THESE THINGS CAN CHANGE

Photos by David Bacon

Text by David Bacon & Rosario Ventura

In 2013, Rosario Ventura and her husband Isidro Silva were strikers at Sakuma Brothers Farms in Burlington, Wash. In the course of three months in 2013, over 250 workers walked out of the fields several times, as their anger grew over their wages and the conditions in the labor camp where they lived.

Every year, the company hires between 700 and 800 people to pick strawberries, blueberries, and blackberries. During World War II, the Sakumas were interned by the U.S. government because of their Japanese ancestry, and would have lost their land, as many Japanese farmers did, had it not been held in trust for them by another local rancher until the war ended. Today, the business has grown far beyond its immigrant roots, and is one of the largest berry growers in Washington, where berries are big business, with annual sales of $6.1 million, and big corporate customers like Häagen Dazs ice cream.

PHOTO: **To the barricades! Strikers put up a barrier on the road into the labor camp.**

Sakuma Farms owns a retail outlet, a freezer and processing plant, and a chain of nurseries in California that grow rootstock.

By contrast, Sakuma workers have very few resources. Some are local workers, but over half are migrants from California, like Ventura and her family. Both the local workers and the California migrants are immigrants, coming from indigenous towns in Oaxaca and southern Mexico where people speak languages like Mixteco and Triqui. While all farm workers in the United States are poorly paid, these new indigenous arrivals are at the bottom. One recent study in California found that tens of thousands of indigenous farm workers received less than minimum wage.

The irony of the expansion of the H-2A Program in Washington State is that one group of immigrant workers, recruited as guest workers, is being pitted against another group—the migrants who have been coming to work at the company for many years.

In 2013, Ventura and other angry workers formed an independent union, Familias Unidas por la Justicia—Families United for Justice. In fitful negotiations with the company, they discovered that Sakuma Farms had been certified to bring in 160 H-2A guest workers. The H-2A program was established in 1986, to allow U.S. agricultural employers to hire workers in other countries and bring them to the United States. In this program, the company first must certify that it has tried to hire workers locally. If it can't find workers at the wage set by the state employment department, and the department agrees that the company has offered the jobs, the grower can then hire workers from outside the country. The U.S. government provides visas that allow guest workers to work only for that employer, and only for a set period of time, less than a year. Afterwards, they must return to their home country. If they're fired or lose their job before the contract is over, they must leave right away. Growers must apply for the program each year. On hearing about the application, the striking workers felt that the company was trying to find a new workforce to replace them.

When I questioned someone from the company about why it needed guest workers, he said they couldn't find enough workers to pick their berries. But the farm was also unwilling to raise wages to attract more pickers. "If we [do], it unscales it for the other farmers," said owner Ryan Sakuma in an interview. "We're just robbing from the total [number of workers available]. And we couldn't attract them without raising the price hugely to price other growers out. That would just create a price war." He pegged his farm's wages to the H-2A program: "Everyone at the company will get the H-2A wage for this work."

"The H-2A program limits what's possible for all workers," says Rosalinda Guillén, director of Community2Community, an organization that helped the strikers. Community2Community, based in Bellingham, Wash., advocates for farm worker rights, especially those of women, in a sustainable food system. After the strikes, Sakuma Farms applied for H-2A work visas for 438 workers, saying that the strikers weren't available to work because they had all been fired. Under worker and community pressure, the U.S. Department of Labor (USDoL) did not approve Sakuma's application. Sakuma has still not recognized the union, and many workers feel their jobs are still in danger.

A decade ago there were hardly any H-2A workers in Washington State. In 2013, the USDoL certified applications for 6,251 workers, double the number in 2011. And the irony, of course, is that one group of immigrant workers, recruited as guest workers, is being pitted against another group—the migrants who have been coming to work at the company for many years.

As she sat in her home in Madera, Calif., Rosario Ventura described the personal history that led her to migrate yearly from California to Washington, and then become a striker.

See page 22 for Rosario Ventura's story. ❯❯

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Hard camp conditions.

Filemón Pineda, his wife Francisca Mendoza, and their children lived in a cabin in the labor camp at Sakuma Farms during the picking season.

Who checks the weights?

Rosalinda Guillén talks with three young women, who demanded that the company allow them to do the work of weighing and checking the berries picked by workers. Before the strike, workers often accused the company's checkers—mostly local white people, not Mexicans—of cheating them on the weight.

"I came from Oaxaca in 2001, from San Martín Itunyoso. It is a Triqui town [where the indigenous language Trinqui is spoken], and that's what I grew up speaking. My mother and father were farmers, and worked on the land that belongs to the town. It was just enough to grow what we ate, but sometimes there was nothing to eat, and no money to buy food.

There wasn't much work in Oaxaca, so my parents would go to Sinaloa [in northern Mexico]. I began to go with them when I was young, I don't remember how old I was. It costs a lot of money to go to school and my parents had no way to get it. In Mexico you have to buy a uniform for every grade. You have to buy the pencils, notebooks, things the children need. My brothers went to school, though. I was the only one that didn't go, because I was a girl.

