Demand justice for Maria Isabel

Feb 14, 2011 by Margaret Reeves

You may remember the tragic death of 17-year-old farmworker Maria Isabel Vasquez Jimenez back in 2008. Maria died of heat stroke when her body temperature rose to 108 degrees in the scorching heat of the San Joaquin County vineyard where she was working. She was pregnant at the time.

Maria's family is finally getting its day in court, and our colleagues at United Farm Workers of America (UFW) tell us that her employer may walk away without being held accountable for her death.

This is simply wrong. It's a miscarriage of justice for Maria and her family, and sends the wrong message to farmworker employers. It's also a slap in the face of the country's 2 million hard-working men and women who bring a bounty of fresh foods to local, state and global markets.

Workers like Maria face one of the most dangerous work environments in the U.S., and see very little in the way of legal protections. Heat stroke, for example, is an almost constant threat in California's Central Valley. And exposure to highly hazardous pesticides is routine among U.S. farmworkers, resulting in a pesticide poisoning rate 39 times higher than the rate in all other industries combined, and significantly higher rates of certain types of leukemia, stomach cancer, cervical cancer and uterine cancer.

Yet farmworkers are explicitly excluded from any of the protections guaranteed other workers under the National Labor Relations Act, and employers are rarely held accountable for the harms their workers suffer on the job.

Case in point: Maria's employer, Merced Farm Labor Contractors, was charged with violations of California's heat illness prevention law, including failure to adequately prepare workers for laboring in intense heat conditions and lack of a medical emergency plan. Yet as the 2008 case finally comes to court, it seems that District Attorney James Willett is poised to let the company off the hook with a small fine and community service.

It's not as though Maria's case represents the company's first offense. Back in 2006 Merced Farm Labor was fined for similar infractions, but allegedly never paid the fine. In July 2010 the state labor department shut the company down.

Please join PAN and UFW in demanding justice for Maria's family. Urge District Attorney James Willett to hold her employer accountable, and send a strong message that farmworkers across the country deserve a safe, healthy work environment.

This situation is truly outrageous. Nobody, anywhere, anytime should live, work, or raise a family under the conditions faced by farmworkers every day. To tackle these injustices, we need to recognize and reward those employers who provide safe workplaces and just compensation. And we need to put rules in place that truly protect farmworkers – then work hard to ensure those rules are actually enforced.

Source URL: http://www.panna.org/blog/demand-justice-maria-isabel