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BURLINGTON, WA - Migrant farm workers on strike against Sakuma Farms, a large berry grower in northern Washington State, block the entrance into the labor camp where they live during the picking season. *Photo by David Bacon*

A Democratic Food System Means Unions For Farmworkers

By David Bacon

The people who labor in US fields produce immense wealth, yet poverty among farmworkers is widespread and endemic. It is the most undemocratic feature of the US food system. Cesar Chavez called it an irony, that despite their labor at the system's base, farmworkers "don't have any money or any food left for themselves."

Enforced poverty and the racist structure of the field labor workforce go hand in hand. US industrial agriculture has its roots in slavery and the brutal kidnapping of Africans, whose labor developed the plantation economy, and the subsequent semi-slave sharecropping system in the South. For over a century, especially in the West and Southwest, industrial agriculture has depended on a migrant workforce, formed from waves of Chinese, Japanese, Filipino, Mexican, South Asian, Yemeni, Puerto Rican and more recently, Central American migrants.

The dislocation of communities produces this migrant workforce, as people are forced by poverty, war and political repression to leave home to seek work and survive. Any vision for a more democratic and sustainable system must acknowledge this historic reality of poverty, forced migration and inequality, and the efforts of workers themselves to change it.

California's Tulare County, for instance, produced \$7.2 billion in fruit, nuts and vegetables in 2019, making it one of the most productive agricultural areas in the world. Yet 123,000 of Tulare's 453,000 residents live below the poverty line. Over 32,000 county residents are farmworkers; according to the US Department of Labor the average annual income of a farmworker is between [\\$20,000 and \\$24,999](#), less than half the median US household income.

Poverty has its price. It has forced farmworkers to continue working during the COVID-19 pandemic, although they are well aware of the danger of illness and death. As the gruesome year of 2020 came to an end, Tulare County, where the United Farm Workers was born in the 1965 grape strike, had 34,479 COVID-19 cases, and 406 people died. That gave it infection and death rates more than twice that of urban [San Francisco](#), or Silicon Valley's [Santa Clara County](#). COVID rates follow income. Median family annual income in San Francisco is \$112,249 and in Santa Clara it's \$124,055. [In Tulare county, the median annual income is \\$49,687.](#)

Democratizing the food system starts with acknowledging this disparity and seeking the means to end it. And in fact, the broader working class of California has concrete reasons for supporting farmworkers. COVID and future epidemics, for instance, do not stay neatly confined to poor rural barrios, but spread. Pesticides that poison farmworkers remain on fruit and vegetables that show up in supermarkets and dinner tables. Labor contractors and temporary jobs were features of farmworker life long before precarious employment spread to high tech and became the bane of UBER drivers.

The rural legacy of economic exploitation and racial inequality was challenged most successfully in 1965, when the grape strike began first in Coachella, and then spread



The family of Lino Reyes are Mixtec migrants from San Martin Peras in Oaxaca. He and his wife work in the strawberry fields, and live in the garage of a house on the outskirts of town. Oxnard, CA 2009. *Photo by David Bacon*

to Delano. It was a product of decades of worker organizing and earlier farm worker strikes, and took place the year after civil rights and labor activists forced Congress to repeal Public Law 78 and end the *bracero* contract labor program.

The grape strike was a fundamental democratic movement, started by rank-and-file Filipino and Mexican workers. Although some couldn't read or write, they were politically sophisticated, had a good understanding of their situation, and chose their action carefully. Growers had pitted Mexicans and Filipinos against each other for decades. When Filipinos acted first by going on strike, and then asked the Mexican workers, a much larger part of the workforce, to join them, they believed that workers' common interest could overcome those divisions. Their multi-racial unity was a precondition for winning democracy in the fields.

Philip Veracruz, a Filipino grape picker who became a vice-president of the UFW, wrote during the strike's fourth year: "The Filipino decision of the great Delano grape strike delivered the initial spark to explode the most brilliant incendiary bomb for social and political changes in US rural life."

The strike's impact was enormous. Fifteen years after it started, farmworkers achieved the highest standard of living they've had in the years before or since. In the union contracts negotiated in the late 1970s the base wage was 2.5 to 3 times the minimum wage of the time, the equivalent in California of what would be \$37-45 per hour today. The worst pesticides were banned and, for a decade, union hiring halls kept labor contractors out of the fields.

By striking, farmworkers in 1965 were demanding the democratization of the food system. Winning the first and most basic step - a union contract - required overcoming the division between rural and urban people. Workers left the fields, traveled across the country, recruited allies, and stood in front of stores in the cities, appealing to consumers not to buy the struck grapes. Of all the achievements of the farmworkers' movement, its most powerful and longest enduring was the boycott. It leveled the playing field in the fight with agricultural corporations over the right to form a union, and led to the most powerful and important alliance between unions and communities in modern labor history.

Farm worker strikes have traditionally been broken by strikebreakers, and all too

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often, drowned in blood and violence. No country has done more than the US to enshrine the right of employers to break strikes. From their first picket lines in Delano, members of the new union, the United Farm Workers, watched in anger as growers brought in crews of strike-breakers to take their jobs. The boycott couldn't end the violence, but after farm workers crossed the enormous gulf between the fields and the big cities, they didn't have to fight by themselves.

The boycott was a participatory, democratizing strategy, and since then it has become a powerful tool for community-based union organizing. Today alliances between unions and communities are a bedrock of progressive activism. Farmworker strikes and boycotts helped develop this strategy, and gave the UFW its character as a social movement.

