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<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/2h373831>

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**Publication Date**

2015-09-01



# “your liberation is linked to ours”

INTERNATIONAL SOLIDARITY CAMPAIGNS

SEPTEMBER 2015

SUPPORT  
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Transnational  
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# Introduction

As part of the UCLA Labor Center's Global Solidarity project, the Institute for Transnational Social Change (ITSC) provides academic resources and a unique strategic space for discussion to transnational leaders and their organizations involved in cross-border labor, worker and immigrant rights action. The overarching goal of ITSC is to promote solidarity among worker-led transnational organizations in Mexico, the U.S. and Canada. The Institute organizes annual gatherings for labor leaders and grassroots organizers to think critically and creatively building the human and social assets necessary to strengthen the transnational worker organizing movement. The Institute works in close collaboration with strategic partners in Mexico, the U.S. and Canada representing labor unions, worker centers, grassroots advocacy organizations, and academic institutions.

The idea to organize labor delegations and encourage worker-to-worker solidarity in support key campaigns that exemplified the importance of global solidarity emerged during our December 2014 meeting in Los Angeles. Participants of that tri-national meeting discussed the need to practice international labor solidarity from the grassroots level. The present report highlights five campaigns where international labor solidarity has played a critical role in shaping outcomes of the conflict. The main goal in documenting these experiences is not only to learn about the truly remarkable campaigns undertaken by workers at the local level facing global companies, but also to highlight the fact that international workers alliances are integral to their success.

The cases of campaigns at the Ciudad Acuña maquiladora PKC plant, El Super in Los Angeles, the Cananea mine in Sonora Mexico, Sakuma Brothers Farms in Skagit County, Washington, and farms in San Quintin, Baja California in northern Mexico, all illustrate that international solidarity is not an extra burden for workers and organizers. Rather, cross-border ties are positive and part and parcel of their own local struggle. The report illustrates that international labor so-

lidity is not experienced as labor unions from rich countries extending a helping hand to their brothers and sisters in need in other parts of the world, but is successful when struggles are understood as bound to each other. As the Zapatistas use to say about solidarity, paraphrasing aboriginal activist Lila Watson: "Do not come here to help us, we do not need your help. But if your liberation is linked to ours, let's fight together."

This report was written by David Bacon, and was published in Los Angeles and New York in September 2015. The report and conferences are supported by the Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung, an internationally operating, progressive non-profit institution for civic education affiliated with Germany's "Die Linke" (Left Party). Active since 1990, the foundation has been committed to the analysis of social processes and developments worldwide. In cooperation with organizations around the globe, it works on democratic and social participation, empowerment of disadvantaged groups, alternatives for economic and social development, conflict prevention, and peaceful conflict resolution. Its international activities aim to provide civic education by means of academic analyses, public programs, and projects conducted together with partner institutions. In order to be able to mentor and coordinate these various projects, the foundation has established 17 regional offices around the world. The RLS has been granted special consultative status with the United Nations Economic and Social Council in 2013.

The foundation's New York Office, located at 275 Madison Avenue, opened its doors in 2012. It serves two major tasks: to work on issues concerning the United Nations, including collaboration with people and political representatives from the Global South, and to work with North American (U.S. and Canadian) progressives in universities, unions, social movements, progressive institutions, and think tanks. The office's Co-Directors are Stefanie Ehmsen and Albert Scharenberg. The New York Office is part of the global network of the Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung.



*Solidarity delegation in Ciudad Acuña*

## An International Delegation Puts Pressure on a Giant Maquiladora in Ciudad Acuña

Based on a decision made at the December 2014 conference hosted by the ITSC and RLS–NYC, a delegation of union organizers and staff went to Ciudad Acuña, Tamaulipas, to offer solidarity to workers at the Arneses y Accesorios de Mexico plant. This factory is the old Alcoa Fujikura factory, making electrical harnesses for the automobile industry. It now belongs to the Finnish autoparts corporation PKC.

For many years workers have sought to win recognition for an independent union, and to leave the Confederation of Mexican Workers (CTM) they refer to as a “charro” union. The union is politically tied to Mexico’s ruling party, the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) and does not represent the needs of workers or respond to their demands.

The PKC workers have been historically supported by the Comité Fronterizo de Obreras (the Border Workers Committee). Beginning in 2007 the effort to win the

right to bargain as an independent union has also been supported by the Mexican miners’ union, the Mineros. The workers formed Local 307 of the Mineros, and in 2011 the union made a request to the company for bargaining. The company responded by announcing that it had signed a contract with the CTM.

Mexico is plagued by such contracts, called “protection contracts” because their purpose is to “protect” the company against any efforts by workers to organize independently. They are part of a neoliberal political and economic structure whose purpose is to encourage foreign investment by keeping wages and costs low, in factories producing for foreign markets, especially the U.S.

The cost of this regime is paid by workers, and members of the delegation visited workers’ homes to see it first-hand. “We talked to workers directly,” says Mohammad Alsadi, director of the Human Rights and Inter-



national Relations Department of Unifor, which represents auto workers in Canada. “They invited us to their homes and cooked for us. I can’t describe my feeling in seeing the conditions of their lives. We don’t believe in charity in Unifor - we believe in solidarity. Seeing the conditions gave us a clearer understanding of the need to defeat global free trade, greedy employers and bad government.”

In October 2012, the Mexican government’s Junta de Conciliación y Arbitraje (Labor Arbitration Board) held an election in which the *Mineros* won 2,311 votes. The large number is a testament to the courage of workers in the plant, who defied the company and its compliant union. Nevertheless, on December 14<sup>th</sup> that same year, the company fired all the union’s election observers and 18 members of the local’s executive committee, among a total of 122 people terminated from their jobs.

According to the *Mineros*, “workers were called individually to the human resources office and told to sign a ‘voluntary’ resignation letter. Officials of the Federal Labor Board were present and encouraged the workers to sign.” The terminations were distributed among the five PKC plants the company operates on the border.

Workers responded by organizing a hunger strike, and ten at the Ciudad Acuña plant refused to sign the resignation letters. The national *Mineros* union launched a legal challenge to the crooked election and the illegal firings.

