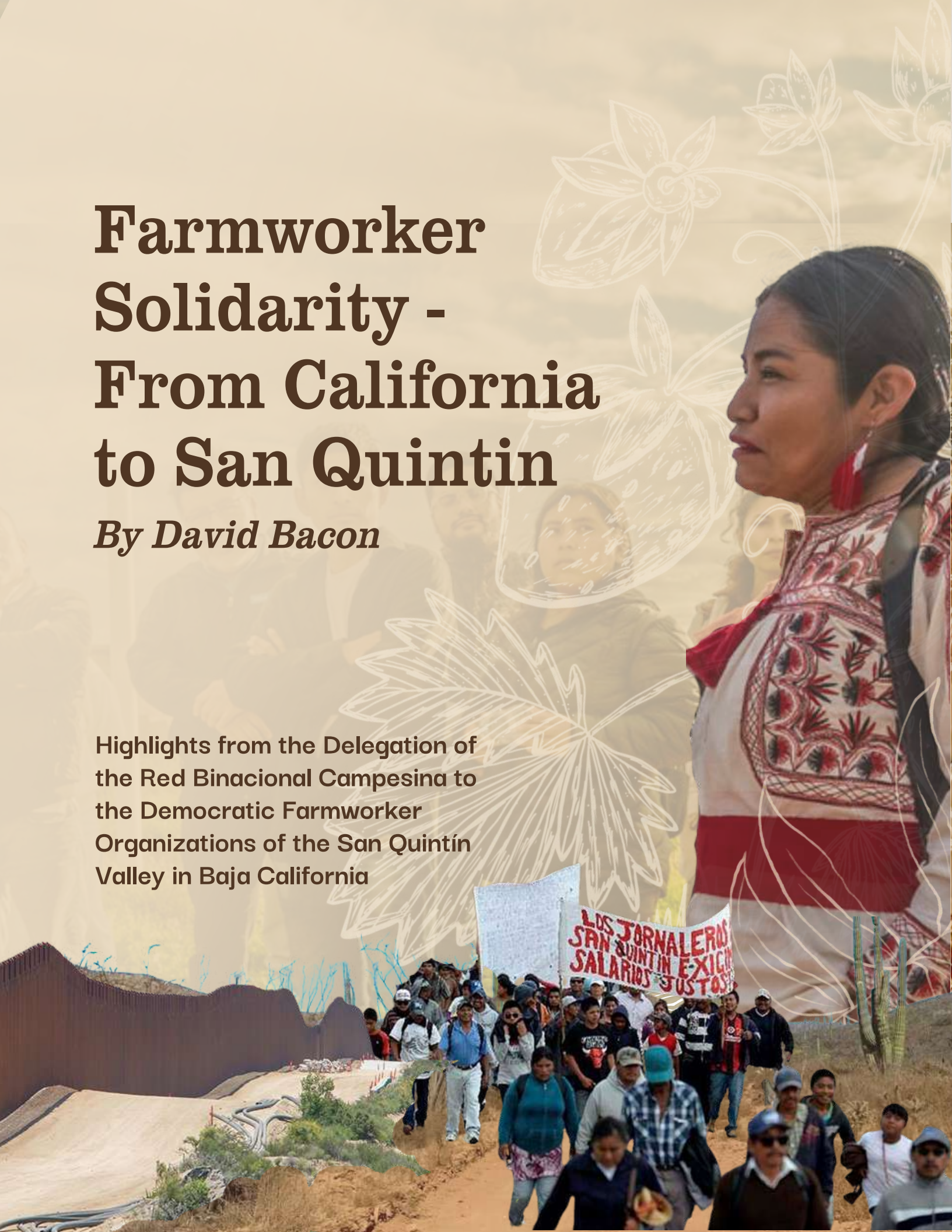


Farmworker Solidarity - From California to San Quintin

By David Bacon

Highlights from the Delegation of
the Red Binacional Campesina to
the Democratic Farmworker
Organizations of the San Quintín
Valley in Baja California



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All interviews, photos and text, except where otherwise noted, are by David Bacon



The Social Context: California and San Quintin

Introduction:

Building Binational Farmworker Collaborations: Lessons from San Quintín,

By: Dulce López

San Quintín, Baja California, México – On January 23-25, the UCLA Labor Center in partnership with the Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung, convened the Red Binacional Campesina, (Binational Farmworkers Network), a group of farmworker labor rights advocates from California, Washington and Mexico who met for two days in San Quintín to examine the growing impact of the H-2A temporary agricultural worker program and its implications for farmworker communities on both sides of the border. Indigenous community leaders, worker advocates, and researchers from the Centro Binacional para el Desarrollo Indígena Oaxaqueño (CBDIO), Central Coast Alliance United for a Sustainable Economy (CAUSE), Frente Indígena de Organizaciones Binacionales, Familias Unidas por la Justicia, Mixteco Indígena Community Organizing Project, Sindicato Independiente Nacional Democrático de Jornaleros Agrícolas, the Mujeres Unidas en Defensa de las Jornaleras e Indígenas, and the UCLA Labor Center sought to create a space not only for dialogue but for coordinated strategy rooted in worker experience.

The convening centered on analyzing a pressing contradiction: While the H-2A program is projected to expand significantly in the United States, labor conditions in Mexico remain structurally precarious. Without coordinated binational organizing, the expansion of temporary labor migration risks deepening economic dependency, weakening local labor standards, and increasing a race to the bottom for farmworkers across the U.S.-Mexico border.

Over the past decade, the H-2A program has reshaped agricultural labor markets in the United States. Yet, wage stagnation and declining housing and workplace standards raise serious concerns about long-term labor protections. Meanwhile, in Mexico, farmworkers continue to face low daily wages, approximately \$350 MXN pesos/ \$20 USD per day in some regions, alongside housing and mobility privatization, weak enforcement of labor law, and limited structural change despite years of organizing efforts.

Independent journalist David Bacon, who was part of the delegation, noted in a recent report based on this trip about the issues currently faced by the San Quintín workers: irregularities and unfulfilled promises to farmworkers by the San Quintin mayor, leading to highway blockades. The issue escalated, forcing the Mexican president, Claudia Sheinbaum, to visit San Quintin as locals demanded the mayor to be removed.

H-2A recruitment practices in Mexico remain inconsistent and, in some cases, predatory. Workers say intermediaries can charge fees as high as \$30,000 MXN, creating conditions of debt vulnerability that heighten the risk of trafficking and coercion. At the same time, the increased use of H-2A workers in parts of the United States has displaced local and indigenous farmworkers, generating tension between labor forces and complicating collective organizing. The absence of reliable cross-border data on migration flows and labor conditions further undermines accountability.

Against this backdrop, the UCLA Labor Center designed the San Quintín convening of the Red Binacional Campesina as a project aimed at moving beyond service provision toward a long-term strategy of binational labor power building.

During this binational dialogue, participants identified recurring barriers faced by farmworkers in both Mexico and the United States, including limited access to labor rights education, structural poverty, high mobility and labor turnover, exhausting work schedules that restrict organizing time, and threats or retaliation against visible leaders. Organizers emphasized that sustained political education remains foundational. As recently as 2013, many workers in the region were unfamiliar with the meaning of a strike or their basic labor protections, underscoring how deeply structural exclusion shapes organizing conditions.

The first day focused on worker testimony and collective analysis of the H-2A program. Workers described recruitment processes, contract conditions, and gender discrimination embedded in hiring practices. Men are frequently contracted for up to eight months, while women are often offered significantly shorter contracts, reflecting persistent gender bias. Contracts are typically provided shortly before departure and outline wages, housing arrangements, food deductions, and medical provisions. Workers reported housing segregated by gender, sometimes accommodating up to 100 individuals in barrack-style facilities. Food and optional medical insurance are deducted from wages, and workers who suffer serious injury risk repatriation and exclusion from future recruitment cycles.



In the photo from left to right, Jesús Estrada from the Indigenous Front of Binational Organizations (FIOB) and Sara Roschdi and Dulce Lopez from the UCLA Labor Center Global Solidarity Program.

Despite these conditions, many workers expressed gratitude for the opportunity to participate in the program, citing limited economic alternatives in Mexico. This normalization of exploitation, often framed as preferable to conditions at home, reflects the structural inequalities that shape labor migration decisions rather than the inherent fairness of the program itself.

A former H2A worker expressed, “Yes, the H2A wages will decrease... when we get sick, we are given the choice of going to the hospital or taking the money from our salary... Even then, if you are trying to make a life in Mexico, working there is profitable, but if you are planning to stay in the United States, it is not.”

Hazel from CAUSE, stated that this point of view came as a surprise, “In my community, [Santa Maria, California], I’ve heard the opposite of what some say about [the H2A program] being a good program. I’ve heard about abuses. Workers are not allowed to leave late. There are people who inspect the apartments and regulate them harshly; they even go into their homes.”

California-based participants contributed historical examples of successful farmworker organizing, including wage increases secured through strikes, reinstatement of unjustly terminated workers, protection of overtime pay for agricultural laborers, and the recovery of more than \$5.4 million in stolen wages. Indigenous-led unions in Washington State have negotiated contracts and built multilingual organizing infrastructures serving workers across 16 languages. These experiences reinforced a central lesson of the convening: durable gains can be achieved through sustained and worker-led organizing.

On the second day, the Labor Center facilitated direct community engagement in San Quintín. Participants worked alongside local strawberry workers to observe current labor conditions firsthand. Others met with mothers at a local kindergarten to discuss the impacts of family separation on women who remain in Mexico while family members migrate under H-2A. Another group visited the Universidad Intercultural, where educators are advancing access to higher education for farmworker children while preserving indigenous languages and identities. These site visits underscored that migration is not an individual event but a community-wide restructuring process affecting women, children, and future generations.

