

# THE BINATIONAL FARM WORKER REBELLION

## Interviews with three farm worker leaders

Interviews by David Bacon

Familias Unidas por la Justicia (FUJ) was born in 2013 out of a work stoppage, when blueberry pickers refused to go into the fields of Sakuma Farms near Burlington, Washington, after one of them had been fired for asking for a wage increase. Workers then mounted a series of guerilla work stoppages over the next four years to raise the piece rate wages. At the same time they organized boycott committees in cities up and down the west coast to put pressure on Sakuma Farms' main customer, the giant Driscoll's Inc. berry distributor. In 2017 Sakuma's owners agreed to an election, which the union easily won. Familias Unidas then negotiated a two-year contract with Sakuma Farms.

In the meantime, work stoppages have hit many local ranches, including Rader Farms, Larson Fruit and others. Many were organized by farm workers who live locally. Most are Mixtec and Triqui indigenous migrants from Oaxaca and Guerrero in southern Mexico. In some cases, however, the paros have been organized by H-2A contract workers, brought to the U.S. under temporary work visas. In 2017 seventy workers refused to work at Sarbanand Farms after one of the fellow workers collapsed in the field, and later died.

A union contract has given Familias Unidas a support base for helping the workers in these spontaneous outbreaks. And because the piece rates for picking berries at Sakuma Farms has increased dramatically (allowing some workers to earn as much as \$30 per hour) farm workers at other farms have taken action to life their own wages.

Job actions like these are not unique to U.S. farm workers, and in fact seemed very familiar to two farm worker unionists from Mexico, who traveled to Wash-

ington to explore ways to give farm workers more power - cooperation across the border.

The National Independent Democratic Union of Farm Workers (SINDJA in its Spanish initials) is a new union for farm workers in the San Quintin Valley, the agricultural center of Baja California. It also was the product of action by workers in the fields. In 2015 thousands of farm workers in one of Mexico's main agricultural centers, in the San Quintin Valley, stopped work to demand better wages. Strikers were beaten and even shot by police. In the end they convinced the government to raise the minimum wage in Baja California for farm workers.

Out of that upsurge workers organized an independent union, SINDJA, and with the help of other progressive Mexican unions, forced the government to give it a "registro" - the legal right to exist and represent workers.



*A meeting in Washington state between Mexican and U.S. farm worker leaders*

The following are edited interviews with three farm worker union leaders, who discuss the cross-border relationship between their unions and the workers who belong to them: Ramon Torres, president of Familias Unidas por la Justicia (FUJ), Lorenzo Rodriguez, general secretary of the Sindicato Independiente Na-

cional Democrático de Jornaleros Agrícolas (SINDJA), and Abelina Ramirez, SINDJA's secretary for gender equality.

The meeting in Washington was facilitated by the Solidarity Center, allied with the AFL-CIO, the UCLA Labor Center, and Community2Community. The in-

interviews were conducted by David Bacon on October 14, 2018.

**Ramon Torres, President,  
Familias Unidas por la Justicia**

We can accomplish a lot together, depending on their needs on that side and the kind of solidarity we can offer. It was very important that they came and spoke with the workers to understand their struggles, and the process they used for winning it, and now how we work under our union contract. There's a lot of difference between how we fought then and how we do it now.

They were able to speak with Tomas Ramon in their own [Triqui] language. The majority of our members come from Oaxaca and Guerrero, Triquis and Mixtecos. Many of our members have family in San Quintin. When they went on strike there, we had a lot of communication with them because there are so many families with relations there, who were participating in their movement.

It's interesting that we're using the same tactics here that they're using in San Quintin. Here, when we saw the movie about Cesar Chavez, it gave us a deeper understanding of how that union functioned when it began. That way of organizing was a little different from the way it uses now, as a more established union. We decided to establish our own independent union, exactly the way they did when they began.

It's very common for workers, those who picking, to become the leaders of the movements. It's very moving, and it's also very just, that the people who are affected fight to win their rights, to win a union contract, and then to administer it.

No other person, from a different work experience, would have the experience to do that job or hold a leadership position. As a union, we're not interested in having someone from another kind of work, like construction or a doctor, become our vice-president or president. So we have something in our constitution that is very similar, that in order to run for office you have to have at least three years of experience working in the fields. Then you have to have a certain number of hours of training.

After talking with the union from San Quintin in Los Angeles, I can see we see many things the same way.

How we organize the work stoppages, how we talk with the people, how we organize. I think this comes from the culture of their towns, because it's not that difficult to organize the workers, in spite of not having laws in our favor.

All of this we didn't realize until we began talking.

Something that we're trying hard to establish is a union that the H-2A workers can trust. We have to organize the workers who are coming up from Mexico. We have to look for the forms for organizing them, and ensuring that they understand their rights in the U.S.



*Ramon Torres talks with a grower about the complaints of a group of workers who have recently joined the union*

If we know the places they [H-2A workers who have been part of the strike and union in San Quintin] are going to work that will be much better. It would be a very important step, and one that would help the people in San Quintin, because people would know their rights, and help us too, because it would make us stronger. If we can start talking about this with the San Quintin union, there are a lot of things we'll be able to do.

