



Land & Liberty:

How Migrant Farmworkers Are Organizing for a Better Future

WRITTEN BY DAVID BACON

Familias Unidas por la Justicia (FUJ) was born when migrant indigenous Mexican blueberry pickers refused to go into the fields of Sakuma Brothers Farms after one of them had been fired for asking for a wage increase. Workers then organized work stoppages for the next four years to raise their piece-rate wages. At the same time, they organized boycott committees in cities on the Pacific Coast to pressure Sakuma's main customer, the giant berry distributor Driscoll's Inc. In 2017, the farm's owners agreed to an election, and the union won. Familias Unidas then negotiated a two-year contract with Sakuma Brothers Farms.

"We know this contract is going to change our lives," says Ramon Torres, Familias Unidas president. "We have always been invisible people, but now our children will have the opportunity to keep studying. It is not that we want to get them out of the fields, but we want them to have an opportunity to decide what they want. Our members understand that we are not just farmworkers. We are part of a community."

Since signing the contract, work stoppages have occurred on many nearby ranches. Most of those workers are also Mixtec and Triqui migrants from Oaxaca and Guerrero in southern Mexico, who now live permanently in rural Washington. Familias Unidas has been able to help workers in these spontaneous strikes. The piece rate for picking berries at Sakuma Brothers Farms has increased dramatically, with some workers earning as much as \$30 per hour. Now farmworkers at other farms have taken action to raise their own wages.

"The wages on the other farms are much lower," Torres explains. "So, our vision is to help form independent unions and negotiate contracts there also. Everything is led by the workers. The purpose is to grow the union, so that all of us have fair wages."

After winning its contract, Familias Unidas members organized the Cooperativa Tierra y Libertad. Rosalinda Guillen, director of Community2Community Development in Bellingham, helped workers form both the union and the cooperative. "Today, the production of food is based on how much profit a farmer or a corporation can make," she charges. "Farmworkers are a cost. Growers do not invest in us because they do not believe we are worth it."

But she believes the culture of indigenous farmworkers is a resource for developing sustainable agriculture. "Many migrants coming to the U.S. were farmers in Mexico and Central America. Because of trade agreements like NAFTA, they were displaced and moved north. Many are in the caravans and now in the detention centers in the U.S. But they know how to grow food with no chemicals, how to conserve water, how to take care of the land. We have to organize these farmers and see them as a resource, because the corporate food system is poisoning

the earth and the water. Farmworkers suffer illness from pesticides and broken bodies because of the pressure to work fast under bad conditions. The average lifespan of a farmworker is forty-nine years. Fourteen years ago, it was forty-seven years."

In the eyes of Torres and the workers, the cooperative is an alternative for workers to the wage exploitation they have suffered since coming to the U.S. This cooperative uses the tradition of mutual help that is part of the indigenous culture of the workers themselves. "In the cooperative, we are educating workers," he says. "We want to be an example. We do not need supervisors or managers. We do not need owners. We can be the owners - we just need land."

Tierra y Libertad has just signed an agreement to purchase sixty-five acres in Everson, in addition to the two acres it is already farming near Sumas. Twenty acres are planted in red raspberries, seven in blueberries and four in strawberries. In addition to the handful of founding members, five more families are being trained in the cooperative's operations. Last year, it sold berries in community food cooperatives, stores on Kamano Island, local fruterias, and even in front of churches after services. When the harvest begins in the spring, they hope to expand to other areas as well.

"We want a system in which we can live and buy locally," Torres says. "Where our gains stay here in the county. At the same time, we will compete with the corporations that have been making money from us."

Basic to the vision of both Familias Unidas and the cooperative is the idea that farm work is skilled, and it should provide a decent life and respect for those who do it. One of the biggest obstacles, however, is the growth of the H-2A visa program that treats immigrant farmworkers as temporary labor, contracted for the harvest and then sent back to Mexico once it is over.

Companies using the H-2A program must apply to the U.S. Department of Labor, listing the work, living conditions and wages workers will receive. The company must provide transportation and housing. Workers are given contracts for less than one year and must leave the country when their work is done. They can only work for

the company that contracts them, and, if they lose that job, they must leave the country immediately.

In 2017, Washington growers were given H-2A visas for 18,796 workers, about 12,000 of whom were recruited by the Washington Farm Labor Association (WAFLA). In 2017, about 200,000 H-2A workers were brought to the U.S., and in 2018, the number exceeded 242,000. "In the capitalist system, we are disposable and easily replaceable," Guillen says. "The guest worker program is a good example. You bring people in and ship them out and make money off of them. It is time to end that. We are human beings, and we are part of the community."

We want a system
in which we can live
and buy locally...
At the same
time, we will
compete with the
corporations that
have been making
money from us.

In the summer of 2017, seventy H-2A workers refused to work at Sarbanand Farms in Sumas, after one of their fellow workers collapsed in the field and later died. The strikers were

then deported because workers with these visas have no right to strike. "The impact of this system on the ability of farmworkers to organize is disastrous," Guillen charges. Workers faced replacement at Sakuma Brothers Farms as well, before the union contract was negotiated.

The flow of workers is not the only cross-border issue facing Washington farmworkers. Recently, two leaders of the new independent union for agricultural laborers in Baja, California's San Quintin Valley visited Familias Unidas and the new cooperative. "Workers in Mexico and the U.S. work for the same companies, like Driscoll's," says Lorenzo Rodriguez, the General Secretary of the National Independent Democratic Union of Farmworkers (SINDJA). "It is important to form alliances with the workers of different countries. That is the only way we can face the companies. They are all coordinated. We must cooperate also."

Adds Abelina Ramirez, SINDJA's Secretary for Gender Equality, "Regardless of what country we live in, we have basic rights to education, to health care, and to the welfare of our children. If we unite and organize, we can win these rights."

PHOTO CREDIT: David Bacon.

