

Satnam Singh: A fatal victim of brutal exploitation on Italy's farms

Marianne Arens

2 July 2024

A week ago, Indian farm labourer Satnam Singh bled to death because he was denied timely assistance. His death casts a spotlight on the appalling conditions facing agricultural labourers who toil as modern-day slaves in the fields of Italy.

Satnam Singh (31) died on 19 June in an emergency hospital in Rome after a two-day ordeal. On Monday afternoon, while harvesting melons on a farm in Borgo Santa Maria (Lazio), he was caught in a machine that wraps film around finished crates and cuts it off. One of his arms was completely severed and both legs were broken.

Singh's boss, the owner of the Agro Pontino farm Alessandro Lovato, refused to call an ambulance, even though Singh's wife Alisha, also a farm labourer, begged him on her knees to do so. Instead, he had Singh brought home in a van and dumped like rubbish in front of the entrance, his severed arm in a fruit crate next to it. Only his flatmates reacted to the cries of the desperate Alisha and quickly called for help, so that Singh could be taken to the hospital in Rome by rescue helicopter. However, he had lost so much blood that he died two days later.

After a rally on Saturday, at which local politicians shed crocodile tears, several thousand Indian agricultural workers went on strike on Tuesday (25 June). They marched through the city of Latina chanting: "Stop exploitation!" They demanded justice for Singh and the right to permanent residence for his wife, as well as proper health care for all injured labourers.

"We all need regular labour contracts so that we are not trapped in this slavery," a migrant worker from India told AFP. A worker with an injured eye reported that his boss said to him after the accident at work: "I can't take you to hospital because you don't have a

regular contract." He has been fighting for ten months to get help.

The infamous "caporalato"—an illegal labour system—is widespread in the Italian fields. It is a common system of exploitation in which the "caporale" (gangmaster) takes all the papers from the migrant workers and then brokers them on to the big farmers, who take no interest in their welfare. The CGIL union estimates that around 230,000 workers in Italy are employed without regular contracts. Thousands of workers from Africa, China and India toil in the fields, the textile industry and in construction without papers and for small change.

The fruit and vegetable harvest is particularly notorious. According to an article in *BMJ* (formerly the *British Medical Journal*), workers there are paid just €12 for an eight-hour shift (and often for longer shifts). "People are treated like cockroaches; they live in shanty towns with no water, no sanitation and no access to basic healthcare. Around 100,000 of them are scattered all over Italy," *BMJ* writes. More than 1,500 workers from outside the EU are said to have died at work in Italy in the last six years.

The farm where Singh suffered the terrible accident is located in the Pontine Plain south of Rome. It was here that the fascist dictator Benito Mussolini had the notorious, malaria-infested Pontine Marshes drained and the land subsequently handed over to farmers loyal to the regime. There is still a certain fascist tradition among landowners and landlords here today.

The Lovato family, owners of the large farm where Singh died, were charged and convicted five years ago for "illegal recruitment and exploitation of labour." A scandal had revealed that the estate paid its labourers only €200 a month. At the time, a "caporalato network" was uncovered on the vast Pontine plain, which used

bogus companies and corrupt officials to employ day labourers illegally and cheaply.

Little has changed since then. For example, Satnam and Alisha Singh's co-workers in the fields of Agro Pontino earn just €4 an hour for a working day of up to 14 hours.

Trade unionists and politicians from all parties have reacted to the terrible death with the usual inconsequential phrases. The head of government, Giorgia Meloni, condemned Singh's death as "inhumane and barbaric" and said that such acts "do not belong to the Italian people"; they must be "severely punished." Her own party, the Fratelli d'Italia (FdI) (Brothers of Italy), stands for the revival of Mussolini's fascist traditions and barbaric laws against immigration that drive people into illegality.

Cecilia Guerra, executive board member for labour of the opposition party Partito democratico (Democratic Party, PD), warned of the consequences because two things came to light over this incident: Singh's working conditions, which did not protect him from the risk of accidents, and the "abomination of those who neglected their responsibilities by not helping this young worker." Obviously, politicians are worried that the case could trigger a labour uprising.

Singh's death exposes the unprecedented scale of the shadow economy and murderous exploitation that has grown on the filth of capitalism and the anti-immigrant policies of "Fortress Europe." It is not only the current and previous Italian governments that are responsible, whether right or the nominally "left," but the entire European Union and its political supporters. The latest decisions on asylum, war and austerity policies will only worsen the situation for migrant labourers.



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)