

Romanian farmworker Gheorghe Vranciu dies amid record heat wave in Spain

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On August 11, Romanian farmworker Gheorghe Vranciu, 61, collapsed and died while harvesting fruit in an orchard in Alcarràs, Catalonia. Vranciu died amid one of Spain's fiercest heat waves in years, with temperatures climbing above 40°C (104°F) and peaking at 43.8°C (111°F). His death, officially attributed to "acute cardiorespiratory failure", exposes the brutal working conditions facing agricultural labourers, many of them migrants, as heat waves surge due to climate change.

The circumstances surrounding his death are damning. Several companies in the area had already suspended activity that day, following occupational risk prevention services' calls on employers to halt work due to the extreme heat. Spanish labour regulations require companies to suspend or adapt outdoor work whenever Meteocat, the Catalan Meteorological Service, or Aemet, Spain's national weather agency, issue an orange or red alert, unless employers can reorganise operations and eliminate heat risks.

Yet Vranciu was kept in the fields. Around midday, he reported feeling ill and asked his supervisor to be taken home. Instead, he was told to rest under a tree. For nearly three hours, he lay suffering in the blazing heat. Emergency services were not contacted until 16:00. By the time paramedics arrived, he was beyond help. Gheorghe Vranciu died under a tree, alone. His death is not an accident, but a social crime.

The rest of the crew was forced to continue until 5:30 p.m., a schedule the company never allows to be shortened. "If you say something, they'll fire you," a worker told *El Periódico*. Vranciu's colleagues described the routine brutality to the same newspaper: from Monday to Friday, they worked from seven in the morning until one in the afternoon, took a half-hour break, then resumed until half past five in the

evening—ten hours a day, plus six hours on Saturday. In total, 56 hours a week (the legal limit in Spain is 40), carried out in searing heat.

His son, Ovidiu Vranciu, told *eldiario.es*: "They were told they had to stay until 5 p.m., and that anyone who didn't want to shouldn't come back tomorrow."

Vranciu was employed through a temporary work agency (ETT) at a farm owned by Agroalimentaria El Pla S.L., managed by Ignasi Argilés Figuerola, one of Catalonia's wealthiest businessmen, with a fortune of €150 million and senior leadership in the powerful Nufri Group. The company cynically denied responsibility.

Last Thursday, 100 people, including seasonal workers, gathered in Lleida to denounce the death. Under the slogan "Enough abuse in the fields," protesters called the death a murder and denounced a system that "puts profits before people's lives." Vranciu's relatives demanded justice: "You cannot just let a man die alone under a tree."

The political establishment and the union bureaucracies rushed to shield agribusiness. Alcarràs mayor Jordi Castany, of the Catalan Republican Left (ERC), cynically praised the "efforts of local agricultural companies," claiming they provided early shifts and water.

The Unió de Pagesos (Agricultural Union), which claims to represent seasonal workers but also defends the interests of farmers, held a press conference to denounce the "stigmatisation of farmers" after Vranciu's death. They insisted "the vast majority of farmers comply with regulations."

The social-democratic General Union of Workers (UGT), linked to the Socialist Party (PSOE), currently in power, demanded only that "the administration intensify labour inspections when high temperatures

pose a serious risk to workers' health" and that "if necessary, outdoor activities must be halted." Workers' Commissions (CCOO), aligned with the pseudo-left Sumar and Podemos parties, declared: "Someone will have to explain how it can be justified that a person is working above 40 degrees," adding that safety improvements were "still far from reaching all workers."

Union officials could have called on local union delegates to invoke Article 21.3 of the Occupational Risk Prevention Law to halt work without penalty during heat waves. This law states that when "the employer does not adopt or allow the adoption of the necessary measures to guarantee the safety and health of workers, their legal representatives may, by majority, decide to suspend the activity of workers affected by this risk." Yet, just as during the devastating floods in Valencia last year that claimed 224 lives, including workers forced to work amid the floods, the unions refused to take any action.

UGT and CCOO are the chief enforcers of "social peace" with the employers and the capitalist state. For decades they have collaborated with agribusiness to impose longer hours, precarious contracts and wage freezes, while turning a blind eye to the exploitation of undocumented migrants denied legal wages and basic conditions. Not once have they called a strike to defend workers from extreme heat.

They work to channel outrage into harmless appeals to the employers, the Catalan government, the Socialist Party (PSOE)-Sumar government that enforce these brutal conditions on workers. They draw hundreds of millions of euros in salaries and privileges from their integration into the capitalist state. Their calls for more "inspections" are a smokescreen: they well know that enforcement is sporadic and penalties, if ever imposed, negligible.

The PSOE-Sumar government, like its Podemos-PSOE predecessor, has overseen years of cuts to labour inspectorate and imposed labour reforms that intensified exploitation, particularly in the agriculture sector that generates tens of billions of euros in operating profit annually. At the same time, it has showered corporations with billions in subsidies and EU recovery funds, whilst diverting billions more in record military expenses to prepare for imperialist war abroad.

Vranciu's death is part of a growing toll of preventable, work-related heat fatalities. It is the second confirmed case this summer in Catalonia, after the heat-related death in June of a Barcelona street cleaner. Official labour statistics systematically undercount such deaths, treating them as cardiac events or accidents. In 2024, Spain's Ministry of Labour registered zero heat-related deaths. Yet the Ministry of Health's mortality monitoring system estimated 2,012 deaths that summer due to high temperatures; another system estimated over 4,000 in June alone.

This underreporting is a European phenomenon. In 2023, only 21 of the EU's 27 states even reported statistics on work-related deaths from extreme temperatures. Most claimed there were none. Greece has not reported a single case since 2008, though summer temperatures regularly hit above 40°C. France, which had one of its hottest summers on record in 2022, has acknowledged only one workplace death from heat in 15 years.

This exposes the European bourgeoisie's long-standing refusal to recognise heat as a workplace hazard. The UN's World Meteorological Organization estimate that 489,000 people died each year from heat-related causes between 2000 and 2019. Europe accounted for 36 percent of these deaths.

The fight to prevent such deaths cannot be left to employers, governments or the trade unions. Measures to save lives such as suspending work during the hottest hours, mandatory shaded breaks, free access to water, on-site medical care, abolition of subcontracting through temporary agencies, and investment in protective technology, are well known. In Japan, for example, some workers already use *Cuchafu Fuku*, high-tech jackets with built-in air conditioning. Worker safety is technically feasible, but deliberately withheld.



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