The convening concluded with a collective discussion of next steps toward a sustained binational strategy. Participants emphasized the importance of maintaining direct relationships with workers before, during, and after migration, as well as investing in long-term political education and leadership development. Organizing within the H-2A context requires strategies distinct from traditional farmworker campaigns due to visa dependency, fear of blacklisting, deportation risks, and shifting labor and trade policies between Mexico and the United States.

Sustaining a binational network will require dedicated funding, shared labor, and institutional collaboration. The UCLA Labor Center is committed to systematizing the findings of the convening, supporting ongoing research, and facilitating future cross-border dialogue to strengthen coordination among worker-led organizations.

The San Quintín gathering ultimately highlighted a central tension: while the H-2A program provides income opportunities, without coordinated organizing, it risks entrenching structural dependency and undermining labor standards in both countries. Binational organizing offers a pathway to reconnect communities of origin with worksites in the United States, centering worker leadership, indigenous autonomy, and political education as tools for structural change.

As participants affirmed, this effort is not a short-term campaign but part of a long-term movement for labor justice across borders, one that the UCLA Labor Center will continue to support through research, convening, and partnership with worker-led organizations.



In the photo from left to right, Abelina Ramirez from the National Independent and Democratic Union of Agricultural Day Laborers (SINDJA) and Jennifer Alejo from Trabajadores Unidos Workers United (TUWU).

A Geography of the H-2A Visa Program

From the article, “The Geography of the H-2 Visa Temporary Migrant Labor Program in Mexico and the United States: Continuity and Change,” by Rubén Hernández-León and Oscar Contreras-Velasco, Migraciones Internacionales, VOL. 16, ART. 23, 2025

“Since 2007, Mexico–U.S. migration has undergone a profound reorganization. Following a surge of undocumented migration that ended with the Great Recession (2007–2009), new unauthorized flows declined, while return migration—driven by deportations and voluntary exits—increased significantly. Several factors contributed to reducing outmigration and fostering returns: the decreasing demand for labor in construction and other U.S. economic sectors; the relative stability of the Mexican economy; the country’s declining birth rate; heightened border and immigration enforcement; and prolonged family separation without prospects for regularization. The balance between new departures and returns resulted in net zero levels of undocumented migration, a situation not seen in decades. This shift prompted scholars to debate the “collapse” of the system of undocumented migration and to describe the 2000s as ‘the decade when Mexico–U.S. migration changed.’

“Over the same period in which undocumented migration declined, legal temporary migration increased exponentially. H-2 visas, divided into two categories—H-2A for agricultural workers and H-2B for non-agricultural workers—became an increasingly relevant means for Mexicans to cross the border and work in the United States. In 1997, the U.S. Department of State issued 31 717 H-2 visas; in contrast, in 2023 it granted more than 442 000. Not all H-2 visas are issued to Mexicans, as citizens of dozens of countries qualify to apply for these temporary entry and work permits. However, Mexicans constitute the overwhelming majority of H-2 visa recipients, particularly in the H-2A agricultural category. In 2023, Mexicans received 91.5 % of H-2A agricultural visas and nearly 64.5 % of H-2B non-agricultural visas, totaling nearly 370 000 H-2 visas. Over the past 12 years (2013– 2024), Mexicans have been issued nearly 3 million H-2 visas (U.S. Department of State, 2024). Although the populations of both Mexico and the United States are much larger today, the number of H-2 visas allocated annually to Mexicans rivals those granted during the heyday of the Bracero Program in the late 1950s.

“While not a formal guestworker scheme, the H-2 visas operate like many temporary migrant labor programs, in that they tie temporary admission to short-term contracts. They aim to satisfy employer demand for migrant labor while preventing integration into the host society. Within the Mexico–U.S. migratory system, the proliferation of H-2 visas represents a return to the Bracero Program, the mid-20th- century bilateral guestworker agreement regulating legal migration. Along with the legality and temporariness that characterized Bracero migration, H-2 visas are overwhelmingly issued to men, who are expected to leave their families at home. H-2 visas also restore circulation in Mexico–U.S. migration, as laborers may remigrate as long as a new contract and visa are secured.

"While the H-2 labor force is not large enough to substitute for settled undocumented workers, this temporary migration scheme appears to be generating a form of generational replacement, particularly in agriculture, substituting aging unauthorized laborers with legal ones who play a complementary yet critical role during the harvest. For Mexicans, the H-2 visa is channeling temporary contract labor toward agriculture and, in that sense, redirecting flows to rural destinations.

"Survey data from the Encuesta sobre Migración en la Frontera Norte de México and data from the Office of Foreign Labor Certification of the U.S. Department of Labor, show that in both Mexico and the United States the H-2 visa program has expanded geographically and assumed a national scope, as more states and localities have become areas of supply and demand for these temporary laborers. In Mexico, the source areas of H-2 temporary sojourning largely coincide with historic and emerging regions of U.S.-bound migration, particularly in central-western and central-southern states, suggesting continuity between the prior regime of undocumented migration and the expanding system of temporary legal migration."



Rubén Hernández-León from the UCLA Sociology Department.

Strawberry Production in California and San Quintin, and the H-2A Workforce

By Marcos Lopez

In providing a social context for the work of the delegation, Marcos Lopez, research director for the Labor and Community Center at UC Davis, provided a set of charts that connected the history of agriculture in the San Quintin Valley, and the geographic dispersion of H-2A employment in California counties.



Marcos Lopez from the UC Davis, Labor Center.

The three stages of agriculture in the San Quintín Valley

Stage One (1880s - 1960s):

- English colony and ejido settlements
- Wheat and livestock production
-

Stage Two (1970s - 1990s)

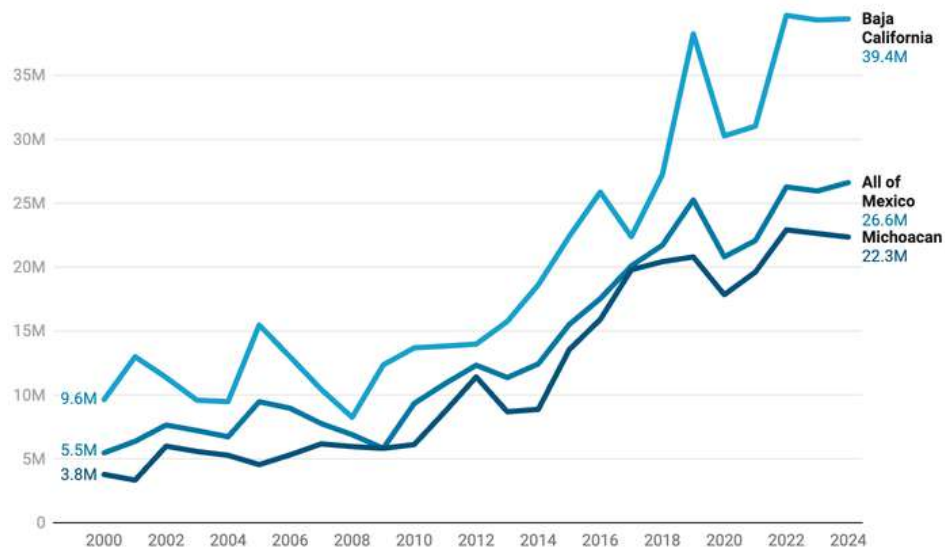
- Expansion of tomato production from Sinaloa
- Recruitment of workers from Oaxaca, Guerrero, and Sinaloa
-

Stage Three (2000s - Present)

- Expansion of strawberry, raspberry, and blueberry production from California
- Introduction of desalination plants for crop irrigation
- Use of shade houses and tunnels for the cultivation of berries and tomatoes
- Labor camps close and farmworker settlements become increasingly present
- Mirroring existing migration to the United States, H-2A recruitment becomes established in the Valley

Value in Pesos of Strawberries Harvested by Hectare, 2000 - 2024

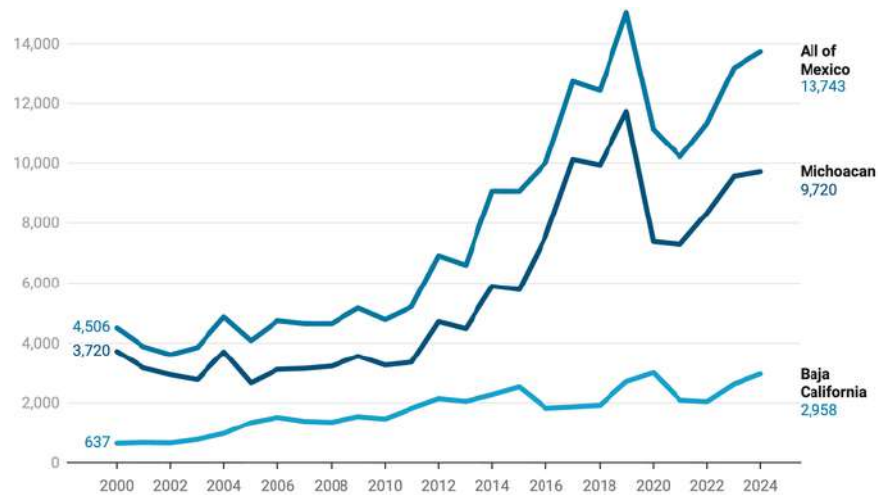
Strawberry production in Baja California generates by far the greatest value per hectare in Mexico. In 2000, strawberry production was valued at \$9.6M pesos [MX] per hectare. By 2024, the value of production increased to \$39.4M pesos [MX] per hectare, up 309%.



