

8 Mexican farmworkers killed in Florida bus crash

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16 May 2024

On Tuesday a bus carrying farmworkers crashed in Ocala, Florida, some 80 miles north of Orlando, resulting in the tragic deaths of eight young men, most of whom were in their twenties. The bus overturned after it was sideswiped by an intoxicated driver in a pickup truck and flipped after descending down an embankment and hitting a tree.

The former school bus was carrying about 53 migrant farmworkers to a job at a watermelon field and was hit by a 2001 Ford Ranger pickup truck driving in the opposite direction on a compact two-lane roadway at around 6:30 a.m. In addition to the fatalities, some 40 people were injured, including 13 in critical condition.

The driver of the pickup, Bryan Maclean Howard, faces eight counts of DUI manslaughter for striking the bus and pushing it off the road. Howard's arrest report identifies six of those killed as Jose Heriberto Fraga Acosta, 27; Isaias Miranda Pascal, 21; Manuel Perez Rios, 46; Cristian Salazar Villeda, 24; Alfredo Tovar Sanchez, 20; and Evarado Ventura Hernandez, 30.

All of the deceased were from Mexico and working in the US on an H-2A farmworker visa. The bus was transporting farmworkers who were harvesting sunflowers, watermelon and sweet corn at various farms in the area. CBS reported that "the farmworkers were making close to \$15 an hour."

Farmworker Association of Florida member Jeanne Oconomos confirmed that some farmworkers were still in the hospital, in addition to suffering physical injuries which may persist. "They definitely are going to have mental traumatic issues. They don't have support systems, family. Most of them are single men."

Forty-four of the bus passengers were Mexican citizens and had been hired by a Mexican American farmer to harvest watermelons under temporary or seasonal visas. The Mexican government confirmed

that six remain in serious condition, and another three are in critical condition.

Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO) said in a statement Wednesday morning, "There was an accident yesterday in Orlando, Florida, involving Mexican agricultural workers on a bus, and eight of our countrymen, who went to work hired by a Mexican American businessman with temporary work visas, lost their lives."

Despite his crocodile tears over "our countrymen," AMLO has been at the forefront of brutal attacks on migrants. Just three weeks ago he called the National Guard to attack a caravan of 3,000 migrants that included some 500 children in the state of Oaxaca. Members of the migrant caravan describe themselves as "international workers" and come from at least 20 countries, including Mexico, fleeing poverty and violence and seeking asylum in the US.

The caravan, known as "Migrant Via Crucis," marches behind a wooden cross and a large sign with the words "Killers of Poor Migrants" to protest the repressive actions and violence used to block their path.

AMLO has been at the forefront of the attacks on migrants and is working closely with the Biden administration to carry out its promises to halt migration and expand state repression, particularly at Mexico's southern border.

The H-2A farmworker visas exemplifies the predatory relationship that both the US and Mexican ruling class exert over workers. Exploited for their poverty and desperation, treated like dogs, and have their labor sold on an international market, these workers are forced to live in squalor and work in dangerous and life-threatening conditions.

It is now the increasing task of the Mexican

government to better control the spigot of labor from workers seeking refuge in the US. Working with Mexico, the US established the CBP One mobile app, which requires asylum seekers to make appointments and wait for months and years to potentially apply for asylum. As we have explained, this is nothing but a version of the Trump era “Remain in Mexico” policy.

The “Remain in Mexico” policy offers benefits to both ruling classes and is viewed by Mexico’s elite as important to fill the country’s labor shortage with immigrants who have traveled north from Southern America and the Northern Triangle in Central America.

Migrant farmworkers whose labor is critical to the functioning of US agriculture, which feeds the entire population, continue to face further abuses upon reaching the US. Though immigrants are historically utilized as the scapegoat, the anti-immigrant atmosphere whipped up by both parties and particularly the Republican governors in Florida and Texas, has taken on high-pitched dimensions in the run-up to the November elections. Former President Donald Trump has boasted that he will embark on the “largest deportation operation in history.”

In recent months Florida Governor Ron DeSantis announced that he would authorize the deployment of up to 1,000 Florida National Guard soldiers to help “Texas fortify the border, add barriers, and wire” against what the far right continually refers to as an “invasion.” The fascist DeSantis has long advocated for a “shoot on sight” policy toward immigrants.

In March DeSantis made clear he was prepared to deploy hundreds of police and soldiers to south Florida in anticipation of an influx of Haitian refugees fleeing the recent violence in that country, noting, “Illegal immigrants feel empowered to enter the sovereign territory of the United States because of the federal government’s refusal to diligently enforce our immigration laws and protect the integrity of the border. When a state faces the possibility of invasion, it has the right and duty to defend its territory and people.”

Contrary to the anti-immigrant agitation of DeSantis and the Republican Party, the site of the crash has been overflowing with flowers from people and families visiting to pay their respects to the farmworkers they never met.

This only underscores the need for the unity of the working class across North and South America and the world over who face hyper-exploitation and threats of violence from the bourgeoisie of every nation. Only an international and socialist perspective aimed at uniting the global masses against capitalism, war and oppression can halt the attacks on migrants and workers.



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