While the legal case moved forward, the workers and their continued organizing were supported by the Border Workers Committee (Comité Fronterizo de Obreras, CFO). CFO organized a series of training workshops, especially focused on women workers.

CFO’s involvement with the workers at the plant goes back to the mid-1990s, when it was owned by Alcoa Fujikura, a division of the Alcoa Corporation. In 1997 CFO accused the company of hiding a series of gas releases, which made many of workers sick. A delegation of workers traveled to Alcoa’s annual stockholders meeting in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, where they had the support of the Interfaith Committee for Corporate Responsibility. Grouping together religious orders with millions of dollars invested in stocks and bonds, the ICCR forced an historic discussion of the situation in the company’s Mexican plants.

At the meeting Alcoa CEO (later US Treasury Secretary) Paul O’Neill at first insisted that “you can eat off

the floors of these plants.” But the group won a commitment to investigate conditions. At its conclusion the company agreed that a series of gas poisonings had gone unreported in 1994, and fired Alcoa Fujikura’s president, Robert Barton.

CFO’s director Julia Quiñones has been involved with the plant’s workers since then. For many years the CFO was supported by the American Friends Service Committee, but lost that funding in the financial crisis of the mid-2000s. In recent years, however, this small grassroots organization led by women and men who work in maquiladoras has developed a relationship with the United Steel Workers in the U.S., and the *Mineros* in Mexico.

CFO also has a relationship with a group in Austin, Texas, called Austin Tan Cerca a la Frontera (Austin so Close to the Border). ACTF organizes groups of activists to go to the border to see first-hand the situation of maquiladora workers, and the delegation of union leaders was coordinated with ACTF.

As the delegation was preparing to arrive in Ciudad Acuña, PKC workers and the *Mineros* announced that they’d won an historic decision from Mexican courts. Four workers who were dismissed in 2012 were ordered reinstated by Special Board No. 15 of the Federal Conciliation and Arbitration Board. The order concluded a long trial in which the CTM leader Tereso Medina tried to assert that the workers had been fired for “dereliction of duty.” The board, in rejecting that pretext, held the firings were a joint reprisal by the company and the CTM.

A statement by the *Mineros* declared: “The company union of the CTM led by Tereso Medina never protected or defended the Arneses workers, but in collusion with the company kept the workers in ignorance of their collective bargaining agreement. It never appeared in the plant, or negotiated wage increases as required by law, or defended the workers’ legal right to profit-sharing. In this process, the authorities have been complicit with Tereso Medina in maintaining this irregular and illegal situation at the expense of the workers.”

The four workers in question had denounced the so-called collective bargaining agreement between the CTM and PKC because it “was made behind the backs of the workers and kept hidden from them. The Company and the CTM tried to use these dismissals



*Solidarity delegation talking with maquiladora workers.*

to discourage the workers in their fight for freedom of association.” The board also ordered a new election to determine which union workers at PKC want as their representative.

Two members of the delegation were organizers with roots on the U.S./Mexico border - Dionicio Gonzalez, district organizer for the United Steel Workers, and Rigoberto Valdez, organizing director of Local 770 of the United Food and Commercial Workers. “We met with the workers who’d been forced to resign,” Gonzalez says. “It was clear that this was total retaliation against them, and part of an atmosphere at PKC in which workers are suppressed every day, and in their case, framed and fired. I grew up on the border and I knew this was the situation. There’s no legal protection for workers in these plants. But by meeting with them,

I hope they could see that they have friends in the U.S. and Canada. We can and should help them, but also understand that they live with this lack of protection day and night.”

Gonzalez feels that U.S. unions have something to learn from the level of commitment of workers in plants like PKC - they face a level of repression beyond that in the U.S. and have learned to organize in that environment. “They put their lives on the line, and have to watch their back at work every day,” he explains. “We don’t have to confront quite that level of threat. So we both can learn from each other.”

He also admired the grassroots style of the activists he met and compared it to that he sees in the best U.S. organizers. “You go to peoples’ soccer games, you



eat their food, you become a friend and someone they trust. You show who you are, and that a union is not just a bunch of promises.”

Alsadi came away from the delegation determined to discover if the electrical harnesses manufactured in the PKC plants were then shipped to auto assembly plants in Canada, where workers belong to Unifor. He planned to raise the question at a July meeting in Mexico of metal and industrial unions.

Alsadi was particularly enraged by the way corporations based in Europe, like PKC, operate in the developing world. “There is a double standard, a racist way of looking at workers that just sees them as cheap labor,” he charges. “Big corporations from Europe think they own people, but at least in Europe workers have the right to choose their union. But then PKC comes to Mexico and fights workers when they do the same thing.”

He was shocked by the conditions of the workers he met. “Their situation at work is terrible,” he says, “where they face favoritism and sexual harassment. We passed the houses of plant supervisors, in communities behind big gates. You can see they live a lot better.”

In Canada unions have negotiated a solidarity and social justice fund in which members have money deducted from their paychecks, and employers pay a percentage of payroll or a periodic lump sum. Unifor has ninety projects that are funded through this fund, 20% in Canada and 80% in other countries. Some are in Mexico, and are administered in cooperation with the international federation of industrial unions, IndustriALL.

“We have to put our money where our mouth is,” Alsadi urges. “Our message this time was simple - we’re here because we care - and I hope they’ll relay it to their colleagues.”

Valdez, like Gonzalez, was born on the border, in Mexicali. “The border is a pretty remote place for most people in the U.S.,” he explains, “so one important reason for our being there is to spread the knowledge of what is happening to workers there. More awareness

means that when the fight escalates at PKC, which is going to happen, we will have a bigger base of people on our side to draw from, and from unions with a direct connection to what’s made in that plant, like Unifor and the UAW.”

Valdez also connected the fight at PKC to the debate over free trade policy and the Trans Pacific Partnership. “We can’t forget the devastation that NAFTA caused. In Ciudad Acuña, and in the conditions of the workers, we saw it. It would be insane to continue this abuse.”

He was shocked especially by the indifference of the company to its own workers and to the communities in which they live. A tornado hit these border towns just before the delegation arrived, and the participants even debated whether it was appropriate to visit them under those circumstances. Workers at the plants, however, encouraged them to come see the reality.

