



By Carl Collen

Wednesday 19th March 2008

## Chile labour disruption begins to ease



A four-day strike over workers' wages at the Port of Valparaiso in Chile has reportedly come to an end

**W**orkers at the Port of San Antonio in the region of Valparaíso, Chile, signed a preliminary agreement with the government on Friday, ending a four-day strike that has come at a bad time for the country's fresh fruit deal, according to the Santiago Times.

The strike was started last Tuesday by San Antonio's public sector dock workers, who claimed that the government had not responded favourably to a January petition requesting better wages and benefits. Workers were also protesting against the modernisation of the port, which has resulted in a number of lay-offs, the newspaper reported.

The strike has caused an estimated loss of US\$4m and left 12 ships queuing

outside the port. The labour strife comes at an especially difficult moment for fresh fruit growers, who are already suffering from the current drought conditions in Chile and the low value of the US dollar.

Labour under-secretary Mauricio Jélvez, who will head up the commission created to resolve the conflict, reportedly said that port activity would "return to normal shortly".

Last week also witnessed the end of another labour conflict in Chile, this time within Region VI's Verfrut fruit export company, which is located at Las Cabras in the heart of the country's Central Valley.

According to the Santiago Times, masked workers shut down the Verfrut fruit packing plant last

Tuesday, destroying company property, burning a truck and stealing three laptop computers in the process. Early the next morning, masked workers also blocked traffic on the principal road connecting the bulk of Chile's fruit export companies to the ports of San Antonio and Valparaiso.

An agreement was finally reached last Friday following three days of demonstrations, which a Verfrut executive attributed to "outside agitators". According to the newspaper, Luis Sánchez, the president of the Cachapoal Valley Temporary Field Workers' Union, claimed that Verfrut had agreed to implement a wage increase of 30 per cent.

"It's not the agreement we wanted," he was quoted as saying, "but it's a big step forward."