

7-29-2015

# Farmworkers in Baja California Negotiate Unprecedented Labor Agreement with Agribusinesses

Carlos Navarro

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/sourcemex>

---

## Recommended Citation

Navarro, Carlos. "Farmworkers in Baja California Negotiate Unprecedented Labor Agreement with Agribusinesses." (2015). <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/sourcemex/6183>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Latin America Digital Beat (LADB) at UNM Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in SourceMex by an authorized administrator of UNM Digital Repository. For more information, please contact [amywinter@unm.edu](mailto:amywinter@unm.edu).

## **Farmworkers in Baja California Negotiate Unprecedented Labor Agreement with Agribusinesses**

*by Carlos Navarro*

*Category/Department: Mexico*

*Published: 2015-07-29*

In June of this year, farmworkers in the Valle de San Quintín in Baja California negotiated an unprecedented agreement with agribusinesses for higher pay and better working conditions. The agreement followed a three-month strike by field workers, who grow berries, tomatoes, cucumbers, and other products for sale in the US market. Some of the produce grown in San Quintín—particularly blackberries, blueberries, and strawberries—is sold widely in the large US supermarket chains under the Driscoll brand.

The agreement seemed like a turning point for the workers at the time, but some of the strike leaders are having second thoughts about accepting the terms negotiated with agribusinesses. They claim the landowners have not acted in good faith since entering into the agreement, and they have accused the federal government of failing to meet its obligations to force the businesses to provide benefits.

Some observers viewed the ability of the two sides to reach a compromise as a significant development. Sara Lara Flores, a sociologist at the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM) who has studied farm-labor issues, said the agreement was unprecedented because agribusiness interests in Mexico have rarely given in to the demands of farm laborers. "This is a watershed moment," Lara said in an interview with the Los Angeles Times in June.

A main catalyst for the agreement was a three-month strike by the laborers, who received assistance from the Coalition of Immokalee Workers (CIW), which helped organize tomato growers in Florida. Fidel Sánchez, who was deeply involved in the Florida labor action, became a leader and a spokesperson for the farmworkers in San Quintín who labored under extremely difficult conditions for years. Greg Asbed, co-founder of the Immokalee union, also helped in an advisory capacity.

"The consciousness and commitment that Fidel developed in his time with the CIW in Immokalee clearly was not lost but rather remained kindled in him and found expression in his leadership of the movement there in Baja today in a world where the need for change is dire," Asbed said in an interview.

Sánchez and other leaders organized a walkout on March 17, convincing farmworkers to stand up for their rights. "It started as a door-knocking campaign by poor indigenous villagers, then grew into a well-organized movement that mobilized thousands and brought powerful agribusinesses and the federal government to the negotiating table," said the Los Angeles Times.

The action was marred by some acts of violence including clashes between protestors and police and acts of vandalism by the farmworkers, who occupied and set fire to government buildings. The protestors also blocked the Carretera Peninsular, which connects Baja California to export markets in California.

The strike received strong support in the US, where sympathizers like the California-based Frente Indígena de Organizaciones Binacionales (Fiob) organized a boycott of the berries and strawberries sold by Driscoll in supermarkets in several US cities.

### *Workers labored in conditions of near slavery*

Despite the violence, there was strong justification for the strike. The 70,000 workers employed in the area were laboring in conditions of near slavery, which the weekly news magazine Proceso described as similar to those that prevailed in the era of Dictator Porfirio Díaz, who held office for nine different terms between 1877 and 1911, in an era known as the porfiriato.

"As was the case during the porfiriato, workers who labored in the farms of Baja California were almost slaves. They worked from dawn to dusk and were paid only a handful of pesos. Their living conditions were terrible, enduring a lack of potable water, and they faced the constant threat of dismissal," said Proceso. "In contrast, the owners were becoming wealthier. Workers received 14 pesos (US\$0.86) per box of berries, while the export price was nearly US\$60."

The Proceso report said that, despite the huge growth in the agribusinesses operating in the Valle de San Quintín, the conditions for workers—many of whom migrated north from Oaxaca and other southern states to escape poverty—had not changed since 2001. "At that time we were earning 100 to 120 pesos a day (US\$7.40), or between 8 and 10 pesos (US\$0.49 and US\$0.61) per box of strawberries, which they sold for US\$50," said Juan Hernández López, a member of the Triqui community from Oaxaca who migrated to Baja California in 1985.

The strike and the threat of a boycott put enough pressure on the agribusinesses that operate in the Valle de San Quintín to force them into negotiation. "We have awakened. We're not going to accept working for 100 pesos (US\$6.15) a day anymore. We're not going to accept being denied our social security benefits," Sanchez said at a rally in the village of Vicente Guerrero, where he offered details on the agreement.

Negative publicity in the US included a series entitled "Product of Mexico," published by the Los Angeles Times last year. The reports documenting labor abuses at Mexican export farms further pressured the owners into negotiating a settlement.

"I think [the series] introduced the issue of working conditions on farms in Mexico that supply the US consumer on the agenda, and [the strike] was the next installment in that conversation," said Erik Nicholson, national vice president of the United Farmworkers.

Under the deal, landowners agreed to increase the daily wages for about 70,000 workers by at least 50% and to provide government-required benefits that they had denied. The workers negotiated a three-tiered compensation system, with large farms paying 180 pesos per day (US\$11.00); medium farms, 165 pesos (US\$10.15); and small farms, 150 pesos (US\$9.20). Since most work is at large agribusinesses, the raises are about US\$4 per day more for many of the estimated 30,000 workers in the Valle de San Quintín.

While the increase is short of the goal of the workers to boost wages to about 200 pesos per day (US\$12.30), workers earned the right to benefits that they previously lacked. The accord guarantees workers the right to social security benefits and overtime pay, requires the government to improve infrastructure, and allows for worker oversight of farm inspections by labor officials.

## *Company retaliation?*

While the agreement represented a victory for the workers, some of the leaders have complained that the company and the government are not in full compliance with it. Furthermore, they claim the agribusinesses are retaliating against some of the workers who participated in the strike. In the weeks following the agreement, the agribusiness owners laid off some of the workers, some with more seniority than new hires. Many of those laid off had helped organize the strike.

"They call it a 'reduction of personnel' during the end of the work cycle," said Fidel Sánchez. "To us, this seems like retaliation, because the [ones who are being laid off] are our comrades with five or six years of service to this company. Curiously, they are also the workers who participated in the strike."

On July 1, five of the 13 spokespersons for the movement held a press conference in Ensenada to dispel rumors that there were divisions in the movement and to admit that it might have been a mistake to accept terms that allowed the company to renege on social security benefits.

The workers emphasized that the government has reneged on several obligations that came out of the agreement, including an evaluation of the agribusinesses, the release of 14 protestors who were arrested during demonstrations in March, the activation of the process to enroll workers in the social security system, and the construction of a hospital for women. Furthermore, the leaders complained that government representatives had not made any efforts to meet with the farmworkers to discuss these concerns.

"We have enough information to know that the businesses are breaking the law," Justino Herrera, one of the leaders, said in comments quoted by the Tijuana-based weekly newspaper *Semanario Zeta*. [Peso-dollar conversions in this article are based on the Interbank rate in effect on July 29, 2015, reported at 16.29 pesos per US\$1.00.]

-- End --