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Flat Top orchard workers picket for higher wages

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By Shirley Wentworth
Herald Basin bureau

Thursday's waiting game ended in disappointment for about 150 farm workers picketing Flat Top's Mid-Columbia ranches for higher wages.

At day's end, growers told workers they could not afford to pay any more than the current wage of \$6.50 an hour. And some of the workers who left the job Wednesday vowed to continue their strike.

It was a long, stressful day for Dave Hovde, co-owner of the orchards with Yakima-based Borton and Son. By evening, fatigue was evident in his voice.

Farm workers marched Thursday morning at the Flat Top orchard between Burbank and Prescott, then retreated to nearby Fishhook Park to strategize for what they thought would be a 4 p.m. negotiating session. About 100 of the workers waited.

Flat Top pays \$6.50 an hour, but workers want piece rates of \$30 a bin for Fuji apples, \$22 a bin for Braeburn and \$12 a bin for Red Delicious. And workers want \$8 an hour to pick Granny Smith, Gala and Pink Lady apples, which are more delicate and easily bruised and take more care to pick.

But with the apple industry experiencing a difficult market and many farmers complaining they're losing money or barely breaking even, Hovde said Thursday morning that that's a pipe dream.

"At those wages, we might as well let them fall on the ground," he said. Hovde said his partner is fortunately an old company that has money socked away so it can hang on through lean times.

He said he believes most of the striking workers are not employed

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by Flat Top but are instead union supporters who came to agitate about 35 or so workers he thinks walked off the job this week.)

However, Lupe Gamboa, regional director of the United Farm Workers, said the majority are from Flat Top.)

Hovde also disputed an earlier allegation that orchard supervisors were trying to sneak replacement workers through back entrances so they wouldn't have to cross picket lines.

The \$6.50 figure is in line with what other growers in the region are paying, he said. Flat Top paid \$5.75 an hour last year.

Hovde called the strike frustrating because of so much outside influence from the union and added that most of Flat Top's workers are long-time employees who work year-round.)

When a worker committee of eight returned to the ranch office to bargain at 4 p.m., there wasn't anything to bargain about. Hovde told them the company couldn't afford to pay higher wages.

"I tried to reiterate our position (about the failing apple industry)," he said. "But I don't know if we made any progress.

"They have to see our point of view, too. They talk about prices going up -- gas, housing -- but our prices are going up, too."

The negotiating committee returned to Fishhook Park frustrated. Workers listened with intent, sober faces as committee members broke the news. At the suggestion of returning to work today, heads started shaking, and a number of voices shouted, "No, we won't give up."

"He said, 'Everybody will have a job tomorrow -- at the same pay,' " said Jose Sanchez through an interpreter. "They were trying to brainwash us. There was general lamenting that prices have been bad for three years and that there's too much fruit this year."

Gamboa said the workers plan to stay on strike, try to make sure replacement workers don't cross the picket line and persuade more workers from Flat Top's five ranches to join.

"We'll try and raise money so people can stay on strike," he said. "We'll just concentrate on shutting down their operations."

Hovde, though, said the ranches seem to have more people coming and looking for work since the strike began.

"There's a lot of people out there who want to work, and not a lot of work out there," he said.

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