Some PKC workers had relatives whose homes were lost in the disaster. Yet the company offered no money to help the communities or to victims. “They put out collection bins for floods in Brazil,” some workers told the group. “We expected the company would give some money to people here, but they didn’t. The CTM put out some bins, but why didn’t they give any of their own money, or ask the company to give?”

Valdez calls the CFO “terrific activists,” and credits Quiñones for helping to develop grassroots leaders in the plants. “We use a lot of similar tactics,” he notes, “like one-on-one meetings, house meetings and training rank-and-file leaders capable of sticking with a long fight. I was also very impressed by the number of active leaders who are women.”

When the Mineros needed witnesses for the hearings over the firings, it sent trucks with sound systems into the worker barrios. “One purpose was also to shame any workers thinking of testifying for the company,” Valdez says. “And when the hearing took place there were no worker witnesses for the company. I think that’s an interesting idea we might think about in our campaigns in Los Angeles.”

# The El Super Campaign Spreads from Los Angeles to Mexico City

The engagement of UFCW Local 770 in Mexico was assisted by relationships developed at the December conference in Los Angeles as well, according to Valdez. On December 4<sup>th</sup>, 2014 conference participants left the UCLA Downtown Labor Center, and joined a picketline and delegation to the manager of one of the largest supermarkets belonging to the El Super chain in Los Angeles. Humberto Montes de Oca, exterior secretary of the Mexican Electrical Workers (SME) spoke to the manager on behalf of the Mexican unionists at the conference. He warned that the company that progressive Mexican unions would take action if fired workers were not rehired, and if the company continued its efforts to decertify the UFCW.

That warning was not an idle threat. The El Super markets belong to the large Mexican store chain, Grupo Comercial Chedraui, Mexico's third-largest retailer with 211 stores. Its owners, the wealthy Chedraui family, have made a large investment in marketing to Mexican and Latino customers in the U.S., operating forty nine stores in the southwest. In southern California the company bought seven Gigante supermarkets in 2008, which all had UFCW contracts covering their workers. The company, known in the U.S. as El Super, signed a five-year agreement on buying the stores, which expired in 2013.

Between September 2013 and April 2014 the union met with the company repeatedly. Workers wanted a full 40-hour week instead of the previous guarantee of 32, and improvements in health benefits and other issues. El Super, however, made demands for concessions in bargaining, and began retaliating against union members. In June it implemented its last, best and final offer, which was vigorously rejected by UFCW members.

The December delegation by Mexican, Canadian and U.S. unionists took place just before an effort by management to decertify the union. On December 12<sup>th</sup>, however, UFCW members voted overwhelmingly in favor of continued union representation. The National Labor Relations Board issued a complaint accusing the company of bad faith bargaining.

El Super not only ignored a subsequent request to go back into negotiations - it fired Fermin Rodriguez, a member of the union negotiating committee, on January 8, 2015. Rodriguez had been present in the meeting between the international union delegation and store managers. The union began a consumer boycott of El Super stores, which was endorsed by community, labor and faith groups throughout southern California.



*Fermin Rodriguez*



“Mexican unions saw how management treated the delegation with disrespect,” Valdez says, “and could only imagine what they were doing to workers inside the store.

In cooperation with the Solidarity Center of the AFL-CIO, Local 770 began planning an appearance at the Mexican shareholders meeting. With help from economists at the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM), the union analyzed the report Chedraui’s management were giving shareholders, and saw there was no mention of any labor dispute in their U.S. subsidiary.

Mexican activists then went to Jalapa, Veracruz, where the shareholders meeting was held, and obtained proxy statements allowing them to participate. When they arrived, they discovered they were the only people present besides the company’s board and one reporter. Management was so afraid, they stuck the delegation into a separate room where they could only watch by video and participate remotely. The delegation told the board that failing to mention the U.S. boycott was a violation of Mexican law, and threatened to report the company to the Bolsa de Valores - the Mexican stock exchange.

The following week the Mexican unions who’d been present at the Los Angeles conference organized a press conference, and announced they were commit-

ted to action against Chedraui. The press conference was held at one of the company’s largest stores, in the working-class barrio of Tepito in Mexico City. “In Mexico we are making plans around the NLRB hearing on the complaint, and we’re hoping to organize a cyberspace action in all three countries based on our relationships in the Trinational group,” said Benedicto Martinez, former general secretary of the Authentic Workers Front and a participant in the Los Angeles meeting.

The NLRB in the U.S. announced the day of the press conference that it was seeking a 10-J injunction, ordering the company to resume bargaining with the union. It requires the company to immediately reinstate Rodriguez, go back into bargaining with the union, and restore the contract benefits the company had unilaterally changed. A further 10-J is being sought in Arizona over the firing of two workers there.

And on July 30<sup>th</sup>, Chief United States District Court Judge George H. King issued a the 10-J injunction, telling El Super to immediately remedy unlawful treatment of workers represented by the UFCW, and to ensure their right to join the union is protected. The court reinstated the vacation policy the stores had illegally slashed, and ordered the company to resume bargaining with the union. “I am incredibly excited to be returning to my job where I can continue to fight for dignity and respect for all El Super workers,” Rodriguez said.



*Mexican and Canadian union leaders went from the ITSC December conference to confront El Super managers at a Los Angeles supermarket.*

# A New Alliance of Copper Strikers and Environmentally Impacted Communities

On March 19<sup>th</sup> Bob LaVenture, District 12 director of the United Steelworkers, Manny Armenta, USW district 12 representative, and Ericka Wills went to Cananea, Sonora, at the invitation of Section 65 of the Mineros, to witness the occupation of the water transfer station at the huge copper mine. All three were participants in the December meeting in Los Angeles, along with Genaro Arteaga Trejo of the Mineros.

In 1989 miners struck in Cananea to stop reductions in the workforce to cut labor costs. After Grupo Mexico asked the government to call in troops to break the strike, 800 miners were laid off. Union leaders were blacklisted. According to Carlos Navarette, one of the organizers of the plantón (protest encampment), “the company blacklisted us throughout the whole country.” In one job interview, he charges, “the person interviewing me asked me where I was from, and I told him from the south. But then he saw my name on his computer. He said, ‘There’s no work for you here.’”