Analysis and chart created by Marcos Lopez [UC Davis Labor and Community Center]
Source: [Servicio de Información Agroalimentaria y Pesquera](#) Created with [Datawrapper](#)

Strawberry Production in Mexico by Hectare, 2000 - 2024

Strawberry hectares harvested in Baja California increased by 364% from 2000 to 2024.



1 Hectare = 2.46 Acres. Analysis and chart created by Marcos Lopez [UC Davis Labor and Community Center]
Source: [Servicio de Información Agroalimentaria y Pesquera \(SIAP\)](#) Created with [Datawrapper](#)

Top H-2A Employers in Key Destinations for H-2A Workers from the San Quintin Valley, 2025

Figures reflect agricultural jobs that the U.S. Department of Labor has certified as eligible for H-2A visa holders.

Monterey County	H-2A Jobs Certified	Santa Barbara County	H-2A Jobs Certified	Ventura County	H-2A Jobs Certified	Siskiyou and Lassen Counties	H-2A Jobs Certified
Foothill Packing	1,501	Royal Oak Ag Services	667	Royal Oak Ag Services	480	Sierra Cascade Nursery	1,392
Elkhorn Packing	1,251	Alco Harvesting	532	Elkhorn Packing	305	Plant Science Genetics	332
Fresh Harvest	921	Freshway Farms	270	Ag Empleo	239		
The Growers Company	700	Pacifica Personnel	246	Magana Labor Services	210		
Empire Farm Labor Contractor	488	Fresh Harvest	238	J.A.M. Packing	168		
St. Romo Labor Force	462	Brothers Best Labor	221	Fresh Harvest	132		
All Other H-2A Employers	2,942	All Other H-2A Employers	1,419	All Other H-2A Employers	623	All Other H-2A Employers	29
Total H-2A Jobs	8,265	Total H-2A Jobs	3,593	Total H-2A Jobs	2,157	Total H-2A Jobs	1,753

Analysis and table created by Marcos Lopez [UC Davis Labor and Community Center].
Source: [U.S. Department of Labor](#) Created with [Datawrapper](#)

Section One - The View from San Quintin

The delegation to San Quintin came in solidarity with the two organizations

The National Independent and Democratic Union of Agricultural Workers was born of the struggle of thousands of farmworkers of the Valley of San Quintin on March 17, 2015. It obtained its official registration on November 28, 2015. The purpose of the union is to defend the labor and human rights of the millions of agricultural laborers whose rights are violated daily in the fields in 19 states of the Mexican republic. This new union proposes uniting each and every worker in the organization and struggle for authentic collective bargaining agreements by which their rights are protected and they are able to receive all of the minimum benefits established by the federal labor law.

Mujeres Unidas en Defensa de las Jornaleras e Indígenas is a group of organized women that promotes the organization and defense of the human and labor rights of indigenous women and day laborers. Its vision is to be a group of women organized and committed to the transformation of social and labor relations, where women exercise their rights towards a full and dignified life.



Professor Gonzala Ruano from United Women in Defense of United Women in Defense of Indigenous Farmworking Women (MUDJI) in San Quintin's preschool.

“We know the violations, we live them” - Leonides Jyreh García Ramírez

Leonides Jyreh García Ramírez is the Recording Secretary of the Sindicato Independiente Nacional y Democrático de Jornaleros Agrícolas, the National Independent and Democratic Union of Farm Workers. Her work involves keeping minutes, notes from internal and external meetings, planning, keeping a systematization of activities, gatherings, meetings, and crafting the work plan.

We all have knowledge based on the lives we’ve lived. Maybe no one taught us how to dress – we just got the idea by watching our older siblings. Everyone learns differently. Some learn by watching, others by listening, others by doing things hands-on or through touch, others just by reading theory. Popular education is based on identifying your learning style and reinforcing it through dynamics, games, songs, videos, reading materials. Together, with everyone’s experiences, we strengthen knowledge and provide additional information – but in a gradual, non-imposing way.

I started working in the agricultural fields at 12 years old. I went to work with my mom, who harvested strawberries. The children’s crews back then were made up of the children of workers from a company. They divided us into small groups of 10-12 children who did cleaning activities, collecting leaves or trash, or maintaining tomato seedlings – work done low to the ground, crouched almost to the soil.



Jyreh García Ramírez from the National Democratic Independent Union of Agricultural Workers (SINDJA)

These activities are harder for adults because of height or weight, but for children we saw it as a game. A child sees everything as fun. So we did the work while playing, talking, listening to music. We didn't care about the amount of work – we just wanted to finish the day and go home to our parents.

That was my first work experience at age 12. I kept working during school vacations. I went with my mother to onion planting, tomato planting, and cucumber planting at Rancho Los Pinos, helping with plant maintenance, removing leaves, cleaning, general labor. My whole life I have been involved in fieldwork, up to today.

Los Pinos is mostly about vegetables – tomatoes and cucumbers. That's what we harvested most back then, and still today the ranch is known mainly for those crops. The biggest family in Los Pinos Rodríguez are the bosses today. Now, as a social activist and labor-rights defender, I know all the suffering and violations we experience in the San Quintín Valley. Even though Los Pinos has an EFI certification on its walls saying "child-labor free," I was 13-14 years old working there – knowing it was a lie.

Today, you mostly see children working with small producers – small family plots of one hectare or less. The whole family goes: mother, father, and their three children, doing planting, cleaning, weeding. But in established companies, minors are no longer accepted.

Here in the San Quintín Valley the population is multicultural. We have people from many states – especially southern states: Oaxaca, Guerrero, Jalisco, Veracruz, Chiapas – and they speak their native languages. We have varieties such as Mixteco alto, Mixteco bajo, Triqui, Tlapaneco, and many more Indigenous languages.

That is one of the biggest challenges because we don't have translators for legal counseling or trainings. If a worker who doesn't understand Spanish suffers abuse, they don't have the safety or confidence to file a complaint. There's also discrimination against Indigenous workers – discrimination and abuse against people who speak Indigenous languages.

An Indigenous person often can't understand a message in Spanish. It's very hard to find a way to translate messages on rights, or any topic. For example, the right to social security is very complex, and there's no tool to translate all that information in a way that makes sense to the worker.

There is also discrimination from coworkers. Recently, we handled the case of a woman who speaks only Mixteco. She doesn't understand Spanish. As a joke, a kind of mockery, they locked her inside a portable toilet for two hours because she couldn't understand Spanish. And her coworkers didn't say anything – no one said, "Take her out." The portable toilet is plastic, filled with stinking smells, and she was inside for two hours without understanding why. Just because she speaks a different language. She is a worker and a human being, and she has rights – especially the right to respect. Cases like that make us want to expand our efforts to defend farmworkers and their rights.

Simply speaking a dialect does not make you different, you are a hardworking person, you also have your rights as a human person, you have your rights to respect more than anything and the compañeros did nothing. So we want to focus on expanding this interest in defending the day laborer population, to the people and rights.

Workers who read or write only in their Indigenous language cannot understand the employment contracts they sign. Companies take advantage of this, giving them contracts with different wages or without benefits.

When workers ask for information, the company tells them: “No, we can’t translate it for you. We don’t have a translator. If you don’t like it, you can leave.” So this becomes a form of abuse as well.

When workers file complaints, the government offices also do not have translators for the many Indigenous languages spoken here. There are very few people – maybe a lawyer or two – who speak a particular language. But for languages like Náhuatl or Tlapaneco, almost no one trained exists. So workers cannot receive proper support.

The disadvantage of not understanding a particular or individual contract is that workers don’t know the legal wages, what benefits are included in your contract, or the schedule on which you are going to work. In an employment contract the date of entry should be given. If it is a seasonal contract, how many months exactly you are going to work, what your salary is going to be, what is going to be your amount of vacation. If it is a permanent contract, your vacation. Your rights include the Christmas bonus, profit-sharing, and whether you’re paid daily, weekly or on a piece rate. Unfortunately the company only use a generic contract and if you don’t like it you don’t have the right to complain.

Many contain violations. Some contracts say seasonal workers do not get a Christmas bonus. But under the law, even if you worked only six months, you are entitled to a proportional bonus.



Farmworkers and other residents in an informal settlement, or colonia, in the San Quintin Valley.

Same with profit-sharing. Even if you worked 2–4 months, you are entitled to your proportional share – but companies ignore it. Many companies use monthly contracts to avoid responsibility. By renewing a contract every 30 days, they avoid paying benefits that legally belong to permanent workers.

Even with a monthly contract, if a worker stays three continuous months without missing a day, the law recognizes them as permanent and as having seniority. Companies refuse to acknowledge this.

Another abuse is avoiding paid vacations. A worker might have five years on the job and wants to visit family. The company says: “Yes, take your vacation. Take 15, 20 days, or a month.” They pay the worker some money – and the worker believes it is vacation pay. But it is actually severance pay, meaning they were fired. When they return, they no longer have a job, and their entire seniority is erased. Workers think: “My boss was so nice, he gave me time off.” But it was a violation of their rights.

We provide personal counseling to help with these problems. When a worker comes to us after an unjustified dismissal or because of a situation in their workplace, we accompany them. Last year we supported over 50 individual wrongful-dismissal cases – not collective. For each case we calculate the severance according to the law, schedule a conciliation meeting with authorities, and help the worker negotiate with the company. Often companies refuse to pay anything unless they are forced. We go with the worker until the company is held responsible and pays the severance.

We also help with Social Security issues. Many workers don’t know their number. We help them look it up, download it from the system, and verify whether the number matches the one the company is using. If the company registered them with a different number, the worker ends up with multiple Social Security numbers, which must be unified so their weeks of contributions count toward a pension.