In all the strikes we've helped the H-2A workers organize, we've seen that they face the same problems we do - discrimination, no breaks, bad wages, deportations, unjust firings. Sometimes they don't take these workers to buy food for two weeks, so they have nothing to eat for lunch. They don't tell them where they can get medical attention. They don't know where to get a bus or where the airport is, so that they can move from one place to another. If there's an emergency, they don't know what to do.

So if they can get this knowledge in their towns, it will make it easier for them to organize here. It would help in San Quintin and here both.

It would help us to know who's been active in the movement in San Quintin. If we could identify those people, it would be much easier to take action if the workers aren't given breaks or lunch, or if there are other violations.

As a union, we are in solidarity with the workers. Sometimes you don't know at the beginning how things will turn out, but now we have our union contract and it covers 500 workers. But we're not going to just stay here. We want to do more, always when we have the people. Having the representatives of SINDJA here explaining what they want, we want very much to help. So let's see what we can do.

**Lorenzo Rodriguez, General Secretary  
Sindicato Independiente Nacional Democrático  
de Jornaleros Agrícolas**

To begin with, we [SINDJA and FUJ] can agree on what kinds of things we want to do. They have a contract with Driscolls and we are promoting a Driscolls boycott. We can compare our experiences in ways of organizing workers. The way they do things here in the U.S. could help us a lot. We can explain in San Quintin the model they're using here. But also some of the things we do in San Quintin could be implemented on this side of the border. So it could benefit us a lot.



*Lorenzo Rodriguez, in a Washington state berry field*

The most important thing we have in common are the people. The big majority of the people working here come from the same places, the same towns we come from. Even the same families. And farm workers have a lot in common, not just in the U.S. and Mexico, but in other countries too. Wherever you go the exploitation is the same. That's what we have to focus on in order to change things.

Because of these similarities, it's important that we form alliances with all the workers of different countries in order to make our struggles stronger. That's the only way we'll be able to face the companies. They are all coordinated. We have to realize this.

The companies are the same. For example, Driscolls. They're here in the U.S., in Canada, in China, in Mexico. Everywhere. And there are a lot of other transnational companies as well. But Mexico pays a lot less than most of them.

Another thing we're investigating is the program for H-2A workers. Many of our countrymen are coming through this program. It's very important to put them in touch with organizations here in the U.S. in different states, to see how we can work together to help them. Many of the workers coming with these visas are coming from San Quintin. The recruitment of H-2A workers is rising every year. They're bringing more and more workers.

We're very interested in their conditions here. Many of them don't have good food. They get abused. The company controls them completely and the workers can't defend their rights. The companies are the ones who get the visas for these workers. They can't raise their voices, and the companies threaten them. The companies sometimes accuse them of crimes, like stealing, in order to force them to leave the country. And then the companies blacklist them to prevent them from returning. All organizations should face these facts.

We're organized. We have a certain recognition by the people for our work. We have been able to consolidate our situation and we now have a legal existence. That makes it more possible for us to build alliances with other organizations, so that we can face these challenges together.

Our union and Familias Unidas are using similar tactics, although our situations can be complicated and a little different. Here the union consists of 3-400 workers. In San Quintin we have 50,000

farm workers, and more than 150 companies. But the kinds of things we've seen here, and yesterday in Oxnard where we met another group that's organizing to support workers there, are similar. The way they recruit workers, and the way they empower workers to change conditions.

We're coinciding, not just in using tactics like stopping work, but in the ways we recruit workers and organize them. The way Ramon and others who are leading these movements in the rows, like we do, gives workers the message that *Si Se Puede!*, that we can make a change. Together we can organize. Together we can walk out. Above all, we can represent ourselves.

We are overcoming the barriers. Like the way they say that a farm worker isn't worth anything, because he or she doesn't have any academic preparation. Today we're breaking down those barriers. We're also pushing forward a new generation. The children who are beginning to get involved in the struggle. They're understanding why their parents have been fighting for better conditions, so that they themselves can get a better education and do other kinds of work. And for those that continue working in the fields, they're understanding how to defend their rights.

Although we're organizations in different countries, we're all committed to the struggle. In the eyes of the world we're showing that farm workers can organize, with the support of many other people, like you with your photos or the lawyers. But the most important thing is the base here, the workers themselves. If there's no organization at the bottom, there's no group that can raise its voice about the conditions they are actually living in. And without that, the rest can't do anything.

Many workers who have participated in the strikes and social movements, not just in places like Lomas San Ramon or Nuevo San Juan Copala, have been blacklisted. No company will give them work. So then they're presented with the possibility, through

H-2A, of coming here. But they haven't yet made connections with the people who are struggling here. Some are also afraid of getting involved here.

There are many ways people are recruited into the H-2A program. The most important reason people agree is because of the wages. That's the main reason. Although a person might have a stable job here, paying 1,500 pesos a week, that's not enough here in Mexico to pay for the most basic needs for a family of 4 or 5 people. If they come to the U.S., where they pay a minimum of \$11/hour, for them it's much better. So of course people take advantage of that opportunity.