Anger mushroomed in 2006 when 65 miners died in an explosion at Grupo Mexico’s Pasta de Conchos coal mine. Workers had complained of gas leaks, and struck repeatedly over safety concerns. After five days, however, the company halted rescue efforts, and the government announced the mine would be closed.

The general secretary of the Mineros, Napoleon Gomez Urrutia, accused the corporation and government of “industrial homicide.” Within weeks the conservative administration of President Vicente Fox charged him with fraud, and Gomez left Mexico to escape imprisonment under this false accusation. Since then all charges against him were found groundless, and he has been reelected union president several times. Nevertheless, he continues to stay in Vancouver, Canada, worried that the government and Grupo Mexico will find another pretext for jailing him should he return.

In 2008 miners in Cananea went on strike again, over health and safety concerns. They charged that the company had disconnected the huge fans and pipes that extract dust from the buildings where the ore is crushed. Dust buildup can cause silicosis, permanently damaging miners’ lungs. A study by a team of U.S. and Mexican health and safety experts, led by Garrett

Brown and the Maquiladora Health and Safety Support Network, found “substantial elevations in the prevalence of respiratory symptoms” among miners and that “a significant percentage of this population may have radiologic silicosis.” In one area acid mist was so prevalent it had eaten away at the structure of the building.

Under Mexican law, an enterprise that is on strike cannot continue to function, so the mine stopped operation. But Grupo Mexico asked the administration of Mexico’s next president, Felipe Calderon, to declare the strike illegal. In spite of court decisions upholding its legality, the government complied. Three thousand federal police drove miners from the gates and the mine was then reopened.

Grupo Mexico created a new business entity, Buenavista de Cobre, to hire workers through contractors to replace the strikers. Sergio Martinez, who worked in the foundry for 13 years, says that before the strike, miners got a base pay of 1800 pesos for working 8 hours a day, 6 days a week. With a productivity bonus, they earned at least 3000 pesos (\$215). Today the contracted employees earn 1200 pesos (\$85) a week, and work 12 hours a day instead of 8. Adjusted for inflation, the average wage in mining nationally is 21 percent lower today than it was in 1978.

Says another miner, “If you say you’re from Cananea, you can’t get a job. Ninety percent of the people now working in the mine are from far away. This is very humiliating for people here. You have kids and there’s no work for them either - even more humiliating.” Like many others, this miner crossed the border without documents to find work in Arizona. “I left my family here. The pain of our separation can’t be compared to anything,” he laments.

Prior to the December meeting in Los Angeles, the USW and Mineros held their first binational training, attended by Mineros members and USW members from five locals at Asarco. Asarco, a huge copper mine operator in the U.S. over many decades, was bought a few years ago by Grupo Mexico, the corporation that owns the struck mine in Cananea, and which has engaged in a virtual union-busting war against the Mineros. The contract between the USW and Asarco has expired, and





*Farmers from the Rio Sonora valley march with striking miners in Cananea. Together they formed the Frente Rio Sonora to confront Grupo Mexico.*

workers are still working under the terms of the agreement, subject to a 15-day notice to terminate it.

According to Wills, during the training “workers discovered that they face the same issues on each side of the border.” Unionists from both countries talked about the long labor history of the copper mining region and visited worksites including the pit at the Ray mine and the Hayden concentrator, both of which belong to Asarco.

At the Los Angeles conference LaVenture described the session, and pointed out that the two unions have developed a very close partnership. “Our unions have built an alliance,” he said. “We took this opportunity to bring like-minded workers together to discuss our ideas as we face a common employer, Grupo Mexico.”

At the meeting workers also talked about the toxic chemical spill at the Cananea mine in Sonora in August, in which 40,000 cubic meters of sulphuric acid and heavy metals were dumped into the Sonora River, and the pollution of communities along the ri-

ver. Arturo Rodriguez, of the office of the Attorney General for Environmental Protection, told the New York Times that the cause was “lax supervision at the mine, along with rains and construction defects.” The company didn’t comment on responsibility, but Juan Rebolledo, VP for international relations, stated that the acid wasn’t toxic and “there’s no problem, nor any serious consequence for the population, as long as we take adequate precautions.”

Miners charge, however, that Grupo Mexico was using a contractor, Tecovifesa, to work on the dam. “Before the strike, experienced union members, who were direct employees, did all the work,” according to striker Sergio Martinez.

And although the spill began on August 6<sup>th</sup>, the company didn’t tell the river communities until August 8<sup>th</sup>. Many only discovered what had happened when the river turned orange. “Our children were at the river that day,” remembers Reyna Valenzuela, from Ures. “We didn’t know they would be affected because the company didn’t tell anyone.” The children got extreme





*Miners came from all over Mexico to march with the strikers in Cananea.*

rashes, and doctors finally told her they were due to heavy metal exposure.

After the training, groups of miners fanned out to the small towns along the river, talking about that disaster's impact. Strikers and community leaders called meetings in the town plazas, making speeches through jerry-rigged speakers on the back of pickup trucks. Finally, on March 18<sup>th</sup>, busses headed from the towns toward Cananea. Mine managers, hearing they were coming, called out hundreds of police to keep strikers from blocking the mine gates.

The protestors outflanked them. Instead of heading through town to the mine itself, they roared down the highway to the pumping station. Facing hundreds of angry miners and farmers, the operators shut down the pumps and fled. And as the pumps grew quiet, so did operations at the mine itself.

Approximately 24,000 people live along the river. Three hundred wells were closed after the spill. Grupo Mexico's website displays photos of pastoral scenes along the river and posts articles that describe its efforts to clean it up. It says the company has distributed 164 million liters of water, and installed 58 tanks of 5,500 gallons each in schools. The company set up a \$150 million fund to pay damages to residents, and paid a fine of \$2 million.

Many river residents, however, say they haven't received anything. "We didn't go talk with the town people right after the spill, because many believed in the promises," says Sergio Tolano, general secretary of Section 65. "But months later, most saw they would get nothing and were willing to take action."