When I told my dad I wanted to come to the U.S., he tried to convince me not to leave. When you leave, it is forever—that is what he said, because we never return. You won't even call, he said. And it did turn out that way. Now I don't talk with him because I know if I do, it will bring him sadness. He'll ask, when are you coming back? What can I say?

I would like to return to live with him, since he is alone. But I can't get the money to go back. There is no money, there is nothing to eat, in San Martín Itunyoso. I thought that I would save up something here and return. But it is hard here too. It's the same situation here in the U.S. We work to try to get ahead, but we never do. We're always earning just enough to buy food and pay rent. Everything gets used up.

It is easy to leave the U.S., but difficult to come back and cross the border. When I came, it cost two thousand dollars to cross, walking day and night in Arizona. We had to carry our own water and food. Out there in the desert it is life and death if you do not have any. It took a week and a half of pure walking. We would rest a couple of hours and get up to walk again.

Those who bring children suffer the most because they have to carry water and food for them, and sometimes carry the children themselves. Thank God we all crossed and were OK. But now that I'm here I'm always afraid because I don't have papers. I can never relax or be at ease.

When I crossed the border I came alone, and then found my brothers, who were already here in Madera. They took me to Washington State to work at Sakuma Farms. I met Isidro when I was working, and we got married in 2003. He speaks Mixteco and I speak Triqui, but that did not matter to us. In those times I hardly spoke Spanish, but now I know a little more.

When I came here, they were pruning the plants. That is very hard work because you get cut and the branches hit your face. When I was in Oaxaca, thinking of coming, I was expecting a different type of work. But this is all there is. People who know how to read and write or have papers can get easier jobs. The rest of us work in the fields.

At Sakuma Farms the company was always hard on us. They would tell us, "you came to pick, and you have to make weight." If you don't make weight they won't let you work for a few days. If you still can't make weight, they pull you out of the field and fire you. But when you're working, and you take what you've picked to be weighed, they always cheat you of two or three pounds.

I've always lived in the labor camp during the picking season. We decided to continue living in Madera, and never moved to Washington permanently. When it gets really hot in the San Joaquin Valley in the summer we go to Washington, where it's cooler. Then when it gets cold there and the work runs out, we come back to Madera. We go every season.

When we go to Washington we have to rent someplace in Madera to store our belongings, like our clothes. Then when we return we have to search for a new home again. It is a hassle. This year we left the house where we'd been living with my brother instead, because he didn't go to Washington. We all live here—Isidro, my four children, my brothers and sisters, and their children. The family pays two thousand a month for the whole house, and Isidro and I pay three hundred as our share.

When we're in Washington we have to save for the winter season, because there's no work until April. I don't work in Madera because I can't find childcare. The trip to Washington is expensive—about $250 in gas and food. If we don't have enough money, we have to ask for a loan. That's what we normally do, since by then we've used up what we saved from the previous year. There is a food bank in Washington, which helps when we get there.

With the strikes last year in Washington we were out of work for almost two months. We didn't save anything, so it was very hard for us afterwards. We didn't have enough to pay the bills, and we couldn't find work. The strikes started when the company fired Federico [a coworker]. We wanted Sakuma to raise the [piece rate] price, and the company refused. They told us if we want to work, work. Then they accused Federico of starting a protest. They went to his cabin, to kick him out of the camp. That's when we stopped work, to get his job back.

We were also upset about the conditions in the labor camp. The mattress they gave us was torn and dirty, and the wire was coming out and poked us. We're accustomed to sleeping with the children, but the bed was so small we couldn't even fit on it. There were cockroaches and rats. The roof leaked when it rained. They just put bags in the holes and it still leaked. All my children's clothes were wet.

They told us they would change things, and the county inspector would come check the cabin. But the company man in charge of the camp told me: "If the inspector comes, don't show him your bed. Don't say anything or you will have a lot of problems." So when the inspector came the company man followed him and didn't let me say anything.

They always try to make us afraid to speak up. If you ask for another five cents they fire you. They threatened to remove us from the camp because of the strikes, and said they'd fire us. They are always threatening us. They fired Ramón also [the leader of the strike and union] because he talked back to them. But thank God he had the courage to talk.

I think there will be strikes again this coming year, if the company doesn't come to its senses, and as long as we have support. We can't leave things like this. There is too much abuse. We are making them rich and making ourselves poor. It's not fair. I think these things can change if we all keep at it. We won't let them keep on going like this. We have to change them. It is important that they raise wages, treat us right, and help the farmworkers. All the mistreatment, threats, everything—it isn't fair.

I want to work, to have money, to be in a better place. I want a little house and to stay in one place with my kids. That's all I'm hoping for. I'd like to see my children reach high school and maybe college. If they don't, I want to go back to Mexico, if I can save money. My kids can go to school there too. I want them to continue studying. I don't want my children to work for Sakuma. D&S"

Back to work, for now.

The strike actually consisted of a number of separate work stoppages, and each time, when it seemed like the company would resolve the main complaints, workers would return to the fields to pick. On this morning, strikers walk into a blueberry field at sunrise, ready to start work.

The next generation.

On the fence at the gate into the labor camp, the children of some of the strikers do what they've seen their parents and friends doing. They grab a sign, stand on the fence, and begin to chant and shout, *¿Qué queremos? ¡Justicia! ¿Cuándo? ¡Ahora!*