

Workers upset over wages, conditions at Mount Vernon farm

By Shelby Rowe
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MOUNT VERNON — Nearly three dozen farmworkers walked off the job over the weekend at Valley Pride — a first for the farm in its 35 years — over wages, housing and living conditions.

On the first day of blackberry picking Aug. 3, three workers left because they wanted higher wages, said Valley Pride owner Larry Jensen.

On Saturday, 35 of about 50 blackberry workers walked off the job. Four remained off the job Monday.

Maru Mora Villalpando, spokeswoman for Familias Unidas por la Justicia — an independent union supporting farmworkers — said it's unclear when those workers may return.

A recent state Supreme Court case that ruled workers must be paid separately for breaks — a ruling that resulted from litigation filed by former Sakuma Bros. workers — prompted Valley Pride to switch from piece-rate wages to an hourly wage plus an incentive bonus.

Jensen said he pays his workers \$10 an hour plus an incentive that kicks in after workers have picked more than 10 pounds of blackberries an hour. He has no plans to negotiate higher wages.

Workers say the system is confusing and think the wages are unfair, Villalpando said.

The workers approached Familias with reports of poor housing conditions, and no access to bathrooms and drinking water while in the fields, Villalpando said.

Villalpando said if the workers did have access to bathrooms, the conditions were unsanitary.

Jensen said there is a dispute over wages, but reports of poor conditions are untrue. He said port-a-potties and drinking water are in the fields and always available for workers.

“(Those complaints) were a straight lie,” Jensen said. “We have a third party auditor who checks the conditions and we passed those audits. That part was clearly untrue.”

Villalpando doesn't think the workers have a reason to lie, but said they have not filed complaints with the state Labor & Industries Department or the state Department of Health.

Familias Unidas por la Justicia will discuss filing a complaint at its weekly meeting Sunday, Villalpando said. She said the workers were inspired to take action after two court cases were decided in favor of the union for paid breaks and housing.

“In my personal opinion and based on what I’ve heard was the fact that they saw Familias Unidas por la Justicia being a strong union and being able to work and help support several groups in the county, but beyond that having won litigation,” Villalpando said. “They’ve been watching what’s been going on at Sakuma.”

While Sakuma Bros. is familiar with strikes and work stoppages after combating the issue for several years, Jensen said he’s never experienced this before. He wants to resolve the issue.

“This was brand new to me,” Jensen said. “It was hard. I told them that I was very thankful to have them working and I need them to work. But I also understand if they have a better opportunity elsewhere. I can’t renegotiate something every day or every week. Frankly, there’s not enough margin (for profit) in it.”

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