The purpose of the plantón, he says, is not just to stop the mine's operation. The union and residents have organized a coalition, the Sonora River Front. It is demanding that the government force Grupo Mexico to clean up the river and take responsibility for the health and lost income of residents. It also seeks to restore the strikers to their jobs.

Valenzuela, whose children suffered extreme rashes from the heavy metals contaminating the river, went to the mine to ask for money to take the kids to Phoenix for tests. "The miners helped us and gave us a place to stay," she recalls, but Grupo Mexico never answered her appeals. She became one of the first residents of the plantón. "Because the miners are supporting us, we're supporting them," Valenzuela says. "If we all get together, we can do something here. The whole Rio Sonora is with them."

A week after the occupation started, Section 65 of the Mineros organized an international forum to publicize the formation of the Front, and develop the cross-border



*USW representative Manny Armenta speaks with the strikers in Cananea.*



support alliance. USW representative Manny Armenta and Juan Linares, a Mineros leader who was imprisoned in Mexico City for his opposition to government attacks on the union, were architects of the alliance and spoke at the rally. David Bacon, a member of the organizing group for the December Los Angeles conference, took photographs and wrote about the Cananea events for the U.S. media. At the conclusion of a march from the center of town to the pumping station, Armenta told the crowd, “The government and Grupo Mexico are making history, but backwards, taking away the right to strike and the right to industrial safety.”

Two years ago the Mineros and the USW agreed to join to form a single union. The merger has not been completed, but they now support each other in dealing with their common employers, and look to the day when their bargaining can be coordinated.

Tolano credits this alliance with keeping the strike in Cananea alive. “Some of us have had a very hard time, but due to our tradition of supporting each other we’ve been able to take care of ourselves,” he says. “There have been divorces. Some people have lost their homes. But we’re still here.”

# Indigenous Farm Workers in Baja California Strike with Support in the U.S.

One of the most important movements of cross border solidarity, and cross border organizing, developed this year among the indigenous people of Oaxaca and southern Mexico, who have become an important part of the workforce in the fields of both Mexico and the U.S.

In a dramatic protest farm workers went on strike in the San Quintin Valley in Baja California, but the same anger is building among indigenous farm workers all along the Pacific coast, from San Quintin in Mexico to Burlington, just an hour south of the U.S. border with Canada. Two years ago Triqui and Mixtec workers struck strawberry fields in Skagit County in Washington State. Two years before that, Triqui workers picking peas in the Salinas Valley rebelled against an inhuman work quota, and immigration raids in the town of Greenfield.

The strawberries, blackberries and blueberries sold everyday in U.S. supermarkets are largely picked by these indigenous families. Their communities are very closely connected, all along the two-thousand mile chain of agricultural valleys that line the Pacific Coast. These migrants come from the same region of southern Mexico, often from the same towns. They speak the same languages - ones that were thousands of years old when Europeans first landed on this continent. Increasingly they talk back and forth across the border about their desire for change, sharing tactics and developing a common strategy.

And from valley to valley, these indigenous farm workers labor for a small number of large growers and distributors who dominate the market. One of the largest is Driscoll's. Miles Reiter, who just retired as CEO after 15 years and is grandson of its founder, says the company's intention is "to become the world's berry company." It operates in five countries, and this year began exporting berries from Mexico to China.

Driscoll's and its Baja partners BerryMex and MoraMex have a large share of Mexico's berry harvest, worth \$550 million annually. Last year Mexico shipped 25 million flats of strawberries to the U.S. Its shipments of 16 million flats of raspberries and 22 million flats of blackberries were larger than U.S. domestic production. The company, with headquarters in Watsonville,

California, is a partner with growers all along the U.S. Pacific Coast as well.

Driscoll's and other global growers wield enormous economic and political power. But farm workers are beginning to challenge them, organizing independent and militant movements on both sides of the border. The companies can feel the rumbling from below.

One of the San Quintin strikers, Maria Ortiz, walked out of the huge greenhouses at the south end of the valley when the movement started. Her home in Santa Maria de Los Pinos is a cinderblock house with a concrete floor, an amenity many neighbors lack, including her mother.

When Ortiz built her house, she put in spaces for windows, but several years later she still can't come up with the money to buy frames and glass panes to fill them. She also strung electrical conduit and plugs up the concrete walls. But when her son plugs in the battery recharger for his toy car, nothing happens - the government provides no electrical service. "We buy candles for light at night, and I worry that some crazy person might break in and hurt me or the kids, because there are no streetlights either," she says.

During the six-month work season her family doesn't go hungry, but they don't eat well - meat twice a week because a kilo costs 130 or 140 pesos (about \$10). Eggs cost 60 pesos (\$4) a carton, she says. "Some of us are only making 90 pesos a day, so it takes almost a whole day of work just for one," she laments. She works as an irrigator and is paid by the hour, making 900 pesos a week, or 150/day (\$10).

Many women charge that they are humiliated and harassed by supervisors. According to Ortiz, "They don't say anything. They say OK and go with the foreman. But they do it against their will." She named several supervisors at large companies she says have hit on the women. All the companies say they have policies forbidding sexual harassment, but firings for violations are virtually unheard-of.

All along her dirt street neighbors have strung up long pieces of thin cloth as fences to keep out the omnipresent dust. There's no sewer service, and although



*Odilia Romero, a leader of the Frente Indigena de Organizaciones Binacionales, helps distribute toys and food to the families of striking farm workers in San Quintin.*



there is a water line, the water it provides is almost unusable. The first big growers and their U.S. partners started export agriculture in San Quintin in the mid-1970s. Twenty years later they'd pumped so much water from the desert aquifer that salt had infiltrated the groundwater. The largest growers then built desalination plants and installed drip-irrigation systems in huge greenhouse complexes.

In the barrios, however, families live with the salty water. "It makes the children sick," Ortiz says, "and gives them a rash if they wash with it." At the entrance to her yard sit two 55-gallon drums. Every few days a big tank truck passes by and fills them with drinking water - for a price.