In Mexico, at age 16 you are assigned a Social Security number that you should use your whole life. But when someone starts working, they sometimes forget their number. The company says: “Don’t worry. We’ll give you one.” Sometimes they assign a fake number, a number belonging to someone else, or they create a new one altogether. Then the worker changes jobs, forgets which number they used, and the new company again says “Don’t worry, we’ll give you one.” Some workers end up with five, even seven numbers.

It is an issue of corruption, since they deduct a commission from the workers to pay their social security and if they give them a false number, that money is not delivered to the insurance, the company keeps it. Now, if an accident at work happens to you, a fall, a fracture - because you have falls, fractures, injuries to the back, to the arms - when you go to social security they ask for your social security number. The Social Security office searches for their real number, finds no registration, and says, “You’re not registered. Go back to your employer.” When the worker is finally registered with their real number, Social Security labels the injury a general illness, not a work accident, so the employer is not held responsible.

Sometimes workers ask us to support their work stoppages or strikes, either because the company does not want to pay profit-sharing or Christmas bonuses or some other benefit. The organized workers decide to stop and block the entrance, not allow workers to enter or leave. Often the company is pressured by that and agrees to pay the benefits. The workers have always looked to us for legal support and our commitment. Whether those workers are members or not we support them, not only agricultural workers, but hotel workers, waiters, cooks, people in different jobs.

We get calls at 6 in the morning saying, "We decided to stop work, we need you to accompany us, to help us negotiate with the company." Many times the company intimidates the workers so to we help them not to feel intimidated. Support from the union helps workers know us, because we go with a large banner with our name. The comrade, the worker, feels stronger and is no longer afraid to speak or make demands.

We take advantage of any opportunity to ask workers to join and get committed. We tell them, "If you are join me, I can support you in any situation. This is your union, it is not my union. As a member now your union will support you, it will back you." Many times workers tell us a union is useless and does not solve anything. They confuse us with the company unions and they say we are on the side of the boss. So we demonstrate with facts and with commitment to work that we are not the same, that we are independent. We will always be on the side of the worker because we are also workers. We know the violations, we live them - the abuses of companies against workers.



Residents in an informal colonia, in the San Quintin Valley.

We want to revive the strikes of 2015 with the SINJA at the forefront, because the abuses continue. The legal wage increase does not reach agricultural workers. It may happen in offices or in cities, but here it does not arrive. We say we need to do something big. Our idea is to revive March 17, 2015, with a massive strike of all workers to demand improvements in wages, in work conditions, and in health. We say, no more unjustified firings or labor abuse or exploitation of day laborers.

These rights already belong to us. But many times oppression does not allow us to advance, does not allow us to lose the fear of going on strike and unite all together. But I hope that soon there will be a strike demanding improvements for everyone, not just on one ranch or for one person, but in general. If many workers join we can achieve collective agreements and change for everyone. For everyone.

We continue to reach out, so workers can see the union's interest in improving the situation, that they really know who we are and that we are going to be there to support them. Our strategy is based on recruiting members through personal contact, and house-to-house visits in communities of the San Quintín Valley. We are knocking on doors, saying, "We are the union, get to know us, tell us what your needs are." We are going to organize the people to fight for those needs.

Sometimes we see the agricultural monsters here in San Quintín as untouchable. They are always protected, more than anything else by money. It's what they use to break up a strike or buy off workers, so they won't say anything to threaten them

We have been given the opportunity in two companies to negotiate a collective agreement. People there know that the union is there to defend them, but we need the workers to participate for the union to exist. If they don't it is not going to work.

Many of us have suffered reprisals, dismissals for wanting to organize. They put us on the blacklist. They have their agricultural council, and they know or identify workers that they are organizing so as not to hire them on any ranch. That's what happened in 2015. The spokespeople who were at the forefront of the movement suffered the most reprisals. Some were identified with videos or photographs and suffered layoffs and were not hired in any ranch. Today the same thing is still happening. If you raise your voice, they fire you. When you go look for another ranch they don't give you the job.

The blacklist is illegal, but it exists. We have to work so that freedom of association as a right becomes a reality. The right to freedom of expression and freedom of association also must become a reality, not just left on paper. They have to become a reality here in San Quintín.

After 2015, because the movement was divided, some leaders got a position in the government, which is fine. But the activism in them and in the movement went down. Maybe someone thought he could no longer raise his voice, as long as he has that position. He cannot organize because he will lose that position, with a salary higher than farmworkers, and it would be like going backwards for him.

I imagine that in their thoughts the feeling for the struggle for which they were organizing still remains. But I understand that there is also a need for the family. I do not judge them, I do not criticize them, I simply learn from them so that I do not commit the same action. My commitment has always been to women, to workers, to accompaniment without a single peso

Some in the movement now see it as something lucrative -I accompany you, but you give me your 30% if you win the lawsuit. They see it as a business. If we accompany workers who achieve their demand, we do not ask them for a single peso. It is their money they earned in years of work. We as a union or as accompaniers, do not have any right to that money. It does not seem fair to me that other colleagues because they know the process, they see it as something lucrative.

The dream of so many workers is to go to the United States, because it is more income. Here, the companies use that hook a lot. They say, "Stay with me for five years and I'll give you your visa so that you can go work in the United States." Many times workers have been at a company for ten years and they have never been given a visa. But they continue working with the promise of next year and then next year, and it never comes.

Some workers who have gone to the United States then take advantage of that situation and stay there. That is illegal, we understand that, but workers do it to benefit their family. Perhaps the American dream is illegal. So the companies limit the spaces for workers here in San Quintín.



Informal settlement in the San Quintín Valley.

When we want to organize meetings, the worker says, "No, I can't go because if I go I'll miss a day or the company will identify me and they won't give me my visa." So the companies use it so that the workers do not organize, do not join the union, do not speak, do not say anything, do not demand rights. The opportunity to get an H-2A visa is frustrating for the union, because workers don't want to organize for fear of missing out on the opportunity.

Despite that, I see it as positive for our working people, those who have had the opportunity to go. It makes a positive impact on their lives and families, because the day laborers, the majority of its population here in San Quintín, live in extreme poverty. Having that opportunity to give their children an education and end the cycle of day labor work means the children of farmworkers can become professionals. It is an opportunity for the youth to no longer live this forced labor and their exploitation as farmworkers. It gives them the dream of a better future and a chance to be a professional.

I don't know much about the work there in the United States, but I know the work here. For workers here will stay in a job for just 50 or 100 pesos more. So if the wage in the U.S. still beats the daily wage here in Mexico, they will look for the opportunity.

I just want to encourage the youth today to learn something new. They can learn about activism, feminism, the power struggle here in the system. They can learn to challenge the systems of oppression that are blocking and exploiting our farmworkers. Don't be afraid to organize and learn something new. We are all exposed to labor abuse in whatever sector we find ourselves. So MUDJI and the Farm Workers Union extend our hand to work together, whether it's in the United States or here in Mexico.

From this exchange with organizations on the other side we want to generate a support network between organizations and people, whether for accompaniment, for training, or the sharing of information. Of course, we want to generate some action too, as we did in 2017 after the strike. Whether it is BerryMex, Driscolls or other companies that are also in the United States, we need activity, some movement in a big way in binational coordination, so that we can win real changes.



“We have basic rights” - Abelina Ramirez

From **More Than a Wall (COLEF, 2021)**

Abelina Ramirez is the past President of SINDJA, and was formerly its Secretary of Gender Equality.

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



Abelina Ramirez from SINDJA comforting a mother affected by family separation due to the H-2A visa program.

As a woman, this is a broader vision of our work, including here in the U.S. and other countries. Our job is to do more than take care of our children. We are contributing to the social and economic life of the whole society.

After the strike in 2015 there wasn't a lot of participation by women, because of the same obstacles. The economy - that we have to work every day. The day that we organized for the strike, thousands and thousands of women participated. But then the real work began of training and education of organizers and fighters. We're trying to train a new generation of women. Women aren't just good for serving children and husbands, but are needed for participating and holding public positions. Our world of farm workers has ignored and failed to recognize what is possible. It has to be everybody's decision, not just women.

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

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

Workers Speak Out

Catalina Juana Lopez Reyes and Daisy Morales

Catalina Juana Lopez Reyes and Daisy Morales are farmworkers in the San Quintin Valley, and gave their testimony during a meeting with delegation members at the Indigenous Preschool Gabriela Mistral, organized by its principal Gonzala Ruano Bautista.

Catalina Juana Lopez Reyes

We arrived in 1976. We built our house out of sticks. We slept on branches for a year. My husband had to go hunt rabbits for us to eat because at that time there was very little work – only about three months of it, and it was all tomatoes.



Parents and grandparents of children at the Indigenous Preschool, Gabriela Mistral, a kindergarten for indigenous children.

Things were very cheap then. We would go back to Oaxaca every year. The trip would be from here to Ensenada, and buses left every eight hours. We traveled from Ensenada to Tijuana, from Tijuana to Mexico City. The whole trip took about three and a half days. Over time the government stopped making us return. When we arrived, there were only three bosses – Terry, Nacho, and López – all of whom have passed away. Now there is enough work, but it's still very hard.

We lived like that for about four years. After my daughter was born, we didn't have to go back to Oaxaca. She had been born there but it was risky – you had to pay for a midwife. Work was scarce and there was no insurance. A birth cost around fifteen to seventeen pesos. The best daily wage was seventeen pesos; the usual was fifteen. After that, six or seven of our children were born here.