Those are the actual conditions people are working with, but I'm sure that in the future we'll see them participating in the struggles here in California. So we should prepare them for what they'll find here, and we should organize these H-2A workers.



*Barracks in Washington state for H-2A guest workers*

They are the same. Many of the people coming are members of our union. Some are even in the union executive committee, who leave their position for a while so that they can come work here because of their necessity. It's important to have contact with these people as they're coming here, and to help them build alliances with different organizations. Then when those workers begin to

organize, we will know who will help them and give them support.

Most important, we have to help them lose their fear, and understand that they're not alone here. There are many organizations here that will support their struggle. But as I've said many times, the people who are working in the rows will not raise their voices if they don't understand their rights, no matter how many alliances or groups there are that would support them.

In spite of the fact that our trip has been short, we've been able to get a better understanding of things here, to share our experiences, and to hear from unions in places like Morocco and Tunisia, and from the unions

that are organizing here in the U.S. We can see that the exploitation is the same everywhere. Big union and smaller groups all need to come together to confront this.

We have to have something real to offer workers who are not organized. We have small groups who are organized, but there is so much more to be done. The percentage of workers in Mexico who are in unions is only 7-8%. And of that, only 1% are in a democratic union. The others are in protection unions, charro unions, company unions. With over 88% of workers in no union at all, we need a clear strategy about how they can organize.

In the end, the strength is at the base, in the workers who are organized.

### **Abelina Ramirez, Secretary of Gender Equality Sindicato Independiente Nacional Democrático de Jornaleros Agrícolas**

I've been very impressed with what they [FUJ] have been able to achieve, and the story of how they faced a critical situation, their spirit and enthusiasm in confronting it, and the good result. It taught them a lot.

Now we need a coordination in how we can work together, especially since we see our same people working here, and that there are very similar labor violations to what we see in Mexico. I think we can make a good agreement about the kind of relationship we want to have, making decisions and putting forward proposals for defending the rights of the workers.

The situation of women is very similar in relation to their work, the exploitation and slavery. Also the wages. We can identify with what we've seen and we're committed to making things better. From our discussions it seems that the laws here are a little more fair than they are in Mexico, but in both places we can't hope for the government to come in and solve our problems. As workers, we have to do it ourselves.

I don't think women have a double job. I think it's a triple job. We are the first to get up in the morning, and the last ones to go to bed to rest. We don't just take care of the family, but we produce economically. We produce for all of society. The fruit of our work sustains not just the people immediately around us, but people in other countries of the world, when

we talk about the export of the fruit that we harvest.

Something that we say in San Quintin, especially that came out of the strike, is that we want a professional salary. We believe that our work is professional. We know how to identify and cut the good fruit. We know how to pack it. From the rows here where we work the fruit arrives directly to the table of the consumers. We are professionally qualified in the work of the rows, and all of the workers who do it deserve, not just in Mexico but here and in all the countries of the world, a professional wage for it.

We have basic rights - to education, to healthcare, to the welfare of our children - regardless of what country we live in. We produce what the whole society eats and drinks. So this work should be recognized and well-paid. Our children should be able to go to school. And we've discovered that if we unite and get organized, we can achieve these things.

As a woman, this is a broader vision of our work, including here in the U.S. and other countries. The people [on the delegation] from Morocco have made me admire what women all over the world have been able to do. Our job is to do more than take care of our children. We are contributing to the social and economic life of the whole society.



*Abelina Ramirez talks with Rosalinda Guillen, director of Community2Community*

After the strike in 2015 there wasn't a lot of participation by women, because of the same obstacles. The economy - that we have to work every day. The day that we organized for the strike, thousands and thousands of women participated. But then the real work began of training and education of organizers

and fighters. We had very little participation in that. Really, there are only two or three women who are trying to jump over those walls of ignorance, lack of time, and also machismo.

It's been hard for me to find women who can get involved. But we're going in the right direction. We're trying to train a new generation of women. I hear the voice of Tomas Ramon [a leader of FUJ] who said that he was very young in 2013 [when the Sakuma Farms strike started] but that his education began even before that.

We've really suffered because of the lack of women's participation, but the day that we achieve this we will have many victories.

Men play a very important role in making possible greater participation by women. Instead of prohibiting, they can open spaces for participation and education. Women aren't just good for serving children and husbands, but are needed for participating and holding public positions. Many women have achieved this. Our world of farm workers has ignored and failed to recognize what is possible. It has to be everybody's decision, not just women. I've met many women, both here and in Mexico, who are willing, but if they have no time or opportunity, it's logical that they won't be able to.



*Farm workers and supporters begin a march in memory of Honesto Silva, an H-2A guest worker who died in a Washington field of Sarbanand Farms*

As women and mothers, our first concern is for our home, and after that everything else. And that's where it becomes important for the men to offer support and help in the home so that we can participate and get involved in the work of society and in social struggle.

I want to greet all the women, not just of my country but of the United States and the whole world where there are working women. We do a lot, and if we get organized we can do much more.