



# Dismantling Racism in the Food System

Special multi-authored series on racism and liberation in the food system

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## Part III: The People Went Walking

*How Rufino Dominguez Revolutionized the Way We Think About Migration*

By David Bacon, edited by Luis Escala Rabadan



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*This publication is the final part of a three part Issue Brief on the life of the radical organizer, Rufino Dominguez. This Issue Brief is part of Food First's Dismantling Racism in the Food System Series. This Issue Brief has also been translated into Spanish.*

The FIOB, especially those leaders like Sergio Mendez who were veterans of the strikes and social movements of San Quintin, built chapters in Tijuana, Ensenada and the San Quintin Valley. After Pimentel's expulsion, however, his supporters left, taking many members from the Baja chapters. Then in 2001 Julio Sandoval, a Triqui migrant from Yosoyuxi, Oaxaca, was imprisoned for leading a land occupation in Cañon Buenavista, an hour south of the U.S. border. He spent two years in the Federal prison in Ensenada. His supporters came to the FIOB binational assembly

that year for help. After his release he was an active participant in the assemblies in 2005 and 2008.

Beatriz Chavez and Julio Cesar Alonzo were the two organizers for CIOAC in San Quintin at the end of the 1990s. Chavez led land occupations also, among Triqui and Mixteco farm workers. Like Sandoval, she was sent to the Ensenada prison. Her health was destroyed by her incarceration, however, and she died not long after her release. Despite the repression, however, the FIOB chapters were reorganized, and when farm workers in San Quintin again went on strike in 2015 the FIOB members were active participants.

When the FIOB began to organize in Oaxaca itself, “we began with various productive projects such as the planting of the Chinese pomegranate, the forajero cactus, and strawberries,” Rufino explained, “so that families of migrants in the U.S. would have an income to survive.” Those efforts grew into five separate offices in the state, and a membership base larger than that in the U.S. in more than 70 towns. In 1999, the Frente entered into an alliance with the PRD and elected Gutierrez Cortez to the state Chamber of Deputies in District 21. “For the first time we beat the caciques,” Rufino declared proudly.

Following his term in the state Chamber of Deputies, Gutierrez was imprisoned by then-Governor Jose Murat, until a binational campaign, with demonstra-

tions organized by the FIOB at Mexican consulates throughout California, won his release. While the spurious charges against him were quickly dropped, his real crime was insisting on a new path of economic development that would raise rural living standards, and on the political right to organize independently for that goal. “Before my arrest I thought we had a decent justice system,” he said. “Then I saw that the people in jail weren’t the rich or well educated, but the poor and those who work hard for a living.”

## The Right to Stay Home

Gutierrez was a teacher in Tecomaxtlahuaca, a town in the FIOB’s main base region in the Mixteca. He and other teachers in the FIOB have been leaders in the state teachers union, Section 22 of the CNTE. In June 2006 a strike by Section 22 led to a months-long uprising, led by the Popular Alliance of People’s Organizations (APPO). FIOB leaders, along with other teachers, helped organize the protests. The APPO sought to remove the state’s governor, Ulises Ruiz, and make a basic change in development and economic policy. Ezequiel Rosales, who led the union during the strike and insurrection of 2006, later became the FIOB’s Oaxaca state coordinator. The uprising was crushed by Federal armed intervention, and dozens of activists were arrested. FIOB leaders were named in arrest warrants as well. According to



*Romualdo Juan Gutierrez Cortez teaching a class in Tecomaxtlahuaca. Photo copyright © 2019 by David Bacon.*



Leoncio Vasquez, who heads the FIOB office in Fresno, “the lack of human rights itself is a factor contributing to migration from Oaxaca and Mexico, since it closes off our ability to call for any change.”

Participating in the APPO reflected the growing demand in the FIOB and other organizations in Oaxaca itself for alternatives to forced migration. The experience of Oaxaca-based activists led to discussions of a new way to look at it.

