

# COVID-related strikes hit Washington apple sheds

David Bacon

[This story first appeared on Capital & Main, an award-winning publication that reports from California on economic, political and social issues.]

The COVID-related strike in Washington state's Yakima Valley quadrupled in size as workers walked out at three more apple packinghouses. More than a hundred stopped work on May 7 at Allan Brothers Fruit, a large apple growing, packing and shipping company in Naches, in Central Washington. On May 12 they were joined by 200 more workers, who walked off the job at the Jack Frost Fruit Co. in Yakima, and at the Matson Fruit Co. in Selah. The next day another 100 workers walked out at the Monson Fruit packing shed, also in Selah.

At the center of the stoppages are two main demands for those who decide to continue working during the pandemic: safer working conditions and an extra \$2 an hour in hazard pay.

Apple sheds line the industrial streets of Yakima Valley's small towns. Inside these huge concrete buildings, hundreds of people labor shoulder-to-shoulder, sorting and packing fruit. If someone gets sick, it can potentially spread through the workers on the lines, and from them into the surrounding towns. Although packinghouse laborers are almost entirely immigrants from Mexico, their families comprise the stable heart of these areas. Most have lived here for years. Jobs in the sheds are a step up from the fields, with year-round work at 40 hours per week.

This part of agribusiness is by far Central Washington's largest employer, and the industry has successfully fought off unions for many years. The virus may change that, however, if the strike wave becomes the spark for creating a permanent organization among these workers. It is undoubtedly what the companies fear when they see workers stop the lines, and even more so, when they see farmworker union organizers helping to sustain the walkouts.

"The most important demand for us is that we have a healthy workplace and protection from the virus," said Agustin Lopez, one of the strike leaders at Allan Brothers. "Fourteen people have left work over the last month because they have the COVID-19. So far as we know, the company isn't paying them. We need protections at work, like adequate masks, and we want tests. How do we even know if any of us have been infected if there are no tests?" (Allan Brothers Fruit did not respond to phone and

email requests for comment for this story.)

He charges that Allan Brothers didn't disinfect the plant and stop production when the workers got sick. One worker, Jennifer Garton, told the *Yakima Herald*, "They are not doing what they're saying they're doing," and that workers only heard about the cases of COVID-19 in the plant through their own conversations.

According to Lopez, at the end of April the workers sent an email to company managers, asking for better conditions, extra pay, and the right to take off work. "People



were taking their vacations or sick leave or anything they could to stay home. The company said that if we had worked for five weeks we could stay home, but they wouldn't pay us. We're only making minimum wage, so how could we do that? And we have no guarantee we would even have our jobs back if we don't come in to work now."

In response to the demands, he says the company offered to buy the workers lunch. Over a hundred workers rejected that and struck the company.

The shed of another Yakima packer, Roche Fruit Company, did stop work in April to disinfect the plant, after two workers had become infected. Roche employees then also demanded hazard pay in a message to managers. When the company offered an additional \$200 per month, the laborers stopped work after lunch on May 11. After an hour of bargaining, the company offered them \$100 per week instead, and they went back to work. Operations manager Alfonso Pineda said the company had already planned to give workers "gratitude pay" for working in difficult circumstances.

"At the heart of the dissatisfaction of all these workers is the fact they are essential workers, but their pay does not reflect that," says Edgar Franks, the political director of the new union for Washington

farm workers, *Familias Unidas por la Justicia*. He explains that workers from both Roche and Allan Brothers got in touch with them when they were getting ready to

Inside these huge concrete buildings, hundreds of people labor shoulder-to-shoulder, sorting and packing fruit.

strike. "The walkouts then started after management refused to raise their wages. At Roche, when union organizers and leadership arrived, management quickly relented. This is the power of the presence of the union."

concerned that no one is looking after them or the wellbeing of their family and friends still inside."

Agustin Lopez has lived in the Yakima Valley and worked in its sheds since 1985. His experience has made him cautious, therefore, about predicting whether workers will decide if a permanent union is the answer to their problems. But when he looks at the waves of people leaving the apple sheds, each

company encouraging the next one, he thinks change is not just possible, but happening around him. "This connection between us is something new," he says, "and there are people out here from lots of the plants. Maybe we are actually a federation." The answer will be determined by the strike, he believes. "If the companies are willing to negotiate, we'll listen to what they have to say. And if not, then we will continue with our strike."

