

Mexican migrant workers strike over wages and working conditions

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Thousands of agricultural workers went on strike last week in San Quentin Valley (*Valle de San Quintín*) against 15 agricultural corporations in defense of their rights, and over wages and better working conditions. Some 30,000 migrant workers work in the valley, part of a labor force of 70,000 for the entire Baja California Peninsula.

San Quentin Valley is located the northwestern state of Baja California Norte. The valley lies about 200 miles (300 km) south of San Diego, California. Because of its location, it is a major exporter of agricultural products to the United States, including strawberries, cucumbers, tomatoes, chilies, and other vegetables that are picked with labor-intensive methods.

As part of their protest, the workers barricaded the Transpeninsular highway at various points, demanding a meeting with state and federal officials to set up a mechanism to enforce workers' rights that are guaranteed by Mexican law but ignored by the growers.

The government responded with repression. On Tuesday and Wednesday (March 17-18) police attacked agricultural workers at the Transpeninsular highway barricades near the coastal city of Ensenada. Over 200 were arrested and charged with supposed vandalism against supermarkets and stores. Many of those arrested were not at the road closing and had been dragged from their homes.

The migrant agricultural workers had blocked the Transpeninsular highway with stones and tires early Tuesday morning. The protests spread throughout the day in the region that lies between the communities of San Simón to the south and Punta Colonet to the north. Punta Colonet lies 120 kilometers from Ensenada. In the town of Camalú, a contingent of 400 day workers occupied government offices.

The *La Mexico Jornada* deploys of thousands of workers, many of them Native Americans, migrate to the San Quentin Valley every year as stoop labor for giant agribusiness firms. While they are supposedly paid 100 pesos (US\$7) a day, they are charged for transportation, lodging, etc, reducing their take-home pay to 40 pesos (often the 100-peso base wage is contingent on a quota of work).

Since December 2014, farmworkers' leaders had sought a 300-peso base wage, plus improved working conditions that are enforced by law. Both planters and government officials had ignored their demand.

About 100 workers were released the day after the police assault. Formal charges have been lodged in Ensenada against 54 workers for blocking the highway. According to *La Jornada*, a majority of the 30,000 workers may have taken part in the various protests of Tuesday and Wednesday.

On Thursday, demonstrators rallied at the San Quentin Government Center demanding the release of their comrades. The police moved in with tear gas and rubber bullets.

Leaders of the farmworkers in the Alliance of National, State, and Municipal Organizations for Social Justice (AONEMJUS) charged that *agents provocateurs* were sent in by the Confederation of Mexican workers, and the Revolutionary Confederation of Mexican Workers (CTM and CROM, allied with the ruling Partido Revolucionario Institucional), to discredit their struggle and provide the pretext for the police attack on the rural workers. The provocations took place in the vicinity of the highway protest and allegedly involved drug addicted youth from Ensenada recruited by the PRI, the CTM, and CROM.

The AONEMJUS accused the leader of the PRI-affiliated Farmworkers Union (STC), Jesús Espinoza,

of personally organizing the provocation.

Other organizations that operate in the region, including the Commission for the Advancement of Indian People and the Parents' Association of Lomas de San Ramón, also charged that provocateurs were used.

Both the CTM and CROM have signed sweetheart contracts with the growers behind the backs of the workers. AONEMJUS is demanding that those deals be rescinded.

An AONEMJUS spokesman declared, "This is what they have done for many years, this is how they work. Ask where the CTM and CROM are. Nowhere! Nobody knows his or her leaders! Yet they are the ones that sign collective bargaining agreements with the companies."

In response to the workers' action, Baja California governor Francisco Vega de Lamadrid traveled to San Quentin to discuss the situation with local authorities and supposedly to negotiate with the workers.

The governor met with the regional military commander, Augusto Moisés García, Navy admiral Victor Uribe and officials in charge of security, signaling repression, not negotiation. When AONEMJUS negotiators showed up, they were attacked by the police who even fired live ammunition; some were arrested and their fate is unknown as this article is being written. All the meetings (without AONEMJUS representatives) were held behind closed doors. The governor refused to speak to the press following the meetings.

Francisco Rueda Gómez, BC government secretary, initially promised that security forces would not be used except in the case of vandalism. Gómez also declared that "outsiders" would not be allowed in the area of the demonstrations.

Mexico is the third largest producer of agricultural foodstuffs in Latin America, and is aggressively expanding exports of labor-intensive foods into Asia and Europe. While agribusiness in Mexico is growing at twice the rate (2.8 percent per year) as the rest of the Mexican economy and generating profits for the agricultural corporations, the basis for its success is the brutal exploitation of its agricultural workers.

In addition to low wages, a form of slavery known as debt-peonage is common. Mired in debt to the growers, migrant workers often return home after a season of

work with little or no money.

Besides the miserable pay, workers are forced to work 14 to 16 hours a day, they are exposed to pesticides, have no access to social services, and child labor is ubiquitous.

The farmworker protests in San Quentin Valley took place a day after 200 rural workers, among them a contingent of Tarahumara Indians and their children, were rescued from slavery at farms further south in the state of Baja California Sur. The Indians, and other rural workers, from Sinaloa and Guerrero, had been enticed with false promises only to be imprisoned and made to work at plantations in subhuman conditions with little water or sanitation.



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