“Migration is a necessity, not a choice,” explained Gutierrez. “There is no work here. You can’t tell a child to study to be a doctor if there is no work for doctors in Mexico. It is a very daunting task for a Mexican teacher to convince students to get an education and stay in the country. It is disheartening to see a student go through many hardships to get an education here and become a professional, and then later in the United States do manual labor. Sometimes those with an education are working side by side with others who do not even know how to read.” He described the bitter feeling of talking to students whose family members were making more money at a blue collar job in the U.S. than he made as the teacher trying to convince them of the value of education.

As the FIOB organized its June 2008 binational assembly, dozens of farmers left their fields, and women weavers their looms, to debate the right to stay home instead of being forced to leave Oaxaca to survive. In the community center of Santiago Juchtlahuaca, two hundred Mixtec, Zapotec and Triqui farmers, and a delegation of their relatives working in the U.S., made impassioned speeches, their hot arguments echoing from the cinder-block walls of the cavernous hall. People repeated one phrase over and over: *el derecho de no migrar* – the right to not migrate.

Asserting this right challenges not just the inequality and exploitation facing migrants, but the reasons why people have to migrate to begin with. Indigenous communities were pointing to the need for social change to deal with displacement and the root causes of migration. It was this need that drove the uprising in Oaxaca in 2006.

“We need development that makes migration a choice rather than a necessity -- the right to not migrate,” said Gaspar Rivera Salgado. “We will find the answer to migration in our communities of origin. To make the right to not migrate concrete, we need to organize the forces in our communities, and combine them with the re-



*Rufino talks with former braceros in the palacio del gobierno, and stands with FIOB leaders and members of its weaving cooperative in Santiago Juchtlahuaca. Photo copyright © 2019 by David Bacon.*

sources and experiences we’ve accumulated in 16 years of cross-border organizing. Migration is part of globalization, an aspect of state policies that expel people. Creating an alternative to that requires political power. There’s no way to avoid that.”

Repression of the 2006 uprising by Oaxaca’s state government led teachers in Section 22, as well as the FIOB, the PRD and many civil society organizations in Oaxaca, to organize to get rid of the PRI. In the election of 2010, Gabino Cue Monteagudo, the former mayor of Oaxaca city, was elected governor by an unwieldy alliance between the PRD on the left, and the National Action Party on the right.

Following the election, Governor Cue held a meeting with FIOB leaders from both Oaxaca and California, in which they proposed measures to implement the right to not migrate. “We are going to create a Oaxaca in which migration isn’t the fated destiny of our rural and urban population,” he promised. FIOB’s binational coordinator at the time, Gaspar Rivera Salgado, responded that “FIOB has struggled for twenty years for the rights of migrants, and now we want to fight for the

right to not migrate, to change people's actual living conditions so that migration isn't their only alternative."

Cue appointed Rufino Dominguez to head an office charged with defending the interests of migrants, the Instituto Oaxaqueño de Atención al Migrante (the Oaxacan Institute for Attention to Migrants, IOAM). And when FIOB held its next binational assembly in 2011 in Oaxaca city, the gathering was opened by speeches from Rufino and other officials in the new state administration.

"Rufino was always more skeptical of electoral party politics than many of us, and thought that the political process corrupts people," Rivera Salgado remembers. "We really had to twist his arm to get him to agree to accept Cue's offer. We chose him because we knew he wouldn't get corrupted. It was part of the policy he'd agreed to, and he had to walk the walk. In the end he embraced the challenge, and said he wouldn't run away from it. But he always regretted the decision, and it turned into a very bitter experience for him."

At Oaxaca's 2011 celebration of the International Day of the Migrant on December 16, Rufino honored the first of Oaxaca's migrant workers to travel to the United States as braceros, from 1942 to 1964, and the women who cared for the families they left behind. Around the balconies of the interior courtyard of the Palacio del Gobierno, the ornate colonial state capitol building, he'd hung photographs showing the lives of current migrants from Oaxaca, working as farm laborers in California. Later he exhibited the photographs in many of the main towns sending migrants into the U.S.

"We want to show young people the reality of work in the north, so that they won't have illusions that life is easy there. While migration is their right, and we'll fight for their rights as migrants, we want them to think of having a future here. Our starting point is to understand the need for economic development," Rufino told the former braceros and other community leaders, "because the reason for migration is the lack of work and opportunity in people's communities of origin. If we don't attack the roots of migration, it will continue to grow. We have to have economic development, and respect for the human rights of migrants as they come and go."