David Bacon covers labor and immigration for a variety of publications. His latest book is *The Right to Stay Home. How US Policy Drives Mexican Migration* (2014).

This article is reprinted by permission of Capital & Main, copyright 2020.



# Local students undeterred by coronavirus

Jenny Jang, Joy Matsuoka, Kaylee Shen

We are juniors at Olympia High School. After hearing about people suffering both directly and indirectly from the coronavirus last December, we felt driven to help. Students Against Coronavirus is a project under a student organization we created called "AI Benefit Projects."

Getting official approval to expand the project

We started with a fundraiser at our high school, to send direct relief to Wuhan, but since then we have expanded into much more. We worked for a month to get our project approved by the Olympia School District with an expansion to include more community activities besides fundraising. Thanks to our Associated Student Body president and other student body leaders, the project has grown to include all the high schools in greater Olympia.

Through "Students Against Coronavirus," we have found out how students can have an impact in their local communities. By expanding from OHS to five other high schools, the project connected students to help at the local food bank, to provide childcare for medical workers, to assist the elderly and to raise money for direct relief and vaccine research.

Coming up with ways for students to help

The childcare idea came from Abby Burtner, a senior at OHS. Together we created a form for students to sign up to provide child care for medical workers. This was before the statewide

stay-at-home order, so we were still able to go out. Many schools had already shut down and since medical workers had to work extra during COVID-19, we thought it would help if they had someone to watch their kids while there was no school. Students from many high school responded and we contacted hospitals to spread the word.



Left to right: Kaylee Shen, Jenny Jang, Joy Matsuoka

The food bank idea came from our ASB President, Chandler Sam, who worked with the Olympia Food Bank. Many food bank volunteers were over sixty years old, so it could be unsafe for them to continue working at the

food bank. Our student volunteers were able to help until the stay-at-home order was issued.

Learning leadership through experience

Being able to expand AI Benefit Projects into our community has been a blessing. It taught us many life lessons about leadership, hard work and responsibility. As leaders of the project, we learned the hardships that come with starting a project as well as the determination it takes to be a leader through the hard time of COVID-19.

Taking a breather to reflect on the human condition

Sadly, throughout this pandemic we have seen unfortunate actions, from racism against the Asian American community to people hoarding supplies, preventing members in our society that need supplies the most from getting them.

Through these troubling circumstances, this pandemic allowed us to reflect on the human condition and ourselves, teaching us invaluable life lessons.

We have learned that the world is beautiful, yet people often get consumed in themselves and take for granted the small things that bring us joy. "The things we take for granted, someone else is praying for." We forget what truly makes us happy until it is taken away from us. We have learned to appreciate what we have – safety in our homes, daily meals to share with our loved ones, video chats with close friends, technology that can still bring us education, time to spend with family among many smaller things. This pandemic has allowed us to take a breather to take care of ourselves and those around us.

Making an impact through aspiration and love

We originally chose "AI" because we planned to send relief to Wuhan. "AI" means "love" in Mandarin and is the character we use in our logo. "AI" also stands for Aspiring Impact in recognition of our expanded project. We believe that students can make a positive and lasting impact in the world, ultimately shaping the future we envision. So our name "AI Benefit Projects" shows our goal and our means to achieving it: to make an Aspiring Impact through love or "ai." Through this organization, we are looking to start new projects in the future, expand, and continue to inspire others.

As we go through this time together, we hope our community will stay healthy. Thank you for supporting students and organizations such as AI Benefit Projects as we move forward amid this pandemic.



The City and the local Arts Alliance dreamed up a project to enliven downtown during the shutdown, "Artists on Board." Several artists painted murals in the safety of their home workshops and then installed them on Legion Way and other streets. The murals were installed at the end of May. You should take the opportunity to visit the many installations on Legion and on other streets downtown, as they will be taken down as we move through Phase 2. Photos by Paul Peck

## Centralia Square Antique Mall

Antiques • Restaurant • Hotel

Directions from Olympia  
South on Interstate 5  
Off at Exit 82 (Factory Outlets)  
East on Harrison  
Right on Pearl  
201 S Pearl & Locust

Open 7 days  
10am-5pm



THE  
brotherhood  
LOUNGE

daily happy hour 3-7

119 CAPITOL WAY  
WWW.THEBROTHERHOODLOUNGE.COM