

Settlement in Mexican farmworkers struggle leaves families mired in poverty

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The recent settlement of the struggle by tens of thousands of farm workers in the San Quintin Valley of Baja California for higher wages and labor rights came up far short of workers' initial demands. Under terms of the agreement reached last month growers will pay workers employed at large-scale farms 180 pesos a day (about US\$11.50), those at medium farms 165 pesos (\$10.05), and those at small farms 150 (\$9.55). The strike began March 17.

Daily wages for the arduous work in the fields had averaged around 100 pesos (\$6.50) a day. But workers were often charged for transportation and lodging, and their pay docked when they took a day off. The Alliance of National, State, and Municipal Organizations for Social Justice (AONEMJUS), representing the workers, had originally demanded a 300 peso daily base wage.

Despite claims of victory by AONEMJUS, the settlement leaves a hypothetical family of four with two farm worker parents employed, even at a large farm, with a combined income that would still fall short of the official poverty line in Mexico—the miserly sum of about 10,000 pesos (\$640 a month). So even at the top end of the pay scale the harsh reality is that nearly half of children belonging to such families, disproportionately indigenous, will be obliged to spend at least some part of their childhood working in the fields.

Many workers expressed anger that after three months of protests and sacrifice the gains were quite meager. “After all these days without eating, without bathing, leaving kids at home and forgoing work, and this is all we get?,” Matilde Hernandez, a 47-year-old mother of three, told a *Los Angeles Times* reporter. “We’re fighting for crumbs.”

Workers had also demanded rights such as access to

social security, and overtime (workers often work 13-16 hour days), as well as an end to the use of child labor, sexual abuse by labor bosses and discrimination against the largely indigenous work force.

The settlement purports to guarantee rights to social security benefits and overtime pay, with the federal government overseeing enforcement. But the agreement is not a binding, legally enforceable contract. Growers can evade their obligations by transferring ownership of farms or hiring new workers, and simply refusing to comply.

The walkout in March quickly resulted in violent clashes between workers and police, as the state supported the big growers. Workers torched government buildings, battled police with rocks and blocked the main highway to export markets in California, 200 miles to the north.

Negotiations were then scheduled for May 8 between AONEMJUS, Mexican Undersecretary of the Interior Luis Enrique Miranda, and Baja California Norte state officials. However, Miranda, in a show of imperious contempt, deliberately refused to attend, citing transportation difficulties. Four thousand farm workers who had marched to the San Quintin seat of government expecting a response were left in the lurch.

The next morning farm workers attempted to organize a stoppage outside the gates of Rancho Seco, one of the largest tomato-growing fields in the region. The State Preventive Police, undoubtedly with a green light from state governor Francisco Vega de Lamadrid, responded in force. Police not only violently dispersed those assembled, but also pursued them back to their lodgings, storming houses and attacking men, women and children alike with tear gas, rubber bullets and batons. Seventy workers were injured, seven severely.

Public outrage arising from media coverage in

December of labor abuses at Mexican agricultural exporters generally, including widespread use of child labor, had already induced large U.S. retailers such as Walmart and Costco to press big Mexican growers and the Mexican federal government for some reforms. Intense media coverage of the May police violence against the striking San Quintin Valley workers finally pushed the federal government to intervene to bring about a resolution of the strike.

A tentative agreement was reached May 14, after the federal government said it would cover the difference between what the growers said they would pay and the 200 pesos a day wage that AONEMJUS was then demanding—down a third from its initial 300 peso demand. The agreement was then finalized in June, with the cap on wages of 180 pesos.

Farm workers conducted themselves forcefully and with solidarity. But the limited perspective of the AONEMJUS leadership ultimately left workers far short of their goals. “This isn’t enough to even cover the cost of food, but we don’t want to be radical,” admitted Lucila Hernández, an AONEMJUS organizer.

On April 29 the WSWs warned, “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 [the radical national teachers union] 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.” That warning has been vindicated with this settlement.



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