

# Hundreds of workers walk out at six fruit packing plants in Washington state

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Hundreds of workers have taken strike action at six fruit packing companies in Yakima County, Washington, demanding that the companies provide adequate personal protective equipment (PPE), hazard pay, and safe working conditions to reduce the risk of contracting the novel coronavirus that causes COVID-19.

Last Friday, the first group of workers walked out at Allan Brothers Fruit Company, after 12 workers tested positive for the virus. Management reportedly concealed the positive cases and even required one sick employee to return to work.

The workers' action at Allan Brothers triggered a successive string of walkouts at nearby facilities: Matson Fruit, Jack Frost Fruit, Monson Fruit, and most recently, Columbia Reach and Madden Fruit.

Yakima agricultural workers join walkouts by meatpackers in Crete, Nebraska, garment workers at an American Apparel factor in Selma, Alabama, workers at a trash hauling company in New Orleans, Louisiana, maquiladora workers in Mexico, call center workers in Brazil, and numerous struggles erupting around the world against the dangerous conditions imposed by corporations and governments during the COVID-19 pandemic.

While the walkouts erupted spontaneously from workers outrage, the workers are represented by Familias Unidas por la Justicia (FUJ), which entered into negotiations with Jack Frost yesterday. FUJ is a local farmworker union representing about 500 workers, which was launched in 2013 and affiliated with the Washington State Labor Council AFL-CIO in 2015.

Workers tried to express their concerns with management but were ignored. Rosalina Gonzalez, who has worked for Columbia Reach Pack warehouse for 19

years, told the *Yakima Herald-Republic*, "There are a lot of people who have tested positive here. I feel like I'm in danger, but I have to work. I have no choice."

"Many people don't know what we have to go through at this work," Maria Valdivinos, another striking worker, explained to the local press. "We feel we don't have support from nobody."

On socially distanced picket lines and caravan protests, workers have carried signs in both Spanish and English declaring "Workers before profits," "Farmworkers are essential, not disposable," "We are human," "No more slavery," and "We need protections."

In addition to the basic demand of masks, sanitary supplies, and social distancing measures while on the job, the striking workers are demanding a temporary hazard pay increase from \$13.85 per hour to \$15.85 per hour.

The company has not agreed to these demands, claiming that they have done the best they can to protect workers and will not consider a wage increase. Hansen Fruit owner and president Eric Hansen stated, "If this is about money, then I am greatly disappointed the strike is misleading the public."

Through the exploitation of these workers and thousands of others, Yakima County is the top county in Washington for crop and livestock production, as determined by researchers at Washington State University, generating roughly \$1.65 billion in agricultural products annually.

Located 150 miles south of Seattle, Yakima Valley has the highest number of COVID-19 cases relative to its population out of any county in Washington State, with one case per 123 people. The most recent statistics confirm 1,916 cases and 65 deaths, numbers which are likely gross underestimations due to the lack of mass

testing throughout the United States.

The high rate of infection is correlated with the concentration of migrant agricultural workers in the region, who live and work under retrograde conditions that leave them especially vulnerable to the novel coronavirus.

Just under half of the Yakima County population is Hispanic or Latino, with many of those being temporary seasonal farmworkers from Mexico and Central America. Immigrant workers are denied driver's licenses, proper housing, job security, and welfare benefits, including those passed in the emergency CARES Act.

For many years prior to the outbreak of the pandemic, Yakima workers reported wage theft, sexual harassment, assault, appallingly long workdays and low wages. The poverty rate in Yakima County is 18 percent, nearly twice the national rate.

"There are people who come without [legal] papers and have to sleep on the floor, in cars and in more deplorable situations," a local field worker named Diego told the *World Socialist Web Site*: "There are thousands of civilians who lost their jobs, and many are working on ranches only 4 or 8 hours a week and are not eligible for US government aid programs."

Many Yakima agricultural workers express fear of losing their jobs, and thus the income they use to support their families, by taking isolated action. "If we do speak up, we do not know where to go or not, who will hear us, and if there will be support from fellow workers," worried Saul, an agricultural worker at nearby Borton Fruit whose wife works at one of the locations on strike.

"However," he added, "I support the strikes. Their demands for being essential workers are very fair and necessary. The workers must not fear, for they've already done the hardest part, speaking up."

The actions by Yakima workers reflect the growth of opposition in the working class to the insistence of the ruling class that workers must either risk their lives by working in unsafe conditions or lose their jobs. Workers deemed "essential" fear every day that they will catch the deadly virus at work and transmit it to their loved ones at home.

Rather than mobilizing the resources of the richest country on the planet to produce mass testing capabilities along with contact tracing and quarantine

measures which are necessary to effectively combat the virus, the Trump administration is advancing the "reopening of the economy" to get all workers back on the job so that the profit-making of the corporations and Wall Street can continue.

In order to carry forward their struggle for safe workplace conditions that keep them and their families safe from COVID-19, Yakima agricultural workers must develop their own rank-and-file safety committees at their workplaces to assert that their health and safety is nonnegotiable.

These committees must develop independent of the unions and the Democratic Party, which have worked to prevent working-class opposition from breaking into the open. The AFL-CIO, with which FUJ is affiliated, has not lifted a finger while "essential" workers have died from COVID-19 and "nonessential" workers have been laid off and driven into poverty.

Even with a small pay raise and face masks, workers will not be protected. There must be no return to work until every worker can be tested and guaranteed adequate PPE and paid sick leave under the supervision of the workers' safety committee. In addition, workers must fight for permanent improvements to their work and living conditions, including pay raises, benefits, and housing.

These urgent and necessary demands cannot be won by appealing to management, whose sole focus is the generation of profit through the exploitation of workers. Instead, Yakima workers must appeal to other sections of the working class in the farms, meatpacking plants, factories, grocery stores, and warehouses to take action.

United across racial, ethnic, and national divisions, workers can wage a common struggle against the private corporations, major political parties, and the entire capitalist system that subordinates the lives of millions of people to the demands of the ultrawealthy elite.



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