

MEXICO - San Quintín Valley: From Labor Abuse to Labor Mobilization

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"We've been starving to death in San Quintín [Valley] for twenty years."

Javier Ramírez, day labourer, March 2015

"...Our past is hunger, that's the starvation wages we get."

Fidel Sánchez, day labourer, March 2015

"It's worse here [in the fields of the San Quintín Valley] because the children are hungry. You come here and sell everything because you haven't got a cent and here is definitely worse, because you come with promises, illusions, and nothing happens. It just gets worse for you, it makes me sad."

Julián de Jesús, day labourer.

Valley of Contrasts, From Exploitation to Resistance

The San Quintín Valley, one of Mexico's highest producing agricultural areas with a market aimed principally at export, is also one of the places with the most abusive, unsanitary and harmful working conditions for day laborers.

In this context, agricultural workers' demonstrations last March demanding labor rights and fair working conditions were neither improvised nor gratuitous, but rather the result of on-going injustice. After two months of failed negotiations in October 2014 and January 2015, the day laborers took it up a notch, organizing protests in response to the owners' arrogance, disdain and silence, and to the indifference and lack of effective response and political will on the part of state authorities.

The agricultural workers insisted their demands be met; they demonstrated in the streets and publicly denounced the extreme exploitation that is a fact of life for the tens of thousands of farm workers in San Quintín today.

It's no exaggeration to call this slavery. Numerous organizations supporting and defending the day laborers in both Mexico and the United States, [1] have demonstrated that conditions of slavery exist in the fields of San Quintin, including working approximately 60 hours a week, a lack of a labor contract, toxic working conditions (exposure to agrichemicals and pesticides, sun overexposure), exploitation of children, harassment and sexual abuse of women, lack of legal protections, and no social security and healthcare benefits or access. [2]

In a prolonged meeting between representatives of the farm workers and state and federal authorities on May 14, after months of tension, the two sides reached a preliminary agreement that raised wages to 200 pesos per day and charted a course for providing workers with free social security under law. It also established housing improvement programmes and guaranteed humane labour rights for day workers in agricultural fields. [3]

However, an impasse has been created once again as the owners of the farms have failed to comply with these agreements, mainly with respect to the core demand of the raise to 200 pesos in daily wages. [4]

Farmworkers With No Future, Citizens Abandoned By the State

Most of San Quintín's day laborers come from areas where their populations are marginalized and excluded. They hail from the poorest states in the country, especially the southern Mexican states of Oaxaca and Guerrero, regions with a large ethnic-rural population base and the highest levels of infant and maternal mortality, and lowest levels of life expectancy, education and income. The farm workers are the disinherited, the systematically and constantly forgotten subjects of the State.

Many agricultural workers from the south belong to indigenous groups (Mixtecos, Triquis, Zapotecos) and have had arduous and difficult migration histories. Fleeing misery in the south, they found poverty, exclusion and exploitation in the north.

These farmworkers and indigenous people left their places of birth in search of better living conditions in an attempt to leave behind the historical-structural lack of social services (health, employment, education) in the rural areas they came from. They were and are the disinherited, the systematically and constantly forgotten subjects of the State.

In the wake of neoliberal agricultural policies that have intensified the farmworker economic crisis and reduced or eliminated supports and stimuli for small agricultural production, the disinherited have seen their already highly precarious living conditions get worse. This has accelerated migration toward the country's north in search of employment opportunities. Their impoverishment has created an overriding urgency to leave in order to survive that increases their vulnerability, something the farming company owners of the San Quintín Valley have taken advantage of to boost profits.

San Quintín, A Bitter Reflection of a Generalised Exploitation

Mexico ranks eighteenth in the world in terms of modern slavery. [5] The abusive conditions and labor exploitation experienced by day labourers in San Quintín is an example of what almost two million agricultural workers endure in the fields. They come mostly from the southern states of Oaxaca, Chiapas and Guerrero to work in eighteen agricultural states (Sinaloa, Sonora, Baja California, Baja California Sur, Chihuahua, Guanajuato, Zacatecas, Jalisco, Nayarit, Colima, San Luis Potosí, Querétaro, Veracruz, Morelos, Hidalgo, Michoacán, Mexico State and Chiapas). [6]

The farm worker protests of the San Quintín Valley have revealed the ways in which systems of exploitation form part of the complex relationships between agricultural business owners and state politicians. They also demonstrate how owners use the life-or-death urgency of the day laborers' need to work by offering the most meager salary for their labor. [7]

Migrant agricultural workers in Sinaloa are being utilized as cheap and disposable labor simply because state courts do not respect federal labor law and, in fact, permit inhumane and illegal working conditions. This effective absence of compliance with the law is due to the government/private sector revolving door-in Baja California, and probably in other states in the country, agricultural business owners are and have been state officials and are very close to political power.