Later the land was divided, first Maclovía Rojas was created, then this area, then Lomo de San Ramón. When I got my land here in Section Thirteen, it cost 700 pesos. At that time they paid twenty to twenty-five pesos a day. To earn enough, I had to work ten, twelve, even fifteen “tareas.” A “tarea” was twenty rows – about eighty rows for laying wire. Twelve rows for planting tomatoes was also a “tarea.” If it was wire work, I'd take five, eight, or ten rows.

Back then the land cost 700 pesos. Now land costs 150,000 to 400,000 pesos. Daily wages may be 300–450 pesos, but expenses have risen just as much. For someone with two or three kids, it's not enough – food, clothing, school. The government gives breakfast at school, but it's still not enough. Rent alone is 2,000–3,000 pesos a month, plus water and electricity. People are forced to work and put babies as young as one or two months in daycare.

I worked most of my life. I stopped in 1997 when my last child was born. I haven't worked since. I've been a widow for four years; my children are married and I live alone. Believe me, it's not easy. Thanks to God, my husband left me a small house where I live.

Life is still hard today, very hard.

Daisy Morales

My name is Daisy Morales. I haven't suffered as much as others, but I did watch my parents struggle a lot. My dad is over there in the U.S., and I have a brother there too. Another brother goes with a work visa, and my husband also went, but now he stays here because we have a child and it hurts us when he leaves.

I lived through my father leaving. He stayed in the U.S. for a long time and had another family and more children. It's hard that there's not enough work here so people have to leave. My dad eventually got papers, but he never got papers for us – we are five siblings – nor for my mom. He only got papers for himself, partly because of the cost. I remember my mom crying because my dad left.

He didn't send enough money because there were five of us. That's why my brother left for the U.S., and now he can't come back either. He came back about ten years ago and then left again; we haven't seen him since because he doesn't have papers. My other brother can come and go with his visa. My husband decided not to go anymore because he doesn't want to leave us.

I'm almost 33 years old and he never wanted or managed to get us papers. That's the saddest part – my father has papers, my siblings born over there have papers, but we don't. When my father dies – and it will happen – we won't be able to see him or say goodbye. Only my siblings with papers will. He could have helped us get papers, but didn't. Now we live with the consequences. He can't drive or walk much anymore. It's sad that I can't go see my dad unless he comes here. And I don't know if I'll ever see my brother again either – I have to try to get a visa to look for him because he can't come here.



Daisy Morales, a parent at the Indigenous Preschool, Gabriela Mistral

Families get separated because there's no work here, no way to support four or five children. Now there are better opportunities – people can go to the U.S. on a work visa and know they'll come back. That's a big advantage. I think those visas are a blessing.

Maria Luisa Rojas

My daughter leaves the house, I go to work and they go to school. I leave them lunch, but I don't know if they eat it. I get home around five so I don't know how they're doing in school.

The Zapata School charges 1,500 pesos every year. It's not enough for food and everything is expensive. Here everything is expensive – food went up a lot. Eggs are more than 100 pesos. An apple is 10 pesos. Right now I'm home with the youngest and only my husband works, but it's not enough. That's how we're living



Marisa Luisa Rojas, a parent at the Indigenous Preschool, Gabriela Mistral,

Section Two - The View from Both Sides of the Border

"In San Quintín it is difficult to organize an independent union"

Jesús Estrada Velasco

Jesús Estrada Velasco is a longtime activist in the indigenous Mixtec community in California, and has a home and roots in the San Quintín Valley. He came as a representative of the Frente Indígena de Organizaciones Binacionales (FIOB).

I joined FIOB in '97, and it was already five years old. Then, in June 1999, I had my first major organizing experience. We went on strike in Santa Maria with the support of the Mixteco and Triqui workers. But before that I had participated in the movements here in San Quintín, especially for the construction of the hospital here in San Quintín that May.

That was the first time that I got involved in a march, and at that time there was a highway blockade as well. I participated with my car with a loudspeaker, making announcements, and I went to the sit-in that they organized in Camalú.

Camalú was a very important experience for me, because I met several of the leaders. Some are no longer here and have died, but others are still there. There I met the FIOB, because it came to support - people like Gaspar Rivera and Rufino Domínguez, who was a great leader.



Jesús Estrada from the Indigenous Front of Binational Organizations (FIOB).

All the organizations met together at that time. There was CIOAC, the Confederacion Independiente de Obreros Agricolas y Campesinos {founded by the Mexican Communist Party}, led by Julio Alonso and Beatriz Chavez. Enrique Rojas, another leader, was also there. Everyone participated in the sit-ins, and that won the construction of the hospital.

At that time I didn't know what the left was I only sympathized with Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas, who ran for President, but I didn't really know what being on the left meant. Over time I learned, and you could hear the left in the campaign of Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas in 1988, which I admired.

At that time I also met Arturo Pimentel, who was the leader of the FIOB, I met him in Ensenada, where he came to support us when I helped organize the planton in front of the Social Security of Ensenada. There were already important leaders who had a lot of experience. I had heard about the movement Benito Garcia was organizing in the eighties, eighties, when it was strong.

The times now are very different. Then there were arrest warrants against the leaders so they were very careful. Today there is more freedom of expression, there is more political awareness. People can express whatever they want, but. No one is imprisoned for expressing their ideas, which is very different from before.

I have a lot of admiration for all the leaders of that time, because they clearly knew the danger, but they still went ahead. Many were imprisoned. I knew exactly what the consequences were. Times were very different.

Since 2015 there have not been any big strikes, like that one. It was a very strong movement At that time I was a leader of the FIOB in California and we participated in the strike here in San Quintín. We brought tons of food and beans. When the strikers came up to the border in Tijuana, we joined them there as FIOB California and FIOB Tijuana. That's where I developed as a leader with a leftist ideology, to fight for those who have less.

I think now people are more aware, they have more information, they know more about the rights they have through the union, through organizations. Although at that time there were also organizations. In 2015 we had a civil association that was part of FIOB here in the San Quintín Valley, called Indigenous Legal Assistance, headed by Francisco Tapia. Over time, though, the association ended when the strike movement died down. But today there is more knowledge and more information. People know more about their rights.

The company unions with their phantom contracts, CTM and CROC and CROM, were already here before 2015. In 1985 I met Sergio Méndez, Antonio Garcia and Maclovio Rojas, but I didn't really know them. Then the CTM arrived and they fired Garcia.

In San Quintín it is difficult to organize an independent union, because the valley is controlled by the unions that work with the companies. For that reason I think we have to work more with those who make the laws, with the deputies and senators. Right now workers need a clear process they can use to form an independent union, which we don't really have. They talk a lot about the 40 hour week as well, instead of the 48 hour week we have now, so let's hope that will benefit the workers too. But the law for forming independent unions needs to be clearer and less bureaucratic so that it can really help workers.

Even though the labor reform says all unions must have elections on their existing contracts, I haven't really seen that here. But the SINDJA union compañeros don't have a contract. This has been a very important challenge. here is only one labor inspector for the whole valley. That cannot be possible. There are over 200 companies for a single inspector. That's why there is no enforcement. If there are workers' right laws, they are dead letters because there is no enforcement.

Over time that can change. We have only had 7 years with a different government. So I think that's going to improve, little by little.

That kind of reform has not yet arrived in San Quintín. The previous governments of focused on the north and center of Mexico, not on states like Chiapas, Oaxaca, Veracruz. So AMLO started there, and only spent a little effort here. Now they have said that they are going to start in the north, so we are waiting for the benefits to come. One of them has to be a labor reform that really benefits the workers.



Farmworkers and other residents of the Zapata colonia in the San Quintin Valley blockade the Transpeninsular Highway to protest corruption in the new government of the San Quintin municipality.

Now San Quintin is a municipality on its own, not part of Ensenada. San Quintín is a municipality of migrants from everywhere - from Michoacán, Oaxaca, Guerrero - from every state. Many have become residents. They came as migrants, as workers, but then their children were born here. Tijuana also is a Tijuana of migrants. That's why AMLO said, "When I come to Tijuana, I find people from all states."

But because it is a municipality of migrants, working people here do not have a political voice, They don't participate or organize strongly enough to capture the political structure.

All the movements here, all the blockades, are organized by migrants - people from outside the system. The natives here are very satisfied with things as they are. For them, everything is very good. But they are not the majority. When there is a movement like the blockades, they say that migrants should not come here to organize. It has taken such strength to organize. But I believe we are all in the same country. If we come and stay here, if we have houses and pay property taxes, then we are citizens of the municipality.

The blockades we've seen are movements of migrants, those who are not natives but those who have come here. They have their possessions and their businesses. They have their home. Their children are born here. They are fighting against local corruption of course, but this movement is something else as well. They're looking for a political voice. That is what has failed here.

Celerino García was the first indigenous person to run for municipal office here more than twenty years ago, so this is not something new. People have been wanting this for a long time, but it has not been possible. Behind many blockades, there are political interests. But it is a movement, something has begun and so far a lot has been achieved.

As the comrades here say, the politicians learned something from the 2015 movement. "How did those day laborers achieve something and why don't we?" But it is a good example that migrant farmworkers, whose parents came from somewhere else, are organized. I admire their unity a lot.

When the patron saint's feast is organized by the Triquis here, that is their unity and it is their strength. It has an impact of organizing, because unity is the important thing, its traditions, its customs, its people. That unity is their strength, it is not individualism. So that has been part of SINDJA's organizational strategy, to use these networks or these associations in these communities.

It's a good one. When it is a good cause, communities come together. The goal must be clear, what the objective is. If they believe that something is needed to benefit the people, then they unite. You can take advantage of the unity and strength that each people bring..

