

Basin/Northwest

Workers get \$1 raise, end strike

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MATTAWA — King Fuji Ranch workers rejoiced Wednesday as union leaders and bosses reached an agreement following a five-day strike at the farm near Highway 24 between Othello and Mattawa.

About 100 apple pickers, tractor drivers and other laborers walked off the job Saturday, demanding higher wages and sanitary work conditions.

An agreement, which calls for a \$1 an hour raise for most workers, was reached around 3 p.m. Wednesday. Picketers returned to their jobs this morning.

King Fuji owner Mike Taggares could not be reached for comment and may be out of the state, according to his father, Pete Taggares of Othello.

Supervisors at King Fuji said they were instructed by company officials not to comment. Taggares and another company official, Joe Wright, did not return messages left at the farm office Wednesday afternoon.

Lupe Gamboa, director for the United Farm Workers Union, read the contract in Spanish to about 50 workers milling just outside the gates to the 700-acre farm.

Pickers, who have been thinning the expensive, sweet apples, will receive a raise from \$5 to \$6 an hour. Wages for tractor drivers will increase from \$6 to \$7 an hour.

Irrigators, who had been paid \$6.50 an hour, will receive a 25 cent raise, and crew leaders will be paid \$7 an hour, Gamboa said.

The farm employs 240 workers. Workers cheered and chanted "Viva la union!" and "Si se puede!" (yes, it can be done). They waved union flags and signs in Spanish declaring "Dignity and Respect."

It's impossible to live off \$5 an hour, even when working 11-hour days, said Rose Ocampo, an Othello mother of two and picker at the farm.

Some workers feared their negotiations would be futile, she said. King Fuji initially offered \$5.50 an hour with the promise of a 50-cent-an-hour bonus at the end of the season.



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King Fuji Ranch workers celebrated an agreement reached between union representatives and company officials Wednesday. The agreement, which calls for a \$1 an hour raise for most employees, ended a five-day strike.

"We said 'no.' It's not fair," Ocampo said.

Company officials told picketers they were stupid to strike, Ocampo said, and threatened to call immigration authorities.

Another worker, Maria Aguirre of Mattawa, said she was confident from the beginning they would be victorious. She planned to celebrate by dining and dancing with her husband, she said.

Workers said they did not fear losing their jobs.

"There are always other farms," said Rafael Magara, a worker from Mattawa.

The labor supply is tight, Gamboa explained. Whereas there may have

been five workers to a job last season, there are only about 1.5 available applicants per job today, he said.

The change likely can be attributed to a recent crackdown on immigration laws.

In addition to establishing pay increases, the agreement also requires King Fuji to provide sinks and soap for workers to wash their hands and to clean the on-site restrooms regularly. Until now, workers have had no place to wash.

The agreement mandates fertilizers and other chemicals be applied according to law. Workers complained of eye irritation caused by chemicals sprayed on crops, Gamboa explained.

United Farm Workers was happy to

help with negotiations, Gamboa said, but did not see this as the end of the battle. Ultimately, the organization hopes to persuade workers to join the union and establish a union contract with King Fuji.

"We're not strong enough to do that. We're getting there though," Gamboa said. "The important thing is people know they can accomplish something by working together."