

Washington state farmworkers fight unsafe conditions as unions move to shut down strikes

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Hundreds of fruit packing warehouse workers who participated in wildcat strikes against seven fruit companies in Yakima County, Washington, are being sent back into the fruit packing warehouses with agreements that will not provide adequate protections against COVID-19. Out of the seven locations where workers went on strike, workers are continuing the strike at two companies, Allan Brothers and Columbia Reach.

The first walkout erupted at Allan Brothers on May 7, when fruit packing workers decided to walk out after management tried to conceal information that 12 workers tested positive.

Soon after Allan Brothers workers began their strike, fruit packing workers took similar initiatives at Matson Fruit, Jack Frost Fruit, Monson Fruit, Columbia Reach, Madden Fruit, and Cold Storage. Workers raised demands for personal protective equipment (PPE), safe working conditions, pay raises, and the protection of workers' rights to organize and raise demands to the company.

These actions were largely initiated by the workers themselves, with workers committees organizing the strike and negotiating with management. Familias Unidas por la Justicia (FUJ), a small union affiliated with the AFL-CIO Washington Labor Council, has played an advisory role and is now overseeing the settlements with the fruit packing companies.

Negotiating committees reached an agreement with management at Monson Fruit and Jack Frost (Frosty Packing) Fruit on Friday, and Matson Fruit on Monday. Workers at Madden Fruit and Cold Storage returned to work last week with promises by management to implement a few changes to workplace conditions.

The agreements, however, are empty promises that will not protect workers from the COVID-19 disease, let alone offer improvements to the general workplace and living

conditions under which workers are forced to labor.

Humberto, a warehouse worker at Jack Frost, told the *World Socialist Web Site*, "The agreement wasn't much. There are points on protective gear and workplace safety [during the pandemic], but that was already promised by the company before."

"Economically," he continued. "There is almost no help. We got \$20 a week extra. That's a joke for us. We entered negotiations demanding \$100 a week plus a raise of \$2 per hour. Economic conditions are becoming more severe every day. The minimum of \$13.50 is no longer enough."

While he was disappointed with the concessions, Humberto said, "We know our rights now, so that is good. I hope that one day we can have an organization for all workers and that we will assert our rights."

As many as 65,000 workers were employed in picking and packaging apples in the state last year, and more than half are migrant workers temporarily allowed in the US under H-2A visas. In the fields and warehouses, workers face long hours, prolonged exposure to extreme weather, poverty wages, unsafe work conditions, harassment by management, and retaliation when workers speak out. In addition, the Trump administration has used the pandemic to lower the wages of H-2A workers.

The conditions in which agricultural workers are forced to live and work have heightened their risk of transmitting the virus that causes COVID-19. H-2A migrant workers usually sleep in bunk beds in barracks constructed by the companies, eat food in common areas, and go to and from their workplace in large groups with company transportation. Undocumented workers are granted even less protections, often homeless and sleeping in cars.

Yakima County has the highest infection rate on the entire West Coast, with 445 cases per 100,000 people

recorded in April, due to the high concentration of poverty, migrant workers, and jobs in healthcare and agriculture. According to 2018 data from the Yakima County Development Association, 63 percent of all jobs in Yakima County are considered “essential” in agriculture, health care and wholesale trade industries, compared with 54 percent across the whole state.

Little has been done to protect workers, with corporations and local officials claiming they are doing all that they can. Since the strikes began, Yakima Health District officials visited the fruit packing plants and gave the green light for the meager protections provided to workers.

After the brave rebellion by workers who insisted that their lives and the lives of their loved ones take priority over profit, several unions, feigning support for the strike, stepped in to keep opposition isolated and contained.

After decades of colluding with the agribusinesses and gross corruption, the United Farm Workers has long been discredited and its membership, which peaked at 60,000 members, has fewer than 10,000 today. Under these conditions, the Familias Unidas por las Justicia (FUJ) has organized small sections of farmworkers, including 500 indigenous Mexican workers from Sakuma Brothers, an independent grower for Driscoll’s berries, in Burlington, Washington.

The organization, which relies on boycotts and appeals to the Catholic Church and the Democratic Party, has offered farmworkers no way forward. FUJ did not call on the Burlington workers to carry out joint strike action alongside the Yakima workers.

However, the chief role in isolating and betraying this struggle is being played by the Washington Labor Council AFL-CIO, which made sure there was no common struggle between farmworkers and other workers at warehouses and other “essential” businesses on the job. On the contrary, the state AFL-CIO has helped giant corporations like Boeing herd tens of thousands of workers back into the plants despite the dangers to their lives. National AFL-CIO President Richard Trumka sits on Donald Trump’s “Council to Reopen America.”

The unions and activist groups that are trying to win favor among the militant agricultural workers in Yakima seek to tie them to the Democratic Party. Hostile to an independent mass movement of the working class, they channel workers' opposition into negotiations with individual companies, boycott campaigns, lawsuits, and appeals to state Democratic Party politicians.

In mid-April, FUJ and UFW filed a lawsuit against

Washington state for the lack of workplace protections for agricultural workers, demanding that the state immediately make policy changes to address the issue. In response, Democratic Governor Jay Inslee’s Department of Labor and Industries has adopted the minimal measures and is continuing to allow the growers to leave crowded dormitories, transportation and workplace conditions intact. Tim Church with Labor and Industries, declared, “Under the emergency rules, if you have a group that stays together, works together, eats together, and it’s only that group, then they [growers] would be allowed to use bunk beds.”

Opposing these efforts to isolate and subordinate the struggle to the economic needs of the corporations and the government, agricultural workers must develop their own independent means of organization and expand their struggle to broader sections of the working class.

This fight requires the building of rank-and-file safety committees at every fruit packing plant, farm, and workplace. These committees, which must be completely independent of the unions and Democratic Party, have to secure the health of all workers, regardless of the impact on the stock portfolios and profit margins of the corporations.

The fruit packing workers in Yakima confront the same dangerous conditions as workers across the United States and internationally. At other agricultural sites, hospitals, transit systems, meatpacking plants, automotive plants, and grocery stores, workers are denied the basic public health measures and protections that would keep them safe from contracting the virus.

Hundreds of workers at the maquiladora plants in Northern Mexico have died from COVID-19 due to back-to-work policies. In the United States, which has the highest number of deaths out of anywhere in the world, there have been reported deaths of migrant workers who labor on farms in New Jersey and meatpacking plants in Nebraska, among many other workplaces.

Workers must use their safety committees to coordinate and expand the struggle across various workplaces throughout the United States and internationally, developing a powerful unified movement for the working class to demand all the necessary protections to save lives.



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