Featuring former braceros in the celebration illustrated one element of IOAM's list of its accomplishments in its first year. Some 4,470 Oaxacans worked in the U.S.

during the bracero period, and were very old. The Cue administration gave 10,000 pesos (about \$800) to each worker, or to their surviving family members. The gesture sought to compensate to a small degree for the fact that braceros had money deducted from their wages while working in the U.S., which then disappeared once they returned to Mexico.

Rufino headed a state agency in a government in which the left was weak, and as a result the IOAM was always starved for funds. Nevertheless it invested 1.6 million pesos in a program to help women to get more training in developing new styles for artisan products, and worked on a program for housing improvement in communities with high rates of emigration. IOAM and teachers in Section 22 cooperated with activist teachers from California's Sacramento State University and the Davis campus of the University of California; together they trained teachers of migrant education to work in New York, California and Michigan among Oaxacan students.

Rufino and Romualdo Juan Gutierrez Cortez, appointed as his deputy, worked on the problems faced by migrants crossing into the U.S., as well as Central American migrants passing through Oaxaca itself. In Ciudad Ixtepec it helped create a Grupo Beta police team responsible for investigating and halting the widespread robberies and rapes suffered by Central American migrants. And facing the high rate of deportations from the U.S. (about 1 million during the first 2.5 years of the Obama administration), IOAM helped to repatriate 22,454 Oaxacan deportees during its first six months of operation.

Rufino signed an agreement in January 2012 with the United Food and Commercial Workers Union, to cooperate in protecting the labor rights of Oaxacans working in Canada as guest workers. "We have to make sure they understand their rights and how to enforce them," he declared. The agreement promised friction, however, with the consulates appointed by Mexico's federal government. They were, and are, notorious for discouraging guest workers in Canada and the U.S. from making complaints about violations of labor rights, or demanding wages and unions that would make them less attractive to employers.

"Rufino came from the left," said Bernardo Ramirez, former binational coordinator of the FIOB. "He came from the community. That produced his ideology. He believed in giving attention to those who have the least. The idea of the right to not migrate, which he elaborat-

ed first with Gaspar Rivera and Centolia Maldonado, was to attack poverty by organizing productive projects, and by trying to produce what we consume. It included the right to housing, to a decent standard of living and to jobs - to an alternative to going to the U.S. At IOAM he proposed a law for migration and presented it to the state Chamber of Deputies. It recognized the human rights of migrants, and treated migrants as political actors with the right to political participation. As it was finally passed, the law wasn't all that it could have been, but it was still an important achievement."

At the same time, however, Cue began to pressure Rufino and the IOAM to support the recruitment of guest workers in Oaxaca. Cue believed that encouraging recruitment would be politically popular, and that the remittances sent home by those workers would help economic development. While the FIOB had historically opposed those programs, Rufino had to support the government's policy if he intended to keep his appointment. "I think he was also tired of documenting the deaths on the border," Velasco recalled. "He began accepting the argument that guest worker programs would provide a safer way for people to do what they were going to do anyway - cross the border. And he was feeling more and more that he had no power to change the basic situation. In his tours through Oaxaca he saw clearly that migration was beating down communities. When he fought against guest worker programs in the FIOB he was fighting for the long term rights and sustainability of those communities. But later, in the IOAM, he was just trying to deal with the immediate crisis."

Rufino endured harsh criticism and attacks during his period as IOAM director, which undermined any feelings of accomplishment he otherwise might have had. "When a militant activist becomes part of the government there's a kind of isolation from the base and a lot of criticism," Velasco says. "It's very different from what happens when the left takes power. Somehow he was able to navigate alone, with few resources." In the end, though, his position became untenable.

At the beginning of Cue's administration, the teachers had negotiated the governor's support for their progressive education reform program. The Program for the Transformation of Education in Oaxaca concentrated on respecting indigenous culture and forging alliances between teachers, students, parents, and their communities. Teachers also wanted better conditions. "A typical teacher earns about 2200 pesos every two weeks

[about \$220]," according to Jaime Medina, a reporter for Oaxaca's daily Noticias. "From that they have to purchase chalk, pencils and other school supplies for the children."

