

Romanian harvest workers in Germany strike for promised wages

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About 180 harvest workers at an asparagus farm near Bonn went on strike last Friday to demand the wages promised to them. Their protests and a demonstration on May 18 shed further light on the unspeakable working conditions facing eastern European seasonal workers.

The workers, who arrived from Romania at the beginning of April, had been promised they could earn €1,500 to €2,000 per month for three months while harvesting asparagus. However, the asparagus farm, belonging to Claus and Sabine Ritter in Bornheim near Bonn, was already insolvent in March. The insolvency administrator, who has been running the business ever since, hired them nonetheless.

The administrator, attorney Andreas Schulte-Beckhausen, presented a report on the insolvency to the creditors' meeting quoted from by the *General-Anzeiger*. According to this, the company had generated millions in income two years ago but has been in debt ever since. This was because of high irrigation costs in the last two years due to heat waves; in addition, the Ritter Spargel company had invested €1 million in the construction of a huge asparagus restaurant. The report says, "The shareholders [i.e., Claus and Sabine Ritter] may have taken the profits and invested them outside the agricultural sector."

To maximise the bankruptcy assets, the insolvency administrator apparently decided to follow the profit model to the extreme, based on the exploitation of cheap seasonal labour. With the active support of Agriculture Minister Julia Klöckner (Christian Democratic Union, CDU), he succeeded in having the low-wage workers from Romania flown in despite the coronavirus pandemic. At the same time, savings were made in their working conditions and accommodation wherever possible.

This meant the workers encountered conditions that defy description. Although they faced deductions of more than €400 a month for food and accommodation (€13.50

per day), they were accommodated in a remote container village on a completely filthy site, far from any civilisation, in the vicinity of a sewage plant and a railway line. The sparse food supplied by a caterer was said to have been bad, often cold and sometimes mouldy.

Although the lockdown had dominated everyday life in Germany for two weeks, they were forced to live in circumstances that meant they could neither adhere to the social distancing rules nor observe a minimum of hygiene. The workers slept four to a room and had to use dilapidated, dirty communal toilets and washrooms, without a supply of soap and shower gel, not to mention disinfectant. As for masks, they were given them only once, by a bus driver who took them to the fields.

Two weeks ago, the management suddenly decided to stop harvesting asparagus because restaurants had closed due to the coronavirus pandemic. On May 14, the workers were told, "In a week, this will be over, then you will all have to leave." The harvesters were paid miserable sums of money for five to six weeks of hard work. At the same time, they were told that they would have to vacate their accommodation in a week.

In a promotional video from March, still circulating on the Internet, insolvency administrator Schulte-Beckhausen advertises hourly wages of €10 to attract harvest workers. In reality, the workers received only a few hundred euros in total. One Romanian worker told a newspaper he received just €500 for 500 hours' work.

The workers had not received their full wages, nor had they been given proper, timely notice or any prospects of being able to return to Romania under conditions of the coronavirus pandemic. In this situation, the asparagus cutters decided not to work another hour until they received their full pay.

On Friday, May 15, some 180 workers refused to board the buses that would take them back to the field to work. Instead, they all stayed together and made their wage

demands clear on hand-painted cardboard signs. The plant manager alerted the police, who arrived with 20 officers.

As a result, the conflict, which had previously developed out of sight, was reported in the press and attracted attention. A group of the FAU Bonn, which calls itself an anarcho-syndicalist union, and the initiative “Aktion gegen Arbeitsunrecht e.V.” (“Action against Labour Injustice”) spread news of the strike on the Internet. The mainstream unions had ignored the fate of the harvest workers.

Over the weekend, the workers received solidarity visits from Bonn and Cologne, and a protest demonstration was announced for Monday, in which at least another 150 supporters, including from the Ruhr area, participated.

The protest, with “Solidarity” signs and posters saying “Germany, you lousy piece of asparagus,” marched through Bonn in front of the office of the insolvency administrator Schulte-Beckhausen. The march then went to the Romanian consulate, where some of the demonstrators were able to speak with the Romanian minister for labour and social affairs, Victoria Violeta Alexandru. The minister promised to visit the workers the next day.

She had just been on a state visit to Germany to negotiate a new model of the infamous work contracts for Romanian seasonal workers with federal Labour Minister Hubertus Heil (Social Democratic Party, SPD). These lucrative but murderous contracts have met with massive criticism, especially in connection with the spread of coronavirus at German slaughterhouses.

When the strike attracted public attention and numerous visitors from trade union circles, the media and the local Left Party, a cleaning crew suddenly appeared to clean the washrooms in the accommodation. Debris and rubbish were removed from the premises by an excavator. Suddenly there were also sufficient quantities of face masks.

Most importantly, their wages were paid out. However, this was done in a manner reminiscent of the Wild West, with the workers sent in small groups to distant parking lots and fields to receive their pay envelopes.

Stefan Hübner, a labour lawyer, insisted on being present for the payments. He stated that the workers were presented with receipts, which, if signed, would have meant that they would have waived all further claims, and finally managed to get the workers to refuse to accept these illegal waivers.

As Hübner explained at an impromptu press conference on Friday, the vast majority of workers have received

only a fraction of the wages to which they are entitled. The insolvency administrator, on the other hand, told the media that everything had been paid off.

While the protests continued and the media attention was still focused on the farm, the workers were promised, and in some cases given, paid return travel home or placement in other harvesting operations, depending on their wishes. Thus, at the end of last week, only about three dozen workers remained in the container village.

The spontaneous strike by the asparagus cutters made two things clear. Firstly, it highlights the inhuman way in which the German bourgeoisie and government treat seasonal workers from other countries. The coronavirus pandemic has revealed hundreds of such cases over the past few weeks. In slaughterhouses, at parcel depots, on construction sites, in truck factories and elsewhere, the health and lives of migrant labourers are being put at risk. Hundreds have already been infected with COVID-19. On April 10, Romanian harvest worker Nicolae Bahan died of COVID-19 in Bad Krozingen. Big business and the political establishment are walking over dead bodies.

Secondly, the industrial action at the asparagus farm is part of a worldwide development that is constantly bringing new layers of workers into struggle. During the pandemic, spontaneous strikes and protests for the right of workers to protect themselves against the virus have already taken place in Italy, France, the United States, Brazil and many other countries.

To change the situation, the working class needs a perspective and a socialist party. To this end, the Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei (Socialist Equality Party, SGP) has published the statement: “Prevent the spread of COVID-19 and save lives! Build action committees in all factories!”

It says: “The pandemic exposes the urgent necessity for a complete restructuring of the processes of production, distribution and economic activity in general. The lives of working people and their families must not be sacrificed in the interests of corporate profits and the private wealth of billionaire oligarchs.”



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