In 2013 farmworkers used that experience when they went on strike against

the Sakuma Brothers blueberry farm in Burlington, Washington. For four years they combined strikes in the fields with a boycott of Sakuma's main client, Driscoll's, the world's largest berry distributor. Their campaign succeeded in winning a union contract, and developed new ways to fight for rural democracy.

Since the mid-1980s a growing part of the migrant flow into US fields has come from the states of southern Mexico, especially the indigenous Mixtec, Triqui and other communities of Oaxaca and the most remote parts of Mexico's countryside. Migrants speaking the languages of these towns formed a new union in the heat of the Sakuma strike, *Familias Unidas por la Justicia*. Their fight for higher wages was closely bound to the right to speak Mixteco and Triqui, and to develop indigenous culture in rural Washington state towns two thousand miles from their home villages. Their struggle for cultural rights expanded the meaning of rural democracy.

The strike at Sakuma Farms started when the company made obvious its intention to replace its existing workers with a new set of migrants, recruited in Mexico and brought to the US in the H-2A visa program. The union fought successfully for the rights and jobs of Sakuma's existing employees, the Mixteco and Triqui farmworkers already living and working in the US. But in the years that followed their union also became the primary source of support for H-2A workers themselves, when they protested about abusive conditions.

Familias Unidas organizers came to the defense of workers at one company, who were fired and forced to leave the US after protesting the death of an H-2A worker, Honesto Silva. They helped

guestworkers on other farms protest exhausting production quotas. And when H-2A workers began to get sick and die after contracting the coronavirus in their crowded living quarters, *Familias Unidas por la Justicia* sued the state over grower-friendly regulations that allowed the virus to spread.

Sakuma Farms workers discovered in the course of their strike that the US food system is a transborder system. In 2015 a similar strike movement began in Baja California, among the strawberry pickers at Driscoll's and other growers in the San Quintin Valley. Workers there come from the same towns in Oaxaca, even the same families, as the strikers in Washington State. Both groups found that challenging the big growers, and winning the right to a voice over working and living conditions, ultimately means cooperation and solidarity across the US-Mexico border.

The largest agricultural employers have responded to demands by workers for economic and racial democracy by proposals to expand the H-2A contract labor system, criticized for being “close to slavery.” The largest recruiters of H-2A workers have enormous influence over immigration policy. With no limits on the number of visas issued annually, their recruitment of workers has mushroomed from 10,000 in 1992 to over 250,000 in 2020 – a tenth of the US agricultural workforce.

Their principal proposal in Congress today is the Farm Workforce Modernization Act. It sets up the conditions for enormous growth in the H-2A program, and would likely lead to half the farm labor workforce in the US laboring under H-2A visas within a few years. The bill will prohibit undocumented workers from working in agriculture, while implementing a restrictive and complex process



A worker on strike at the King Fuji apple ranch. Mattawa, WA 2019. Photo by Edgar Franks

in which some undocumented farmworkers could apply for legal status.

Instead of competing for domestic workers by raising wages, growers seek a supply of H-2A workers whose wages stay only slightly above the legal minimum. This system then places workers with H-2A visas into competition with a domestic labor force, depressing the wages of all farmworkers. As the program grows, domestic workers have to compete with growers for housing, and rents rise. When guest workers are pressured to speed up their work, an exhausting work pace spreads to the other farmworkers around them.

For farmworkers trying to organize and change conditions, the H-2A program creates enormous obstacles. When H-2A workers themselves try to change exploitative conditions, employers can terminate their employment and end their legal visa status, in effect deporting them. Workers are then legally blacklisted, preventing their recruitment to work in future seasons. Farmworkers living in the US, thinking about organizing or going on strike, have to consider the risk of being replaced.

Growers threaten that if wages rise, consumers will have to pay much higher

prices for food. Yet a woman picking strawberries in a California field gets less than 20¢ for each plastic clamshell box, which sells in the supermarket for \$3-4. Doubling her wage would hardly change the price in the store. Yet the food system is built on her poverty, and growers' efforts to build a labor force of temporary workers cements that poverty into place.

Democracy in the fields is based on the idea that farmworkers belong to organic communities - that they are not just individuals without family or community, whose labor must be made available at a price growers want to pay. When Familias Unidas por la Justicia set up a coop to grow blueberries, Tierra y Libertad, it sought to create instead a new basis for community, a system in which workers could make the basic decisions as a community - about what to grow, how land should be used, and how to share the work without exploitation.

Rosalinda Guillen, the daughter of a farmworker family and founder of Community2Community, the main support base for the strikers at Sakuma Farms, believes that a democratic system for food production can't be achieved if farmworkers continue to be landless.

"The value of what we bring to a community is blatantly waved aside," she charges. "We're invisible. Our contributions are invisible. That's part of the capitalist culture in this country. We are like the dregs of slavery in this country. They're holding onto that slave mentality to try to get value from the cheapest labor they can get. If they keep us landless, if we do not have the opportunity to root ourselves into the communities in the way we want, then it's easy to get more value out of us with less investment in us. It's as blunt as that."

Organizing a union doesn't give farmworkers land, and Guillen cautions that its goals are more immediate and limited. "It's not enough to say we've got X number of union contracts," she says. "Those workers are still in a fight. They're fighting everyday for their existence."

But getting land and reorganizing production requires political power, just as raising wages does. And the food monopolies controlling land and production won't give up their power without a fight. Unions for farmworkers, therefore, are the first, most basic step to power. Without the organized power of the workers within it, democratizing the food system will remain just a dream.

The logo for Food First, featuring the words "Food First" in a stylized, handwritten script font.

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