It was water that led to the creation of the organization that mounted this spring's strike. Two years ago community committees in the valley towns formed the Alianza - the Alliance of National, State and Municipal Organizations for Social Justice - to fight for better water. They won promises from the government of extended service hours and improved quality.

According to Bonifacio Martinez, an Alianza leader, "For many years we've been hoping for some kind of change but it never happened." Before starting the strike on March 16<sup>th</sup> this year, he and other activists

spent months going from one colonia to another, meeting after work. "We asked families, 'Are you willing to continue living like this?'" he remembers. "What's behind this movement is hunger and need and a thirst for justice. The powerful people here have no respect for our culture as indigenous people. To them, we're just machines to do the work. They have to see us as full human beings, and respect our rights."

Once the strike began, members and leaders of the Frente Indigena de Organizaciones Binacionales mobilized to support it, both in Baja California itself, and on the U.S. side in California. In Los Angeles FIOB activists and Rigo Valdez, from UFCW Local 770, raised money and collected food to bring south to the strikers. FIOB raised a total of \$8,255, including \$2,905 from online donations through GoFundMe. UFCW Local 770 donated \$3,000, and other support came from the Colectivo Ollin Calli, the Organización Regional de Oaxaca of Los Angeles, the Union del Barrio, and the Mixteco Indigenous Community Organizing Project (MICOP).

The activists then organized a caravan of vehicles, which took three tons of food to San Quintin communities, half of which was distributed by the Alianza and half by FIOB. One worker from El Super, Guadalupe Amador, said "We're proud to help our brothers and



*Unions and workers' centers in the U.S. and Mexico cooperated on a training session for farm workers in Baja California about organizing tactics.*

sisters in Mexico because we're struggling for many of the same things in the United States."

In San Quintin the Los Angeles activists organized a series of workshops about labor rights, and the mechanics of how to organize an independent union. "This isn't just about bringing food," Valdez said. "It's much more complex, because the idea is to share tools for demanding rights, from knowing what the labor laws are to knowing what to do if you're exposed to chemicals at work."

Following the caravan, FIOB, Union del Barrio and MICOP organized a picketline at the Driscoll's office and warehouse complex in Oxnard, north of Los Angeles. "Driscoll's is responsible for low wages in San Quintin," explained Gaspar Rivera Salgado, one of the organizers of the December conference, speaking in his capacity as an advisor and founder of FIOB. "The company invests a lot of money in genetic research on its fruit, and they also decide how much its growers pay in salaries."

"The violation of the human and labor rights of the people of San Quintin has been going on for years," explained Rogelio Mendez, FIOB's coordinator for Baja California. "People have the right to better wages, and they've been fighting for 30 years for them, but the authorities

have abandoned any effort to protect labor rights. Workers are going to have to do it for themselves."

FIOB met with BerryMex and Driscoll's management, after organizing the picketline at the company's offices in Oxnard. Garland Reiter, CEO of BerryMex, the largest employer of strawberry pickers in the San Quintin Valley, says accusations made against BerryMex at the time were not true, and the company later hosted a visit by a delegation of outside observers to inspect conditions in its San Quintin fields and labor camp.

Fidel Sanchez, the Alianza's most prominent spokesperson, charges, "The companies are paying 10 pesos (65¢) a box on the piece rate, and an hourly wage of 100 to 120 pesos (\$7-8) a day. How we can survive on these wages? In the U.S. workers are paid \$2 a box of strawberries."

BerryMex says it pays much more. A posting on the company website during the strike claimed workers were paid \$5-9 per hour - the top wage equal to California's minimum wage of \$9.

Strawberry and raspberry pickers are usually paid a piece rate, however, both in Mexico and the U.S. Earnings vary greatly depending on the time of year, the condition of the field, and how fast they work. In an interview Gar-



land Reiter, the CEO of BerryMex, mentioned one worker who made 2800 pesos a week (\$185), but acknowledged that the average was probably less. “But we also pay the employee’s contribution [for government-required social benefits],” he said, “and when the employee gets 180 pesos a day we’re actually paying 220.”

Reiter said lower wages in Mexico wasn’t the main reason for developing its San Quintin operation. “We wanted to compete with Chile, using trucks to get to the U.S. market instead of air freight,” he said. The company invested in erecting cloth tunnels over its berry rows, a desalination facility, a clinic, and measures that doubled worker productivity.

In a final negotiation session between the Alianza and the government on June 4<sup>th</sup>, state authorities announced a new minimum wage in San Quintin of 120, 150 or 180 pesos a day, depending on the size of the employer. Further, they would enforce the collection of employer contributions for social security, housing and other benefits.

A high piece rate sounds like workers are making much more than 180 pesos. But the price of a gallon of milk in a Baja grocery store is about the same as it is in San Diego. At minimum wage in a California field, that takes 25 minutes to earn. The fastest Baja piece rate worker in the best field might make it in an hour or two. At the top hourly wage, it takes 3 hours. At Ortiz’ wage, it takes half a day.

The picking season itself is only six months long, so workers also have to survive during the months when there’s no work. San Quintin’s Mixtec and Triqui workers originally came as yearly migrants, and went back to Oaxaca after the picking ended. Today, however, most live in the valley permanently. BerryMex’s labor camp houses 550 temporary migrants, for instance, but the rest of its 4-5000 pickers live in the towns along the highway. The Baja California and Mexican government subsidize some families’ living costs in the off-season, through an income-based subsidy called IMSS-Oportunidades. But other families have to get a few days work where they can or borrow from friends.

Families also survive through money sent home by members who’ve left to work in the United States - one reason why such large number of people from these indigenous communities now live there. A recent study estimates that over 12% of farm worker families in San Quintin have at least one member in the U.S.

That migration is increasingly organized by large corporations. Sierra Cascade, which grows root stock for strawberry plants in Tulelake, California, opened an office in San Quintin in 2007. That year it recruited 340 temporary migrants under the H2A visa program guest workers, 550 in 2010, and more every year since. According to Laura Velasco, Christian Zolniski and Marie-Laure Coubes, authors of *From Laborers to Settlers*, “the San Quintin Valley has become a center for the recruitment of temporary migrant workers for the U.S.”

