

# Mexican Farmhands Accuse U.S. Firms

## Panel Hears Washington Apple Pickers

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MEXICO CITY, Dec. 2—Mexican apple pickers working in the state of Washington accused their U.S. employers today of discrimination, health and safety violations and anti-union threats in the most sweeping labor complaint against U.S. companies under a five-year-old regional free-trade agreement.

"I came to the U.S. looking for better living conditions, looking for a better life, [but] I have found nothing of that," said Maria Gonzalez, 48, one of eight Washington state apple workers who testified in the first hearings held by Mexico against a U.S. company under labor-protection provisions of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA).

Gonzalez and other apple pickers and warehouse packers described alleged abuses including prolonged exposure to toxic chemicals, frequent verbal and physical abuse by supervisors, and threats and intimidation intended to prevent workers from organizing unions.

Today's hearing before a Mexican Labor Ministry panel reflected growing concern among Mexican officials, unions and newspapers over abuses and mistreatment of Mexican immigrants working in the United States on farms, in poultry and meat-packing plants and in other low-paying jobs often shunned by U.S. citizens.

NAFTA established a forum for complaints about unfair labor practices, mostly at the behest of NAFTA critics who expressed fears that companies in the United States and Canada would shift their operations to Mexico to take advantage of the looser regulatory environment there—exploiting workers in the process.

Of the 20 complaints that have been filed with NAFTA-established oversight commissions in the United States, Mexico and Canada over the last five years, 12 have been against Mexican firms, 6 against U.S. companies or agencies and 2 against Canadian entities.

Until today, however, no complaint against a U.S. company had gone to a hearing in Mexico. Mexico is holding the hearing, because NAFTA rules generally do not permit complaints to be heard in the country where the allegations took place.

The allegations filed on behalf of Washington state apple workers—the majority of whom are of Mexican descent—represent the most comprehensive complaint filed yet against any of the three NAFTA countries and could set far-reaching precedents for laborers. Most of the 19 other cases have involved complaints that companies or national law inhibited workers' efforts to unionize or punished striking workers.

"This is a tremendous forum for exposing the reality that workers face, which in the long run could be

more important than the single case itself," said John August of the International Brotherhood of Teamsters, which is supporting the complaint filed by Mexican labor unions on behalf of the Washington apple workers.

While poor working conditions and abuses of workers in agricultural and industrial sectors in Mexico have been a frequent target of investigation by human rights organizations and unions, U.S. companies—and U.S. government enforcement of labor laws—have seldom found themselves under scrutiny of the type now permitted under NAFTA.

A ruling against the United States as a result of the complaint could result in fines against the U.S. government for failure to enforce labor laws, as well as loss of NAFTA tariff benefits for the Washington apple industry. But today's hearing was only the first step in a series of international reviews that would be required before any such action could be taken.

The apple industry—Washington state's largest agricultural industry—employs about 50,000 people in packing warehouses and in orchards during harvest. Mexico is the largest export market for Washington apples. Apple workers have been courted heavily in the past year by the Teamsters, who are trying to increase their sagging ranks by unionizing agricultural workers shunned by the union in the past. Attempts to unionize several Washington apple companies failed in elections earlier this year that have since been contested by the union.

The majority of apple pickers and workers in Washington make minimum wages of \$7.50 an hour—the amount they would receive for two days' work in the Mexican states of Michoacan and Oaxaca, where most of the workers are from.

In addition to the testimony of the eight workers taken during the closed hearings today, the labor union also submitted written statements from other workers. Grace Slojund, who said she had been working in the apple industry for 25 years, described her experiences in written testimony: "The Hispanics are intimidated and screamed at by the supervisors, there more than the whites are, whether they are legal or not."

Insofar as health issues, she wrote, "When the fumes become really bad, the supervisors say, 'Oh, we'll check it out.' But they never do it. Last year a lady in the back passed out and hit her head."

She added that she, along with many other workers, suffers from carpal tunnel syndrome: "You wake up in the night and your hands are asleep, you have pain in your shoulders, your elbows, your hands, your wrists. Every sorter knows it. It's just a hazard of the industry."