The money that the workers should, but do not, receive is therefore redirected to employers. The absence of effective labor rights for farm workers translates into high financial profits for these elites. The monetary benefits derived from this exploitation go straight into the pockets of the owners of the fields, with hunger and starvation wages for the workers. It's no accident then that these farm workers are the worst paid and most mistreated workers in the country. [8]

Complicity between the State and business owners not only promotes this state of affairs, but also assumes that the economically and politically powerful can act above the law. This foments illegality and erodes the rule of law in the country in general. The conclusion is that, beyond the good intentions expressed in politicians' speeches, the government gives preference to the excessive privileges and prerogatives of business owners over the application of federal labor law and defense of unprotected and vulnerable workers.

Dignity and the Faces of the Resistance

Despite the drastic scenario of labor conditions in San Quintín's agricultural fields, the migrant farm workers are not just the downtrodden who suffer blatant exploitation, they are also brave men and women determined to act to change their terrible working and living situations. Since a few months ago, they have actively participated in failed negotiations with government and owner representatives and they have also marched, demonstrated, talked to the press, met with other sectors and carried out a wide range of activities and initiatives. They have shown their capacity to organize and act collectively in many ways: dialogues with state institutions, grassroots mobilizations and work stoppages (last March), caravans and tours through different towns and cities in Baja California and the country to publicize their fight and make alliances, visits and meetings with authorities in other parts of the country including the Federal District Government and federal government offices such as the National Human Rights Commission and the Ministry of Government.

They have forged alliances with labor and indigenous organizations in Mexico and the United States [9] and have built relationships with religious communities, collectives and organizations defending human and workers rights. These actions have generated and amplified public and media attention to their demands and their current labor and living conditions, and engendered wide support among citizens and organized civil society.

<http://www.cipamericas.org/archives/15532>

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Footnotes

[1] "Valle de San Quintín un ejemplo de explotación y abusos que ocurren en 18 estados del país" [San Quintín Valley, An example of exploitation and abuses occurring in 18 states in the country]. Red de Jornaleros Internos, La Jornada, 27 de March 2015

[2] "Frente indígena binacional se solidariza con jornaleros de San Quintín", [Binacional Indigenous Front in solidarity with San Quintín day labourers] La Jornada, 27 de March 2015

[3] "Ganarán jornaleros de San Quintín \$ 200 diario" [San Quintín Day Labourers Earn \$200 a Day], La Jornada, 15 May 2015

[4] "Patrones rechazan para \$200 al día a jornalero BC" [Owners Refuse to Pay BC Day Labourer \$200], La Jornada, 16 May 2015

[5] According to the Global Slavery Index, Mexico is the number one country in the Americas in this category and is where at least 266,000 persons are victims of slavery, with the three main sectors

engaging in this practice being agriculture, mining and tourism. “Esclavitud aún en 2015: México tiene el índice más alto en América Latina” [Slavery Still in Existence in 2015: Mexico Ranks Highest in Latin America], Animal Político, 30 March 2015

[6] According to the Red de jornaleros agrícolas [Agricultural Day Labourers’ Network], the states where the exploitation of agricultural day labourers takes place are Sinaloa, Sonora, Baja California, Baja California Sur, Chihuahua, Guanajuato, Zacatecas, Jalisco, Nayarit, Colima, San Luis Potosí, Querétaro, Veracruz, Morelos, Hidalgo, Michoacán, Mexico State and Chiapas. “Esclavitud aún en 2015: México tiene el índice más alto en América Latina [Slavery Still in Existence in 2015: Mexico Ranks Highest in Latin America], Animal Político, 30 March 2015

[7] “Jornaleros de San Quintín: entre la explotación moderna y la resistencia social”, Contralínea, 12 April 2015

[8] “Esclavitud aún en 2015: México tiene el índice más alto en América Latina” [Slavery Still in Existence in 2015: Mexico Ranks Highest in Latin America], Animal Político, 30 March 2015

[9] “Valle de San Quintín un ejemplo de explotación y abusos que ocurren en 18 estados del país” [San Quintín Valley an example of exploitation and abuses occurring in 18 states in the country]. Red de Jornaleros Internos, La Jornada, 27 March 2015