In economic terms, the San Quintin strike was fought to a draw. Workers began by demanding 300 pesos a day, and then lowered their demand to 200 pesos. The government gave less, although wages will rise for some, and more will get benefits. But after negotiations ended, Alianza leaders announced a decision that may have greater long-range impact than raises, and one that will bring them into a much closer alliance with other indigenous strawberry workers across the border.

“We will establish an independent national union for all workers in the fields,” Sanchez explained in an interview on June 4, “and sign contracts with the different companies. What is being agreed today is just a stage on the road to organizing this new union.”

To do this, however, the Alianza will have to break the agreements, called protection contracts, that growers have had with politically-connected and company-friendly unions for twenty years. These agreements are signed without input from workers, who often have no idea they even belong to such a union. When the strike started, these unions quickly signed new agreements for 15% wage increases (less than what the government eventually agreed to), and then told strikers to go back to work. Ortiz charges the union in her workplace even paid a bounty of 50 pesos for the names of strikers, which it then turned in to management.

*Community activists picket at the Driscoll’s office in Oxnard to support Baja California farm workers.*



# Indigenous Farm Workers in Washington State Fight for an Independent Union

An independent union in Baja California, contesting for a contract with Driscoll growers, will find allies among workers in Burlington, Washington. Two years ago several hundred Mixtec and Triqui strawberry pickers went on strike at one of the state's largest berry growers, Sakuma Farms, and organized their own independent union, Familias Unidas por la Justicia (Families United for Justice).

Alianza leader Bonifacio Martinez is a friend of Felimon Piñeda, the vice-president of FUJ. "We've talked a lot with Felimon," he says. "They've been fighting for almost three years, and they've formed a union. We're trying to set up the same thing - a union that will defend the rights of the workers. We're the same workers, and we're talking about the same kind of union." They also work indirectly for the same company. Sakuma Farms sells its berries to Driscoll's, which also markets berries from BerryMex and MoraMex.

On July 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> this year, an international delegation of union leaders and activists gathered in Burlington to mark the second anniversary of the original strike in

which FUJ was organized, and to announce support for the boycott of Sakuma and Driscoll's berries.

The 2013 picking season in Sakuma's Burlington fields was marked by a succession of short strikes over wages, the conditions in the company's labor camp and the firing of a worker leader. Familias Unidas por la Justicia demanded \$14 per hour, and a process for setting the piece rate to guarantee that workers would make at least that minimum. Sakuma managers rehired a worker fired at the beginning of the conflict, and then negotiated with the workers' committee through the rest of the season.

The company did not agree to the wage demand, however. Instead, it applied for 160 workers under the H2A visa program, and eventually brought in about 70. In response to the workers' wage demand, Ryan Sakuma said in an interview at the time, "Everyone at the company will get the H-2A wage for this work." That was about \$12 an hour - a wage mandated by the regulations governing the program. According to Rosalinda Guillen, director of Community to Community, an or-



*Benito Lopez, his wife Juana Sanchez, and Tomas Ramon, committee members of Familias Unidas por la Justicia, at a solidarity delegation press conference at Sakuma Farms.*



*A delegation of international and local trade unions support the farm workers at Sakuma Farms.*



ganizing project that's been the workers' key source of support, "The H-2A rate limited what was possible. The workers had to accept \$12 because that's what the H-2A workers got."

FUJ President Ramon Torres, met some of them in a local church, away from the labor camp where they were living. "They were very afraid. They said that they'd been told that if they talked with us they'd be sent back to Mexico," he charges. Relations deteriorated and the company fired Torres over an allegation of domestic abuse that was later cleared.

The next spring Sakuma sent strikers form letters saying they'd been fired for not working, and then told the U.S. Department of Labor that it couldn't find any local workers. It applied for 468 H2A guest workers, enough to replace its previous workforce. Strikers all signed letters to DoL saying they were willing to work, and Sakuma eventually had to withdraw its application. According to FUJ, however, most strikers were not rehired in the 2014 season.

The union then launched a boycott of Driscoll's, saying the company was obligated to ensure that growers producing its berries respected labor rights, including the right of FUJ members to their jobs, and to negotiate a labor agreement. FUJ members and supporters began picketing Washington State supermarkets selling

Sakuma berries sold under its own labor, and also by Driscoll's.

This spring the Fair World Project, based in Oregon, collected over 10,000 signatures on a petition to Driscoll's supporting the FUJ, asking "that you terminate your purchases from Sakuma Brothers until they in good faith negotiate a legally binding contract." Driscoll's vice-president Soren Bjorn told the freshfruitportal website that the company had audited Sakuma Brothers Farms, and "there were some legitimate claims a while back and those have all been properly addressed." He added, "we stand behind them as long as they continue to meet our standards." Sakuma's CEO Dan Weeden accused FUJ of "a personal vendetta against our farm."

Driscoll's also supports the expanded use of the H2A program because of what it says is a growing shortage of farm labor in the U.S. "Your only mechanism is to bring in H-2A labor," Bjorn told freshfruitportal. "It's the only way today that growers can really expand their labor pool for farm workers." Guillen responded bitterly, "labor in the fields has got to be as cheap as you can get it and be as easily controllable as it can be, and the guest worker program provides a way for them to do that."

Nevertheless, Sakuma did not make an application for H2A workers for the 2015 season. FUJ leaders also say that its members, many of whom were strikers in

2013, have been hired. And in June, after the company implemented a pay system requiring workers to pick 35 pounds of berries per hour to earn a \$10 minimum wage, workers sent a group to negotiate with Ryan Sakuma. After negotiations, the quota required was reduced to 15 pounds. But when the blueberry season started, the quota was raised again, and workers stopped work twice to protest. During one incident, FUJ vice-president Felimon Lopez led workers into the fields to demand that the company sign a union contract. After supervisors called the sheriffs, the workers left and set up a picketline at the local Costco, urging consumers not to buy Sakuma and Driscoll's berries.

The labor delegation arrived in Burlington soon afterwards. It included Jeff Johnson, President of the Washington State Labor Council. Speaking at the rally at the end of a march to the Sakuma Farms processing shed, he said, "If there were any justice in the world, Sakuma would ask you what you think a fair wage should be, and they would sign an agreement with your union. And if there were any justice, Driscoll's would require that Sakuma respect your rights as workers, especially your right to negotiate a union contract." Johnson pledged the support of the state's labor movement for the boycott of Driscoll's huge berry marketing operation.

