

Baja Farmworkers Strike Stalled; Results Mixed; Struggle Goes On

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The strike by farmworkers in the San Quintín Valley of Baja California, which began on March 17 stopping production and shipments on 25 farms and costing the companies tens of millions of dollars, has been stalled as the Alliance of National, State, and Municipal Organizations for Social Justice (AONEMJS or Alliance) which leads the movement faces challenges from the state government, the employers, and corrupt labor unions.

Whether or not the mostly indigenous farmworkers will be able to come out of the struggle with a genuine labor union, a contract, and real gains in wages, benefits, and conditions remains to be seen.

The Alliance, made up of indigenous groups from several Mexican states, began brilliantly with a strike combined with blockage of 80 kilometers of the Tranpeninsular Highway over which all truck traffic carrying produce to the U.S. border must move. The strike paralyzed production and quickly brought the state government and employers to the bargaining table. The Alliance produced a list of demands, at the top of which was the removal from the equation of the Confederation of Mexican Workers (CTM) and the Regional Confederation of Workers of Mexico (CROM), both corrupt organizations affiliated with the ruling Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI). The Alliance also asked for a raise from the miserable US\$6.64 dollars per day they have been paid for the last twenty years under the old union contracts to \$300 pesos or US\$20.25 per day.

After about 30 hours of strike and highway closing, state and federal police as well as the Mexican Army moved into reopen the highway, establishing checkpoints where vehicles are searched. The state government, the employers, and the old unions first stalled negotiations for several days, ostensibly so that the bosses could come up with a common contract proposal, but effectively starving out the workers who live on their meager wages from day to day. On March 28, the union felt forced to end the strike and workers returned to the fields, but as one of their leaders, Fermín Salazar, said, they did so under duress and under protest.

At about the same time Governor Francisco “Kiko” Vega de Lamadrid together with his cabinet made a tour of the fields, announcing that production was at between 85 and 90 percent of normal. In a widely distributed press release printed in papers throughout the country, Vega de Lamadrid said that the unions and the companies participating in the Agricultural Council of Baja California had come to an agreement on 64 points among which was a wage increase of 15 percent.

The Alliance, which had initiated the strike, refused to recognize the agreement because of the involvement of the Regional Confederation of Mexican Workers (CROM) and the Revolutionary Confederation of Workers and Peasants (CROC), both affiliated with the ruling Institutional

Revolutionary Party (PRI). Fermín Salazar said that the political parties and their unions were attempting to take control of the movement, and that they workers would not permit it.

While many workers have returned to work, it was unclear how many had received the 15 percent wage increase or any wage increase for that matter. Driscoll's of the Americas, recognized as one of the better employers in the region, announced that it had given workers raises of 20 to 40 percent. BerryMex also announced pay increases for its employees.

So the strike seems to have had mixed results. Workers have won wage gains, but the government and the employers are clearly trying to marginalize the Alliance while supporting the corrupt labor unions affiliated with the PRI.

Workers have continued to protest, carrying out a march to the state capital of Mexicali and a variety of other protests. As Alliance leader Salazar said, "For us, the struggle goes on."