

# Washington state tulip farm workers strike against unsafe conditions and low wages

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Over 80 tulip farm workers in Skagit County, Washington, went on strike Tuesday in a struggle against unsafe working conditions and poverty wages. The strike took place one week before thousands of tourists visit Skagit for the annual Tulip festival. But the strike was suspended on Thursday so the union, Familias Unidas por la Justicia (FUJ), and Washington Bulb Company could come to an agreement and avoid disrupting the annual Tulip Festival. Discussion between the company and union will begin again on Monday.

The company website states that the Washington Bulb Company is the “largest tulip-bulb grower in the country,” and “one of the largest employers in the Skagit Valley.” The company now farms about 2,000 acres of land. Washington Tulip Company’s parent company, RoozenGaarde, is the largest grower of tulips, daffodils, and irises in the world.

The overwhelming majority of agricultural workers, who toil for extremely low wages in Washington state, and many other states across the US, are migrant workers. These workers are some of the most vulnerable in the US, and have been hit especially hard by the COVID-19 pandemic. Migrant agricultural workers in Yakima, Washington were among the most impacted by the virus. The Yakima agricultural workers have been left on their own, without being issued personal protective equipment, since the beginning of the pandemic. Similar conditions for migrant workers exist across the US.

The Skagit County farm workers have worked under terrible conditions. Workers are not given the proper equipment to protect themselves from winter weather, and are left exposed to dangerous pesticides. Washington Bulb Company does not give workers the proper gloves to stop the acidic plants from damaging

worker’s hands. These gloves must be medical grade to offer protection, and the workers themselves are forced to pay at least \$30 for one box of gloves. Workers are also angered by the unclear bonus payouts system, which is already inadequate at \$7.50 for a “bunch” of flowers picked. The company has not even provided enough portable toilets, and has compelled the farmworkers to bunch flowers together outside of work time. The farmworker’s demands also include an eight-hour workday and adequate sick leave time.

The annual Skagit Valley Tulip Festival places enormous pressure on workers. RoozenGaarde rakes in profits from the festival each year, and any work stoppage poses a direct threat to the company. The fact that the strike was suspended to avoid posing any threat must serve as a warning to workers that Familias Unidas por la Justicia is sabotaging their struggle.

Rather than seeking to broaden the struggle by mobilizing support from the broader working class, FUJ is oriented to impotent appeals to the “conscience” of the corporate owners.

In an interview with King 5 local news, a representative of the union stated that “a significant part of the workforce is picking tulips and daffodils. Hopefully everything can get resolved. The workers, I don’t think, chose this date to ruin the Tulip Festival. I don’t think it’s in anybody’s interest to go that far.” He went on to express hope that “everything can get resolved.”

Only a “part” of all the RoozenGaarde farmworkers had been allowed to strike. The company is “one of the largest employers in the Skagit Valley,” yet only about 80 workers were on the picket line on Wednesday, undermining workers’ leverage against the company. The union representative expresses the hope that “everything can get resolved” quickly, not that

workers' demands are met through the broadening of the strike. Contrary to the union's assertion, it is in the workers' interest to "go that far" to win their demands.

The FUJ began in Skagit County as an independent union in 2013, in response to the firing of a worker when they asked for a raise. However, it was soon co-opted by the official unions.

The FUJ became affiliated with the Washington State Labor Council AFL-CIO in 2015, contradicting the claim made across the mainstream media that the FUJ is "independent." The record of decades of betrayals by the AFL-CIO bureaucracy should serve as a warning to farmworkers and workers across all industries. The AFL-CIO receives its marching orders from the Democratic Party, and serves the interests of the ruling elite.

To broaden their struggle and win their demands, Skagit County farm workers must form independent rank-and-file committees, controlled by the workers themselves. These committees must be entirely independent from the trade unions, and the Democratic Party which the official unions faithfully serve. These committees must call on other agricultural and other workers across Washington and broader sections of the working class such as teachers, Amazon workers and Boeing workers in a fight against austerity, poverty wages, war and the pandemic policy of mass infection and death.



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