Cue also promised not to implement the draconian corporate education reform demanded by the PAN, and then the PRI administrations in Mexico City. Those reforms included mandatory testing of teachers and students, and terminations of teachers. It sought to eliminate the power of teacher unions in states like Oaxaca, and to eventually abolish the normales - the radical teacher training schools. Still fresh in people's memory was the disappearance, and probable murder, of 43 students at the "normal" training school in Ayotzinapa two years earlier.

As the Federal pressure mounted, Cue caved in and agreed to implement the Federal reforms. In the spring of 2016 teachers struck across Mexico to try to stop them. On Sunday, June 19, 2016, demonstrators blocked a highway in Nochixtlan, not far from Oaxaca's capital, after the Federal government arrested leaders of Section 22. Heavily armed police then fired on teachers, students, parents and supporters. Nine people were killed, and many more were wounded. Nochixtlan became a symbol throughout Mexico of the teachers' resistance to corporate education reform, and in Oaxaca, of the Cue administration's betrayal of teachers and the movement that put him in office. Three days after the massacre, Rufino resigned and went back to California.

Romualdo Juan Gutierrez Cortez was FIOB's binational coordinator from 2015 to 2018, and worked with Rufino at the IOAM. "FIOB forced Gabino Cue to take on the issue of migration," he recalled, "especially implementing the right to not migrate. But after he was appointed director of the IOAM Cue never gave him enough financial support for the projects he wanted to develop, especially helping the families of migrants working in the U.S. and protecting the migrants from other countries travelling through Oaxaca. Cue really had no commitment to the people. That became clear, first in his blow against the teachers, and finally at Nochixtlan, where we saw his true face. The three defenders of indigenous communities - David Juarez, Adelfo Regino and Rufino - all resigned."

Returning was a heavy blow personally. In the late 1990s Rufino and his first wife, who had four children together, were divorced. "I got divorced because I was away from them too much," he said later. "I dedicated more of my time to the community, to meetings, than





*Rufino opens the FIOB office in Greenfield. Photo copyright © 2019 by David Bacon.*

to my family. After 15 years of being married, we had to separate. My wife and family thought that because I preferred this work it was obvious that I didn't love them, that it was irresponsible for me not to give them the time that they deserved or needed. But it was hard for me to see so many problems and not do anything about them. I wanted to make a difference. So it was very difficult for me to say no. Divorce is still not too common in our community, but more people get divorced now. With time it will be something more normal, I think."

Oralia Maceda fell in love with Rufino as they worked together in Fresno, and eventually they were married and had two children. When Rufino was appointed the director of the IOAM, Maceda had to sacrifice her work and the chance to use her considerable organizing skills to move to Oaxaca. Nevertheless, they bought a house near the airport, where they lived during his work for IOAM. After leaving Oaxaca, they returned to Fresno. Rufino went to work for the FIOB's fundraising arm, the Binational Center for Indigenous Oaxacan Development, trying to reorganize its office in Greenfield, in the Salinas Valley. He soon discovered that he had a brain tumor, and after struggling with doctors and hospitals for a year, he died on November 11, 2017.

In bringing his body back for burial in her hometown of Paxtlahuaca, an hour from Juxtlahuaca, Maceda completed an odyssey that had begun for her two decades earlier, when her brother asked her to go to a FIOB workshop on human rights. "They talked about the Agreement of San Andres, the autonomy of indigenous people and why we needed to support the Zapatistas," she remembered. "I wondered why in school no one had told me about this. So I started to think. I am still upset that no one told me before that I was an indigenous person, or taught me the language. As a child, when I would say a word in Mixteco, my grandpa would get mad and say that word is only used by Indians. My mom was not allowed to speak in Mixteco. When I got involved with FIOB I realized that I was indigenous too."

