it is sheer poverty that forces people into such conditions. In order not to die of hunger with their families, Eastern European workers take the risk. In this case, too, the coronavirus pandemic has only brought to light the terrible conditions that already prevailed for the low-income workers in the fields.

After the fall of the Stalinist regimes 30 years ago, unemployment, exploitation, poverty and blatant social inequality in Eastern Europe took root under capitalism. Since then, these conditions have forced more and more workers to seek their wages and livelihoods in the West. Many harvest workers have been coming from Romania for more than 10 years, since the country joined the European Union in 2007.

Bahan’s hometown Solca is located in the run-down northeast of Romania. The village has experienced an extraordinary decline over the past 30 years. During this time, several large businesses and factories and a sanatorium and spa have been closed. Not even half of the once 5,000 inhabitants remain, and many families in Solca, like Nicolae Bahan’s, can only survive if their parents work as harvest workers in Germany year after year.

In German farms, they must carry out hard labour for starvation wages. “We did a lot of work and received little money,” was the comment of a couple in an article in news weekly *Der Spiegel*. For seven years, from 2007 to 2013, the couple always came to Bad Krozingen to harvest asparagus and strawberries. In 2013, the last time they worked on this farm, they “received around four euros per hour for harvesting the asparagus,” the report says.

They also had to live in run-down accommodation. “We were five to seven people per room, the lockers in our rooms were rusty, the beds were made of iron, like

in prison. In the shared bathroom, the showers were only separated by plastic curtains and in the kitchen, there was not even a sink,” the report says. Workers’ identity cards were taken from them on arrival. They had signed employment contracts “but never received a copy.” Asked about pay slips, the workers just laugh.

On paper, the wages are higher. The Bad Krozinger company speaks of a €9.35 minimum wage to be paid. However, job placement fees and travel expenses are deducted from the wages, as well as board and lodging, for which the workers have to pay €12 a day (€8 for accommodation and €4 for daily lunch).

The federal government is trying to play down the consequences of their criminal behaviour. On the ZDF talk show “Lanz,” Julia Klöckner said a few days after the death of Bahan, “What we have learned is that he did not die of coronavirus, but following a coronavirus infection. He died of a heart attack.” The district office in Breisgau-Hochschwarzwald also tried to trivialize Bahan’s death, saying, “It is unclear whether the person died of COVID-19 or only with COVID-19 symptoms.”

Such statements are disgraceful pedantry. As has long been known, COVID-19 also acutely increases the risk of dying of a heart attack. The callous calculation of whether someone has died “of the coronavirus” or just “with a coronavirus infection” comes from the arsenal of the right-wing propaganda campaign, which currently equates COVID-19 with a “strong flu.”

The attempts by German politicians to justify this are an open insult to the family of the deceased and to all workers. They make clear that the government has assumed from the outset that hundreds of thousands of workers will pay for the coronavirus pandemic with their lives.



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