In the 90s and early 2000s, the United Farm Workers in California made an agreement with Rufino and FIOB. FIOB was going to help the union with the communities, and the union was going to help those communities. It failed because there was no follow-up and the objective was not clear, or how it is going to be done and by whom. It's like the strike we organized in Santa María in 1999. We just jumped in, but we didn't have a long-term plan or follow up. That is key to organizing. Here the key is a strategic plan, to make a real alliance between the communities and the union, a firm arrangement between the peoples and SINDJA.

Two of the obstacles to organizing are the fear of being fired and the H-2A program with this dream of earning well instead of staying here and changing things. For those who go with the H-2A visa there is a very important advantage. Here to earn \$13 or \$15 takes 8 hours and there it takes one hour. Even if a worker is paid a low wage in the U.S. he is only going to work for a few months. So he saves. He does not live like other workers there, with a television or Internet. His goal is very specific - save and save and come back here. That helps them. So maybe it is better to improve it or propose that it be improved.

If I were like SINDJA I would approach the legislators, those who make the law or those who take the initiative and see what point can be improved for them there or here as well. They can look for those who can make a government-to-government arrangement to improve it.

The H-2A people on the other side are not going to organize on their own, because they go with the idea of working and saving and coming back. If they look for problems they will not hire them for the next season.

In the United States there are also laws that can protect those who work under the program, if they protest and have the courage to protest bad conditions. They can get a witness visa. Now there will be a reduction in wages, maybe 6 dollars an hour, 30% or 40%. But that's what who live in the U.S. see. But here the new salary per day is four hundred and fifty or five hundred pesos, so the wage in the U.S. is still three times more. Before the reduction it was four times more or five times, but even so, he still sees it as a good thing.

I think that what remains to be done, both for SINDJA and us who are in the United States is to bring information. We need to tell people about their rights. If something happens, like if they don't let you leave your housing and no one can come to visit you, that's against the law.. That's what I think as an organizer. Bring rights, bring information, protest and fight every dismissal. SINDJA know the workers when they're here and if they go to the U.S. and have problems, they need to look for sister organizations there for advice. SINDJA can help those workers to make the connection.

I think things here will improve, but I see it as a long way off. Here everything is controlled by the old unions here and the ranchers. Even the water. But if people really organize themselves, things can be changed. It takes a lot of work. In the U.S. it is the same. There are still many abuses there. Contractors hire the people and if something happens, the growers wash their hands.

But I don't lose heart. We keep fighting and that's what will help us. Maybe we won't see a change soon, but in the long run change will come.

Alfredo Lelo Juarez

Alfredo Lelo Juarez is an organizer with Familias Unidas por la Justicia, the indigenous farmworker union in Washington State. He was detained and assaulted by ICE agents in the Trump immigration raids, and was forced to choose voluntary departure after months in the notorious Tacoma detention center.

After being in the United States for almost 18 years, I'm now in Mexico. I have been helping my dad to plant corn and beans and a little pumpkin and following the news about what's happening in the United States.

Life in the Sierra de Guerrero is very different my life in Washington. There I organized and at the same time I worked in the fields, where I talked with the workers. Working this way helped build a level of trust, working alongside my coworkers. They would tell me their stories. Then, after seeing what needed to be done, I'd leave work and organize. Now that I'm here in Mexico, I'm in the fields, but planting corn and beans for our own family.

There are many people in my town who have relatives in the United States. Every week we talk with them, and they tell us the fear they feel because of the deportations. We feel that fear too because we don't know when something might happen to them. When our family goes to the store or to work, the migra can stop them. So they stay at home because it's scary to go out.



From left to right, Gaspar Rivera-Salgado from the UCLA Labor Center Global Solidarity Program, Alfredo "Lelo" Juarez from United Families for Justice (FUJ) and Beatriz Godinez Arce

There is a lot of communication with our families and our communities there. We watch the news as well. From here, you can do almost nothing for the family there, just talk to them and tell them not to go out. There are many families here in Mexico who depend on the money sent by family members in the United States.

Several people in my family decided to return voluntarily to our town after living in the U.S. for many years. They were afraid that the migra would arrest them and lock them up. Many people have come back. They want to work and save money, but since things are very ugly, they decide to return with what they have.

People have spent many years working, paying their taxes, spending their checks there in the United States. But then they come back with almost nothing, because they built their lives there. Like me, they have begun to plant corn and beans, which is the most common crop in our town. Some who do not have land rent the land of family or acquaintances. Sometimes just the man comes back, leaving his wife and children there.

People have heard about the H-2A visa program but the recruiters haven't come yet. When I was] in Washington I spoke with many workers who were working under the H-2A program. Many are from Oaxaca. Now that I am here in Mexico, I want to see what the recruitment process is like. Here in Mexico it's the other side of the story. What happens when they come back? Do they have to register again to return next year? I'm going to try to learn as much as I can, and talk with my colleagues in Familias Unidas, to help them understand how things are here.

It would be very helpful for them to know their rights in the United States. It is a big problem when they get there and have no way to communicate with the community or ask for help. It is very important for them to see the complete story of what life is like there. They have illusions because of the way the recruiters explain the program. They say they're going to give free housing, free transportation, free food and secure work.

Because people are going with a visa there's no fear of deportation,

That's how they sell it. But once you're there there it's another story, it's very different. The treatment is not always good, there's a lot of wage theft, and the housing is often bad. Those of us who are already there organizing and talking to people know this. But people here in Mexico who have not yet gone to the United States do not know first-hand about these conditions.

When workers get fed up with the conditions or mistreatment, and try to organize, the company threatens them with deportation, with calling the police and the migra. That greatly affects their ability to organize and strike. After we won a contract at Sakuma Farms I decided to dedicate myself full time to organizing. It took us four years to win that agreement. Usually It takes a long time to fight for a union contract, and meanwhile you have to pay the rent, buy food and live, so organizing is difficult. But in the tulips, we went on strike, and in three days the company agreed to sit down with a committee of the workers.



Rosa Navarro from United Families for Justice (FUJ).

We asked for help from the community and their support was very useful, making calls to the company telling them to sit down to negotiate with the workers. Then the committee began to negotiate and a few weeks later an agreement was reached to raise the salary, provide gloves, give the 15 minutes of paid rest, and provide clean water and bathrooms.

Having worked in the tulips myself gave workers confidence in me because they could see me there by their side, suffering like they did. We worked all day together, talking about the problems in that company and others. My experience accumulated over the years helps me talk to people and understand how their families live.

Whether it's picking strawberries in Santa Maria or in San Quintin, it's the same experience. Organizing and reaching an agreement with Driscoll would be a great achievement for families who work in the fields, raising the salary and getting better conditions. The abuses that exist in California, exist in Washington and here in Mexico, and the low wages too. It is the same struggle, fighting for better wages, better working conditions.

I plan to talk to people about what is happening in the United States, whether it is about immigration or work in the fields. I have a lot to learn here, so for now I'm in a learning mode, whether it's about planting corn and beans, how to take care of the plants, or learning from the compañeros who are working in the field picking strawberries or flowers here in San Quintin.

Section three - The View from California

Arcenio Lopez

Arcenio Lopez is the executive director of the Mixteco Immigrant Community Organizing Project, with offices in Oxnard and Santa Maria, California.

One of the most important things I saw in San Quintin was the resistance and the struggle of our communities to demand the basics. I have been hearing about Baja California for many years. I grew up listening to stories from my grandmothers and my mother. I have two aunts who live in Camalú. So I've been hearing about 60 years of history. But even though they told me what the conditions were like there, I thought things would be better. Instead, I found a very harsh reality.

Certainly, the condition of the community infrastructure is very poor - housing, streets, access to water - all kinds of things. But what continues to surprise me is that the people are the ones who save the people. The people are the ones who are in the struggle. And they have used their strategies of struggle - the blockades, the talking, the organizing. I was very impressed by that.



Highway blockade in protest of corruption in the new San Quintin municipality's government.

I think they were forced to use those tactics, because otherwise the people who have power don't pay attention to them. They have kept ignoring them through hundreds of years of corruption in the Mexican government. Whatever arrives at the public offices, whether it is the municipal president or the governor, does not reach the people. And they are not willing to negotiate with the people, to listen to the people, to serve the people, as they say when they are running their campaigns. It's always easier to call people savages and use the military against the people when they are fighting. So these circumstances have pushed people to use radical tactics.

This was an opportunity for me to learn more and realize that the work they are doing is very respected. I was very impressed by the work of accompanying people who need help. I know they have been wanting to unionize the workers. They don't have an agreement with any company for a group of workers in their union yet, that's their goal. But even with all their adversities, their work has made them very visible.

Workers respect them because they have good intentions. They're people who were workers themselves, and some still are. These companies are the same ones we see in California.

In California we have labor laws that do give greater protection to the farmworker, but what we need is enforcement. But the owners of the companies are more careful in California because worker can file complaints, and their cases can hurt them. There are lawyers that take on cases of wage theft for unpaid overtime, unpaid travel time, or even when workers are asked to arrive early without being paid for their time.

In Mexico the system unfortunately lends itself to the abuse of the farmworker, and the degree of exploitation can seem like slavery. Real union have almost no support or a government that enforces the laws. I can see that these companies see an opportunity in Mexico to do what they want with workers. That's the monster this independent union is fighting, and they do it with many volunteers and very limited resources. But they've done a lot of work during the protests and strikes of the the past years.

The companies they are fighting are are millionaire monsters and transnationals,. They're not necessarily Mexican companies. Some are foreign companies like BerryMex, which we know in the U.S. as Reuters.

The companies are the same in many cases. And the Mixtec community in San Quintín and the Mixtec community in Oxnard and Santa María are from the same families that come from the same towns. So one thing that creates is the possibility of strengthening connections through guest workers.