Colette Cosner, Executive Director of the Domestic Fair Trade Association, told workers she believes that Driscoll's willingness to meet with her showed its fear of the power of the boycott and the petitions demanding that it hold Sakuma accountable for respecting the right to a union. She said she would not meet with Sakuma without the participation of FUJ, as took place in Watsonville.

Blanca Velasquez, representing the AFL-CIO Solidarity Center's office in Mexico, drew parallels between the movements in Washington State and Baja California, and emphasized that both depended on the strength and involvement of indigenous women. A large group of leaders of the International Longshore and Warehouse Union marched with the farm workers, including Rich Austin, President of the union's pensioners, Terri Mast, Secretary Treasurer of the Inland Boatmen's Union, and leaders of locals 25, 9 and 19. Three representatives came from the Agricultural Division of United Food and Commercial Workers Local 5, including its director Pete Maturino. Ramon Ramirez and a delegation of farm workers came from Oregon's PCUN, including Carmen Gonzalez, a Mixteco-speaking organizer.

In the days after the march on the company, workers stopped work again to protest Sakuma's low-wage system. After an hour of negotiations with supervisors and Ryan Sakuma failed to bring down the production standard to an attainable level the union members walked out of the fields in protest.

Under the new CEO Danny Weeden, Sakuma Brothers has called its new pay scale is the best in the state, and that allows workers to earn upwards of 30 dollars an hour. Most berry pickers, however, struggle to make the minimum quota that earns them 10 dollars an hour. Workers also have been angry that each day when they enter the field they don't know what will earn or at what rate they will be paid. The company keeps changing the rate to maximize production standards, FUJ charges.

What Sakuma is doing to the people isn't right, and nobody should be treated like that," said Ramon Torres, FUJ President. "The only way we can ensure change is with a union contract." The union is intensifying the boycott of the Sakuma and Driscoll's labels. "Driscoll's, the largest berry distributor in the world, has the power to bring Sakuma to the negotiating table," Torres says.

While the absolute wage level is different between Burlington and San Quintin, many demands made by workers are similar, and reflect similar conditions and treatment. Felimon Lopez says that when he arrived at the Sakuma labor camp in 2013 he was given mattresses so delapidated that he had to wrap them in plastic, while he covered the concrete floor in carpet samples. Another worker, Rosario Ventura, says her cabin had a roof that leaked. "They just stuffed bags in the holes and the water still leaked. All my children's clothes were wet," she remembers.

The pressure to produce on the piecerate, to make more than the minimum, is intense. "You have to make 'weight' as they say," explains Ventura. "If you don't make 'weight' they give you some days off, and if you still can't make it, they fire you."

The pressure of no income in the off season is the same as well. A large percentage of Sakuma workers have historically lived in Madera and Santa Maria, California. Their work in Washington State has to pay the cost of travel, and then tide families over during the off-season. While San Quintin workers can qualify for IMSS-Oportunidades, Mixtec and Triqui workers in California are largely undocumented, disqualifying them from almost all social benefits.



California workers have not been as active as those in Washington or San Quintin, but Mixtec and Triqui workers have organized work stoppages. One strike paralyzed all the strawberry growers in the Santa Maria Valley in 1999, at the time of the big organizing drive by the United Farm Workers in Watsonville to the north. Mixtec farm laborers organizing independently stopped production for several days. They won a raise in the piece rate, although their leaders were blacklisted afterwards.

Four years ago a strike by Triqui farm laborers hit the pea harvest in the Salinas Valley, after many were fired for not meeting high production demands. Fired workers won reinstatement and a cut in the quota, but many were blacklisted here also in the following season.

That anger is building once again. Rosalia Martinez, a Triqui worker in Greenfield, says, “What they pay us is not fair. They want you to pick 130 pounds in ten hours, and the piece rate is 45¢, so we make very little. The hourly wage is supposed to be \$9.50 per hour, but when you’re working on the piece rate it’s less. You can make \$100 in a day sometimes, but other times it’s \$80 or \$70.”

The piecerate is physically destructive, she says. “You have to work on your knees, and when you stop it’s hard to extend your leg. It hurts, even when they give you a break. Sometimes your knees break down. That’s happened to a lot of people. Their knees go out permanently and they can’t work anymore.”

When the strike started in San Quintin, Martinez says she began following the news on Facebook. “I worked down there for a number of years,” she recalled. “They paid really low there. We agree with what they did. We

come from the same towns. We are the same community. We are indigenous people, and we have to do whatever we can to keep our children eating, no matter what they pay. But if we don’t work and harvest the crops, there’s nothing for the growers either. We are thinking of doing something like they did in San Quintin.”

FIOB supported the Mixtec and Triqui workers in Burlington, as well as the strikers in San Quintin. When the Sakuma Farms strike started in 2013, FIOB’s binational coordinator, Bernardo Ramirez, flew to Washington State to help workers organize. “Foremen have insulted them, shouted at them and called them ‘burros [donkeys],’” he charged. “When you compare people to animals, this is racism. We’re human beings. Low wages are a form of racism too, because they minimize the work of indigenous migrants.”

All three groups, the Alianza, FUJ and FIOB, believe that workers need to end the instability imposed by migration and low wages. FIOB calls this the right to not migrate, or the right to stay home. Fidel Sanchez agrees: “We are people who have had to abandon our lands and transform ourselves into farm workers, not just here in the San Quintin Valley but in the United States too. A real solution to our problems means that that people should not have to migrate in search of a better life.”

“I want to say to our brothers in the U.S. - here on our side of the border we are crying out for them too,” Bonifacio Martinez adds. “Just like in the United States, here in San Quintin we’ve decided to come out of the shadows into the light of the world. If the companies are international now, we the workers must also become international. We are facing the same one - Driscoll’s.”



*Jeff Johnson, president of the Washington State Labor Federation, speaks at a march supporting Familias Unidas por la Justicia.*