

Part 2

Strike continues at Vantage orchard

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According to Kittitas County Under Sheriff John Jewett, deputies from KCSO, Grant County and several WSP troopers were called at the scene to insure the safety of the workers and other law enforcement officials and that Huntzinger road remained open.

Jewett stresses that his deputies and all other enforcement officials involved with the strike at Auvil this week did not escort strikebreakers across the lines.

He said the law enforcement agencies do not get involved with labor disputes.

Jewett said that KCSO deputies made sure the road was open for the workers who wanted to go to work Tuesday morning and stressed that KCSO and Grant County deputies were not "escorting" them into the orchards as was implied by Gamboa.

"When I hear the word escort," he said, "I envision people on either side of the workers (who were going back to work). This did not happen, we were just making sure that the road remained open."

He added that the strikers had full access to the about 100 workers returning to work Tuesday morning

— either by yelling at them or waving flags.

Overall, Jewett said that strikers have been allowing the road to remain open and no one's safety has been threatened. He said that the one individual that Gamboa said was arrested during the strike was taken into custody because of a warrant completely unrelated to the strike and protest by workers.

According to WSP Lt. Bill Larson, troopers were called to the scene after three KCSO deputies feared for their safety Monday afternoon. He said troopers did not take part in any strikebreaking actions. Larson added that WSP troopers never favor one side or the other in labor issues and are never racially motivated.

"It is the WSP's policy to help everyone regardless of race or skin color," he said.

Larson said if the claims of racism made by Gamboa are found to be true, the WSP has a thorough investigative process

The apple workers went on strike during the busiest harvest period to complain about working conditions. They claim they are forced to work in pairs, and if some of the apples are bruised, one or both of the workers is fired without a right to appeal.

The workers are also striking

because they claim the owners do not pay them what they earn when they earn it.

Gamboa said "They withhold as much as \$15 per bin of picked apples, calling it 'bonus money.' ... In one case going back to 1996, a worker had earned over \$1,000 in bonus money, but was fired before the season ended and did not get what he was entitled to."

Paul King, the general manager at the Auvil Fruit Company, said his company is more than fair to his employees and said he pays them more than adequate wages for the work they do during the harvesting season.

"This all depends on the (workers)," he said. "We need to have bruise-free apples or we cannot sell them."

King said he pays his workers and average of \$8 to \$15 an hour, well above the \$7 to \$7.25 an hour other orchards are paying their employees, adding that Auvil is being unfairly scrutinized because of their historically high wages and well-known name.

King said that during the peak harvesting season, the 900-acre orchard employs up to 300 people including both migrant and full-time employees.