

# Wildcat strike by Salinas, California food processing workers

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Hundreds of food processing workers at the Fresh Express plant in Salinas, California, carried out a wildcat strike Tuesday morning, June 11, to demand improved wages and working conditions.

In a video posted on the website of the Salinas daily, the *Californian*, workers are seen massing in front of the factory. David Rangel, a Fresh Express worker with 23 years, denounced unsafe conditions and the refusal of the highly profitable company to sign a new contract. Hourly wages for most workers range between \$9.40 and \$16.

The United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) union, which had forced workers to remain on the job despite more than six months of failed negotiations, disassociated itself from the walkout. UFCW Local 5 official Pete Maturino denounced the action, saying it “was not authorized by the union” and that workers were “putting themselves in jeopardy” by defying the no-strike clause in the extended UFCW contract.

Less than 24 hours later, union and company officials suddenly announced they had reached an agreement but refused to release details to the 600 workers at the plant.

During the walkout, Adriana García, a former worker who worked the night shift at Fresh Express for five years, told the local media, “It’s unsanitary in there ... that’s what everybody’s complaining about.” In addition to the presence of mold at the plant, García said that the machinery was old and unsafe to operate. The workers are asking for a \$3 wage increase over three years. In the last few years packaged salads sold in supermarkets have become very popular and with high profit margins for companies such as Fresh Express.

A worker commenting on Facebook pointed out the reality that while agriculture and agricultural products

are a source of vast profits, none of that is reflected in wages for agricultural workers and workers at processing plants, many of whom are immigrant workers.

California’s Salinas Valley is one of the richest agricultural areas in the United States and has been called America’s “salad bowl.” In the midst of this abundance, those workers who generate the profits for companies such as Fresh Express face poverty, hunger and dilapidated housing.

Monterey County, where Salinas is located, is the third highest grossing agricultural producing county in the US with revenue of \$9 billion. It also had the highest rate of adults who face food insecurity in California—49 percent—according to a 2010 study by the California Institute for Rural Studies, the Agriculture and Land Based Training Association and the Monterey County Health Department.

For California as a whole, agriculture adds \$100 billion to its GDP. However, many agricultural and cannery workers are poor and hungry.

Though Salinas employers complain about the shortage of labor in the region, wages remain very low, particularly considering the desperate housing conditions that exist in this area.

Many workers live in households packed into trailers and other forms of substandard housing; according to one report, Salinas is “dense with cars and trailers” where people live. The lack of affordable housing is in part a spillover from Monterey County’s proximity to Silicon Valley and the Bay area. In Salinas, monthly rents for one- and two-bedroom apartments are \$1,600 and up. The median single-family home costs upwards of \$550,000.

More than one out of every three children in the Salinas City Elementary School District is technically

homeless, lacking a postal address.

In 2017, about 2,000 workers at Taylor Farms walked off the job in a one-day wildcat strike for a \$2.50 hourly raise. The workers rebelled against Teamsters Local 890, which, like the UFCW, collects dues from workers while enforcing management's dictates.

The Taylor Farms workers got a \$1.50 increase in the summer of 2017 and another \$1 raise in January 2018, according to the *Californian*. Commenting on the Taylor Farms and Fresh Express wildcat strikes, Teamsters Local 890 official Jorge Valenzuela told the newspaper, "If workers go on an unsanctioned strike, they're risking getting fired and getting terminated because they're pretty much breaking their contract with the company."

Salinas has a long history of labor militancy that goes back to the strikes and protests of migrant workers, many of them from the Philippines and Mexico, in the 1930s and later in the 1970s. Driven by poverty, hunger and homelessness, California agricultural workers are once again taking the path of struggle. This is driving workers into a direct conflict with the pro-company unions and both big business parties and the capitalist profit system they defend.



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