## Rufino's Contribution

Migrant scholar Jorge Hernandez, at the Benito Juarez Autonomous University of Oaxaca, traces the evolution of Rufino's ideas in a 2005 article for the Oaxacan magazine, *En Marcha*. "His ideological journey can be seen in a curious detail of his family life - the names of his children," Hernandez writes. "The oldest is Lenin, and the next is Ivan, born at a time when Rufino was begin-

ning his political life. Although he doesn't call himself a Marxist-Leninist, it was in organizations with those ideas that he began his political development. The third is named Ruben, in honor of Ruben Jaramillo [a leader of the Mexican Revolution and movements for land reform, who organized a guerilla struggle against the government of the 1950s], born when Rufino was part of the popular struggles. His daughter, Tonyndeye, has a Mixtec name, which speaks to Rufino's concern for the defense of migrants and indigenous identity. Only his fourth son, Esteban, was named as a result of a family decision to use Rufino's own middle name." Rufino's youngest child, born after Hernandez' interview, is a boy, Numa Yi. - another Mixtec name. Rufino also had a daughter, Yusi.

In his oral history for Communities Without Borders, Rufino notes that his worldview evolved. "Well, my ideas have changed, especially in this country," he explained. "In Mexico things are very different. The movements there are much bigger. Here, when there are demonstrations or marches, there are fewer people because we depend on cars, and if there are no cars, then nobody moves."

Nevertheless, in the transnational perspective that is the thread running through his life, the fight of indigenous communities is the same on both sides of the border, although the context is different. "Mexicans in the United States should have political rights," he asserted. "It's not enough to fight for changes and politically pressure authorities through marches and demonstrations. We need to start political projects, laws that help migrants, the indigenous, and Mexicans in general. Laws should better represent our experiences, because most are made by people that have never experienced the problems we have. We have to be autonomous from political parties, and at the same time have alliances with them, without losing our identity or being dependent on politicians."

According to Gaspar Rivera Salgado, "Rufino integrated his ideas into a single organizing strategy that was his contribution to the politics of resistance. He believed in fighting for the rights of immigrants, but he saw this in a larger context - that it was necessary to transform society. He never abandoned that left idea of organizing popular resistance on a grass roots level to confront power. His goal, in part, was to kick the PRI out of power, but he believed that this could happen through the political process, rather than outside of it through armed confrontation.

"He applied the ideas he grew up with to the migrant experience, and that's what you see in the FIOB today. Now his ideas are being transformed yet again, by a new generation that never lived in Oaxaca, with new ideas."

Laura Velasco describes Rufino as someone with a soft-spoken style, much in the same way people talk about Cesar Chavez. "His idea was to listen, and then transform people's thinking," she says.

"Rufino was a man from a poor family, a comunero from an indigenous community who knew the daily life of migrants. He showed that migrants can organize, and together with the Zapatistas, he helped change the consciousness of Mexicans about the role of indigenous communities. The FIOB has made a very important contribution to Mexican politics, to the left especially. The Frente is organized from the base up. It's an activist, militant organization, in which its members, and not some political party, make the decisions. Today you can see Rufino's legacy in the pages of La Jornada [Mexico's leftwing daily newspaper], in which the FIOB is treated as an interlocutor, interpreting indigenous reality for a broader audience."

## Notes on Names and Sources:

I follow the normal convention with all the names, referring to people by their last name, except in the case of Rufino himself. In part this is to separate him from his father at the beginning, but also because it gives a feeling of familiarity rather than distance, which seems appropriate to me.

The sources for almost all the quotes are from my own interviews with the people quoted, conducted over the last 17 years. A few are from other, written sources, which are noted in the text itself. I note that one of the main interviews with Rufino took place when I did a first attempt at an oral history, in the summer of 2002. In that case I note in the text that it was for a book, Communities Without Borders, published in 2006. Other interviews, like that of Irma Luna and Oralia Maceda, were made in the same period. There are many others that would add detail new perspectives to this history, some of which were published in that book and in The Right to Stay Home.





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## About this special series:

This Issue Brief is the twelfth in a multi-authored series on "Dismantling Racism in the Food System." In this series we seek to uncover the structural foundations of racism in the food system and highlight the ways people, communities, organizations and social movements are dismantling the attitudes, institutions and structures that hold racism in place. Food First is convinced that to end hunger and malnutrition we must end injustices in the food system. Dismantling the injustices of racism in the food system, in the food movement, in our organizations and among ourselves is fundamental to transforming the food system and our society.