The Labor Commissioner recently won millions in a case that involves H-2A workers. That shows us the other side of what we heard from the H-2A workers in San Quintín, who said that everything is fine, and that they were happy for the opportunity to go for a few months to work in the U.S. with free housing and transportation. Now this case shows that there have been violations of the rights of H-2A workers.

So I see an opportunity for education and empowerment, helping those workers to know their rights they have in the state of California, once they cross the border. In California workers have to know they have the right to to be paid, for instance, if the company makes them show up 15 minutes early. Overtime, decent housing, clean bathrooms, hours of rest, minimum wage.

So how do we educate them? How can we have access to them here as an organization? I am interested in starting this education before the workers come here, through the independent union and the women's organization. We could start doing training campaigns on labor laws in California. It's also important for these workers to know about organizations like CAUSA, like MICOP, to help them navigate cases at the Labor Commissioner or the Department of Labor

Many of workers come from indigenous communities and we are used to working with labor laws prohibiting discrimination because of the language you speak or your race. Some of them feel more comfortable in their indigenous language, and the employer is obliged to provide safety training in the language they understand or feel comfortable speaking, whether it is Mixtec or Zapotec.

The independent union in San Quintín, and its members, have the same interest as the organizations here. We all want to empower workers so they can create their own union or be part of a union that already exists. It is a right the law gives them, and I want them to be aware of it.

We have to look at their contracts, to see if one of the conditions is that workers should not join unions. That would be a violation of the law and their rights, but even if companies try to impose it, workers should not be afraid. But the other problem is the simple fact that those workers speak very positively about the program. I'm curious if they're threatened, if they are being told that the moment you speak badly about this program, the company will not bring you back. The moment you complain, they will put you on the blacklist. I know that exists, but how can we verify that employers in this program are threatening those workers for complaining? That is a violation of the labor rights of the worker.



Arcenio Lopez from the Mixteco Indígena Community Organizing Project (MICOP)

There are many opportunities to create solidarity and binational unity to train these workers. There are also workers who do not come under this H-2A program, but who have families with whom we work here in Santa María, in Salinas, in Oxnard. Sometimes it could be easier to talk with their families there because often here we don't even know where they are. Even for workers here who have families in San Quintín, we can tell them about the organizations there that are very similar to us.

In our work we hear complaints from people who live here, that they feel that they do not have the same hours as before, or that they are totally displaced by the recruitment of workers under the H-2A program. People in the Mixtec community here sometimes feel that this program is hurting them. And at the same time, in the same community in San Quintín people are currently depending on that program for the survival of their families there.

When I hear this, I ask, is the problem with the worker or is it the problem with the system? Because if some are guest workers and others are local workers, should we focus our energies on fighting among ourselves? Because you come with better pay and get more hours, and I have lost hours, should I fight with you or should we organize ourselves to fight with the monster that makes us fight? Local workers have fought to have overtime, for better working conditions. Now the companies are punishing them by lowering their hours, and they are going to bring more H-2A workers.

That requires analysis, to be able to identify the target, to see what the problem is. But I believe this can be an opportunity to organize farmworkers and help them see that the enemy is not their other worker who is coming with a two-month job opportunity. It's not the workers who is reducing your hours.

But those messages that the oppressor uses are internalized by the worker. He fights with the other worker because that is what they want. So there's an opportunity for leaders to facilitate those conversations. Workers who are losing hours are angry that they don't have overtime. But we should ask, wouldn't you rather work 8 hours and earn \$27 or \$30 an hour, which is fair what we're fighting for, and spend more time with your family? Do you want fewer hours and better pay? Or do you want to work 12 hours at minimum wage and not be with your family?

This industry is very big and what it's exploiting both workers. It uses the guests as modern slaves. It punishes local workers by lowering their hours because they don't want to pay overtime. Meanwhile we are all at the minimum. So we have to help these workers to see who the target is, who is the problem? And how do we unite to fight so that you continue to come under the guest program, making that program better so that they don't continue to treat you as a modern slave. At the same time we have to fight together so that they pay more for my hour, even if it's a few hours - not just \$17 or \$18 but \$30 an hour.

I think this is an opportunity to organize. It should also be an opportunity for reconciliation and healing. I never knew my two aunts who lived in Camalú and died there. We were walking on the street, and talked with two women who have been here for 30 years. One said, "I am 60 years old and they don't want to give me a job anymore because they want only young people. Well, that's it, the same pattern. That's what the Bracero program wants, workers with strong arms, which is what the name means. The HA program recruits mostly young men because they just want strength. They don't see us as human.

And that's how they saw my aunts. They were never able to make enough to be able to go back to their town in Oaxaca. They were just surviving. We don't do our work as a career. We do it because there is a lot of passion and empathy, but also because we are looking for justice. We say that we are seeking justice for farmworkers, but deep inside we are looking for a justice that has not come in our own lives.

And it is interesting that both the people who leaves as H-2A workers, and the population here in Santa Maria right now, are mostly from indigenous communities. That says a lot in Mexico, where there is still the hierarchy of those who have more opportunities, and who continue to take advantage of those of us who are lower. They continue to abuse us and use us as human work machines, because they do not see us as humans. I think that this trip gave me the opportunity to understand something I grew up hearing. What I heard I kept echoing - the same, the same, the same. And that reaffirms why I do this work, but it also feeds more my anger and desperation - how long will it take for us to find justice.

I'm a person who sometimes wants to do everything and it's difficult because I have to go through the board of directors, I have to do internal work so they understand. Internal work takes time, it takes conversation. But yes, we will support the independent union, support the women's organization of women. Maybe instead of creating another MICOP we can help find a Mixtec-speaking organizer, and look for funds to support that effort. We want unity and a meaningful intentional partnership.



From left to right, Genevieve Flores-Haro, Vanessa Teran, and Juvenal Solano from the Mixteco Indígena Community Organizing Project (MICOP).

Hazel Davalos and Erica Diaz-Cervantes

Hazel Davalos is executive director, and Erica Diaz-Cervantes is labor rights policy advocate, for the Central Coast United for a Sustainable Economy. They were interviewed together, and each person's voice is noted.

Erica: I was in San Quintin when I was five years old. I have family that lives in Zapata, but I haven't been there since. So at first I was just embracing my surroundings, seeing what the land looked like, the people, the community there. And as we were driving through the streets, I was looking at the homes and taking it all in.

When we stopped in at the blockade of the road I immediately wanted to know what was going on, what was the community doing? I had heard a little bit about the political context, and saw the line of cars in the road, not being able to pass. Just stepping foot on the ground, I just felt a different energy. I felt that there was power here. And as we got closer and saw the fire and sparks and the people I could feel this energy of empowerment. I felt we were in the right place at the right time. So that was just like my initial impression.



Hazel Davalos, Monse García, and Erica Díaz from the Central Coast Alliance United for a Sustainable Economy (CAUSE).

Hazel: It was incredible to roll up and see the flames and the action and the energy and feel really inspired by what we saw. It reminded me of a conversation that folks had with workers who had seen the organizing culture in San Quentin. They said they were frustrated with their co-workers who were unwilling to strike or take action. Why don't we block the roads like they do in San Quentin? they asked. So it was incredible to see that organizing culture up close and personal and understand how it traveled so far up the coast to Santa Maria.

Just rolling into the community I could see how similar it looked to Santa Maria and Oxnard and how much we'd have in common.. It felt like our neighbors down the road. At the kindergarten classroom, hearing from the mothers and the family members who have stayed in Mexico and the way they've been impacted by the H-2A programn, you really got to see firsthand the suffering occurs within that program. One of the mothers started by saying, "I haven't been that impacted." And then she went on to talk about her dad having a second family and began crying.

There were other stories about mothers coming to the US on the program and the difficulty of maintaining relationships with their children. But mostly I just took a lot of inspiration, seeing the organizers there facing bigger obstacles than we are here and not being lost in despair, but instead being so strong and powerful.

I just learned this week that the number of work orders for H-2A workers here in the Santa Maria Valley just increased from last year, from 100 and some orders last year to many more this year. The program's increasing quickly, and the need for this sort of binational coordination feels more urgent. We've made strong connections with the folks in San Quentin and they will be sharing contact information for local organizations to workers there, so that gives me some hope.

Erica: There were a lot of similarities in the communities and the working conditions in the fields. Workers were being pushed to work as much as they could, but being paid very low wages. When I was out in the fields, one of the workers there told me she was from Oaxaca and came to San Quentin for work. She had gone to the US for a short time, and thought that even though in the US the wages were higher than in San Quentin, you still had to think about the high cost of living. It ended up being the same situation whether you were in San Quentin or up in the north in California. She saw a lot of people deported from the US, dropped off in Tijuana or in San Quentin. People were trying to make an an established living in the north, and it was being stripped away, all of it and they were even separated from their loved ones. I felt a shared sense of struggle, but also a shared empowerment among communities.

Waiting for the buses to come and pick up workers, we encountered two women who said it was really difficult to ge hired because companies preferred men over women. We see here in Santa Maria too, where a lot of employers prefer to hire male workers instead of women. They see women as not being fast or strong enough, or as a burden in the workforce.

In a recent settlement in Santa Maria, women had filed a case over sexual assault in the workplace. That is something that still exists regardless of whether you're in Santa Maria or San Quintin. But we also saw a strong group of women in San Quintin empower women workers and provide support. That was truly amazing.

Hazel: Monse, one of our community organizers here, kept talking about how they organized and their organizing model. I wonder if they use something similar to the house meeting model. After we walked through the settlement I could see the way Avelina was talking to people, just like going door to door. That was my guess at how they approached the work. I could also imagine that although they're in a space with few resources, word travels in a smaller community.

