

# Mexico farm workers' struggle winds down as negotiations continue

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Over the past week, there has been a general winding down of the strike by farm workers of the San Quintin Valley in Baja California, Mexico. The strike began on March 17, led by the Alliance of National, State and Municipal Organizations for Social Justice (AONEMJUS). Negotiations have been ongoing as the AONEMJUS leadership continues to reach out to the federal government to mediate the bargaining process.

Official government statistics account for 33,000 farm workers in the San Quintin Valley, while generally accepted figures range from 70,000 to 90,000. Estimates vary widely, but it is generally understood that thousands of farm workers, represented by the PRI-aligned CTM, CROC and CROM unions, have accepted terms for a contract and returned to work. It was the Agricultural Council of Baja California, an association of the largest growers that dominate agriculture in the region, which proposed a pitiful 15 percent raise. AONEMJUS rejected this proposal, claiming it was negotiated behind the backs of workers by the corporatist unions.

However, by isolating the strike to the confines of the San Quintin region, the union leaderships, whether corporatist or "militant", have allowed the growers to take advantage of the precarious social position of the farm workers in what is essentially a war of attrition. In the absence of the expansion of the farm workers' struggle, the large agribusiness concerns can afford to wait out the workers and force piecemeal negotiations in combination with threats of layoffs and blacklisting.

The harsh conditions facing workers are by no means particular to San Quintin or even Baja California. As the WSWs has reported, these circumstances are endemic across the republic. At present, farm workers in Mexico generally earn somewhere between 65 and 110 pesos a day (roughly US\$4.25 to \$7.15). A 15 percent increase of such poverty wages does not begin to alter the living conditions of the farm workers, let alone the harsh exploitation of their labor.

Indeed, practices amounting to debt peonage, forced labor and corralling of workers into squalid barracks with limited or no access to basic services such as running water persist in many of these vast agricultural complexes across the country. According to *La Jornada*, the overwhelming majority of farm workers are without a formal labor contract and are forced to work exceedingly long hours under grueling conditions: on

average, men work 57 hours a week, and women 65.

The principal demands enumerated by the AONEMJUS include: a wage increase to 200 pesos per day; the annulment of the aforementioned contract that the CTM, CROM and CROC had negotiated; access to the services and programs provided by the Mexican Institute of Social Security (IMSS); access to basic labor rights and benefits, including vacations, voluntary overtime, and no less than one day of rest per week; the extension of these to working mothers, and an immediate stop to the widespread sexual abuse endured by working women in the fields at the hands of overseers and management. The character of the demands speak, on the one hand, to the intolerable circumstances with which workers are faced, and on the other, to the modest, even timid, scope of the aims of the farm workers' leadership.

The Secretariat of Labor and Social Welfare (STPS) has been obliged by growing awareness over the unremitting exploitation in the fields to pretend to be taking the initiative in redressing some of these abuses. This includes the imposition of paltry fines totaling about 140 million pesos (just over \$9 million) on various growers. To refer to such a measure as even a slap on the wrist would be an exaggeration.

The PRD in particular has opportunistically sought to affect a concern for the plight of the San Quintin farm workers. In the Chamber of Deputies, the PRD had decried the fact that the vast majority of farm workers work without any kind of formal contract, and that 55 percent of them are exposed to harmful agrochemicals. The PRD mayor of Mexico City, Miguel Ángel Mancera, has offered to intercede on behalf of the AONEMJUS, to provide an avenue towards reaching an agreement with the Secretary of the Interior.

For its part, the approach of the AONEMJUS has been that of pressuring a section of the Mexican state. Already, the round of negotiations in late March that the AONEMJUS was excluded from was a signal to limit its demands for increased wages. Fidel Sánchez Gabriel, a leading spokesperson for the AONEMJUS, explained that the initial proposal was for a 300 peso wage for an eight hour day, plus the piecework rates given per basket, but this was lowered to 200 pesos, plus social security benefits. The obdurate and unsparing tight-fistedness of the growers and the abject character of the corporatist PRI-

backed unions is only one facet in this struggle. The other is the conciliatory conduct of the AONEMJUS leadership.

In the weeks since the strike caught the public's attention, Fidel Sánchez Gabriel has become prominent as a spokesman of the union.

Himself the son of indigenous farm workers, Sánchez's concern over the misery endured by the Alliance's rank-and-file and hope for a betterment of its basic living and working conditions may well be genuine. The question, however, is ultimately not one of personal motivations, but of political program and the social forces which that program represents.

Sánchez came up in the 1980s as a farm laborer and was swept into struggle by conditions not dissimilar to those that now impel farm workers to strike. But in the absence of a principled leadership in Mexico's political environment, he found himself in the orbit of ex-Stalinist forces. He became affiliated with the Unified Socialist Party of Mexico (PSUM), an ex-Stalinist multi-tendency organization, and followed it through its series of fusions into the "center-left" PRD for a time. As of late, he has gravitated towards the avowedly Stalinist Revolutionary Popular Front (FPR).

The basic approach of all these political forces—which unites them with elements ranging from the PRD to groups posing as the continuators of the guerrilla movements of the 1960s and 1970s—is one of making direct appeals to the state for "better governance."

The "success" of such appeals can be measured by the prevailing social conditions in Mexico: according to a recent report by the Inter-American Development Bank, 37.5 percent of the population lives below the poverty line, while an additional 37.8 percent of the population lives at the risk of falling into poverty. The country continues to rank as the most socially polarized within the OECD.

Parties such as the PRD and Workers Party (PT) share complicity with the administration of President Enrique Peña Nieto in ramming through the Pact for Mexico "reforms" that constitute a massive attack on the working class, including the privatization of PEMEX, the state-owned petroleum concern, as well as an attack on public education and teachers. Especially in light of the revelations surrounding the Iguala massacre, this complicity extends to state repression and collusion with organized crime and US imperialism, further underscoring their utter bankruptcy.

There is also a resonance between the strike led by AONEMJUS and the recent struggles of teachers against the reactionary education "reforms" under the leadership of the CNTE. In both cases, these leaderships are able to adopt a militant posture to the extent that they can point to the CROM and CTM, and SNTE as convenient political foils while pursuing a strategic and tactical course not significantly different from their openly corporatist counterparts.

All workers must begin to draw conclusions: the defense of their living conditions calls for a different approach that is not

based on making modest (and it must be said, insufficient) economic demands enlivened by a dose of radical pantomime, but on an understanding of the character of the present historical juncture, which means that a fight for a living wage is bound up with broader political struggles.

The past decades of class struggle in Mexico point to the insufficiency of a purely economic struggle. This is compounded by the qualitative shift in the global economy in recent decades, which has altered the social character of unions from defensive instruments of working class struggle within the confines of capitalism to instruments of management that move to curtail the aspirations and militancy of their rank-and-file at every turn, and imposing concessions, or at best, meager and transitory gains. Contrary to the apologetics of opportunists, such hollow "victories" do not embolden, but rather frustrate, demoralize and politically confuse the working class.

A fight to defend the living conditions of any section of the working class must first and foremost be taken out of the hands of a leadership that deliberately limits the scope of the struggle to effectively just one city and one section of the working class. Just as the CNTE made no serious efforts to appeal to other sections of the working class, the AONEMJUS has likewise made no effort to mobilize the over three million farm workers across the country.

Deep fault lines lay under the increasingly strained surface of Mexican society, and social explosions are inevitable, but in the absence of an internationalist socialist perspective, rather than radical Mexican nationalism, the danger remains of these explosions being contained and repressed.



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