It felt like the community saw them as a really solid, trusted resource. The way they do more with less was so impressive. They have community meetings out in rural communities where, if there's not a building, they use a tent to meet. It felt very scrappy and focused.

Erica: They explained that a lot of the time there are no spaces where they can hold meetings, so they'll bring a marker and some paper and put out some chairs sometimes in the middle of the street, where the people are. One of the similarities I found with our organizing is that it starts with explaining people's rights. Once people are equipped with their rights they feel better able to exercise those rights. More power comes to them to organize their communities.

That's something really similar to what we do in Santa Maria. One of our main priorities is to make sure that folks know their rights, understand how to exercise them, and have the support to use them in their workplace. Another similarity is the lack of a formal space to hold these meetings. In our house meetings with our organizer Monse folks often live in really crowded apartments. In the living room there's not a big enough space to hold a house meeting, so they have it outside. In the middle of the apartment complex they just set up chairs and invite their neighbors to come out and participate. As Hazel said, you make it happen with whatever resources you have, whether that's a little or a lot. But if people are willing, you can create space wherever you are and bring your power together.



Jorge Ramirez-Lopez from the Indigenous Front of Binational Organizations (FIOB).

Hazel: We're not a direct service, caseworker kind of based organization. But we get so many calls from so many different workers that we can't do the hand holding every single time. So we find ourselves referring people or letting a worker know they should go back to their mayordomo and say that because they asked for sick time off they cannot be fired. They need to give them their job back or we're going to get an agency involved. It's not perfect, but we do have these agencies here.

We often feel confident sending a worker on their own with that information and then welcome them back if they need more support. There may be a bit less necessity for us to go with folks directly. We think about this constantly within the organization. How do we know when to go in and when, when not to. We're thinking about organizing, first and foremost.

If we have someone who's a member, showing up every couple weeks to a committee meeting or to actions, and they have a labor issue, then we're likely going to give them more attention. And I think there's an escalation piece. But sometimes it's better to see if the worker can remedy on their own and not start with a staff member going out to the fields with them. But we're willing to do that when it's someone who's been involved and showed interest in organizing.

Sometimes, if a worker comes in with an issue, we ask, is this happening to you or also to your coworkers? If they say, we ask, are you willing to have a house meeting and get those workers together? If they can, that really shows us the potential for the organizing and we'll spend more resources on that case. We do need to keep an eye to not getting lost in the casework. But winning cases can also win you credibility. Word travels. If they see that someone remedied their situation because they were accompanied, they're more likely to join or call that organization for help in the future.

Erica: At the end of the day, a lot of folks do reach out to us. Often we're able to reaffirm their rights so they'll be able to go back to their employer. If a lot of workers are impacted and the employer is not budging, that's when our organization steps in to provide more support. In recent cases workers come to us having already taken those initial steps, asserting their rights, whether it's sick pay or wages or pay for the 10 minute breaks in an eight hour workshift. Once they get that confirmation that we can support them, they're more than eager to bring the rest of their crew to speak with us. And that's where everything takes off.

We see that worker empowerment already in our community. It inspires and motivates us to continue doing the work we do. When folks hear about a work issue being resolved or winning a 15 cent increase with the support of our organization, the word spreads. People trust our organization, and that trust continues increases our organizing power.



In San Quintin the metaphor that comes to mind is stopping the bleeding. They're facing extreme violations, pain, and suffering, like workplace harassment and sexual violence, really without state support. They're working in different conditions. The blockades we witnessed were less labor related, but they were still so inspiring. They were cutting the bullshit, going for direct action, wielding power and being tough, and even being feared. When you're under such extreme duress, sometimes you don't have patience, and you just do what you need to do. And that's kind of what I feel like. Even in this political moment here I feel people coming to a place of moral clarity and urgency, and that we have no time to waste. We have to go to the source, and that was what I saw in their work in San Quintin.

Hazel: Here folks come to us and tell us their partner was kidnapped by ICE. They have a family to provide for and their wages just aren't enough to sustain their families. That poses similar challenges. But sometimes in San Quintin and Baja California it's even more challenging when there aren't state agencies or the government to provide an extra measure of enforcement. People have to take matters in a more extreme way because of the necessity. We are fortunate to have a good partnership with the labor commissioner, and are able to resolve issues in a way that's helpful to the worker, while also acknowledging the extreme duress that they're living in.

Erica: One of the more valuable tools from the connection we made in San Quintin is that we'll be able to get our phone numbers into the hands of workers before they get here. That feels like a simple answer, but it can go far. With even more H2A workers in our community and communities across the country, we need to know about efforts like unionizing workers or even having conversations with workers about unionizing before they come. We know that H2-A workers are afraid to organize because the same person is their boss, landlord, transportation, and holder of their visas. But a program that gets that big will be unwieldy. As organizers there will be openings for us.

Not long ago Felipe, an H2A worker, reached out to us via Facebook. That's something really rare. He did that because he was informed of his rights prior to coming to the States. It all starts with knowing what your rights are and being able to exercise them. Now in San Quintin they have our information. They don't have to feel as isolated or alone. They know there are trusted people here they can communicate with. We know that when they're here in Santa Maria or Lompoc they're heavily guarded and isolated, to keep them from interacting with the community and our organizations. I'm a little bit nervous, seeing the increase of workers coming into Santa Maria and Lompoc. But I'm hopeful that now they have our information and know they can reach out to us if they want to organize, or if something's happening in the workplace that shouldn't be happening.

Hazel: there was a study estimating that local farm workers' salaries could decrease by 9%, based on these new changes in the wages of H-2A workers. We're thinking about how to raise the alarm around that among local workers. This is the time to organize because they're going to see a 9% decrease in income when they're barely making ends meet. I'm really curious about using that statistic without county supervisors. Santa Maria is one of the capitals of H2A. We are likely going to see this drop in income in the most struggling, impoverished families in the county. So they should pass a living wage. The idea of farm worker families earning 10% less is scary.

A lot of farm workers have already told us they've had their hours cut. A lot of employers will use H-2A workers because they can work at a faster pace. That puts domestic farm workers in the situation where they feel they have to keep up to the H-2A workers or lose their jobs.

Erica: We just supported a case in which H-2A workers received \$6 million in back wages. I hope that lets growers know that we have these workers' backs. If employers want to continue exploiting farm workers and violating their rights, they should expect to be exposed in public.



SINDJA and MUDJI at the meeting in San Quintin.

“I want to see representation and organizing workers”
– Sarait Martinez

Sarait Martinez is the executive director of the Centro Binacional para el Desarrollo Indigena Oaxaqueño.

SINDJA here needs support. I know its capacity is very limited in most places, and there are more resources in the US than there are in Mexico. It's not a very well resourced organization, and it confronts big growers. What else can we do, as organizations in the US, that would help them? One is definitely by providing information and training, to make sure that they can give good information to workers before they come to the US on H-2A visas. Then ensuring that those workers have a contact to organizations here in the US would help a lot.

Right after we were there, President Claudia Scheinbaum visited San Quentin and announced a Plan de San Quentin. Supposedly it will set up a labor certification for San Quentin growers, so they'll have to verify the labor rights of workers in order to export to the U.S. The government will set up an office in San Quentin to enforce them, because right now the Labor Secretary has no office. There are a number of pieces to this plan.

Can a US organization like Centro Binacional or FIOB have any influence on how the Plan de San Quentin will be enforced? If it just stays on paper, it won't make any difference to anybody. But maybe it could provide some tools for SINDJA to get recognized as a union. That would be creative and I feel they have some influence with the government and they're a well established organization. As CBDIO and MICOP, for instance, we also can have some recognition for our work here. We should try to sit down and see if we can listen to each other.



Sarait Martinez from the Binational Center for Indigenous Development (CBDIO).

For workers going north, we can provide the information they should be giving them about their rights and the organizations where they can go to enforce them. Now in California's new law there's supposed to be a list of the recruiters to hold the companies accountable. So if those same companies here also export perhaps there's a way to use the California law and the Plan de San Quintin together. How could we send a letter to the president about it?

I still want to see representation and organizing workers. And I still think that the program should be eliminated, although I see the benefits that the program means for workers in San Quintin. The H2A workers that are being recruited there are from the same communities that indigenous workers in California come from. So there should be a common interest between our Centro Binacional and the union in San Quintin in talking to those workers. But how do we talk to them? Where and how do we follow up with them after meeting here?

In the meantime, the multi-billion dollar agriculture industry in California is based on cheap labor and the exploitation of farmworkers. Agricultural work is seasonal, and farmworkers employed on a seasonal basis earn an average annual income of \$20,000, making it extremely hard for them to sustain their families. Indigenous farmworkers make even less.

Farmworkers and their allies have sought to change these conditions through organizing - programs like migrant education and farmworker housing projects, as well as unions. Yet undocumented workers still have no social net programs helping them survive during the offseason. Because of their undocumented status, they can't apply for unemployment or other supplemental income, hurting their children and families. The U.S. Department of Labor estimates that half of the nation's 2.4 million farmworkers are undocumented, and many estimate that the percentage in California is even higher.

Although farmworkers have the right to organize, there is still a huge power imbalance between workers and their employers. And as farmworkers struggle to live, big companies complain they face a worker shortage. But instead of raising wages to benefit existing workers and attract new ones, they seek to create a new market of exploitation - the expansion of the H-2A temporary worker program.

Farmworkers will survive and thrive despite all of the barriers they face, but the government has a responsibility to respond to their needs and humanity. We need to honor all farmworkers as skilled professionals with a deep connection to the earth—stewards of the land. Their multicultural, multilingual, and collective knowledge of farming is one of the solutions to climate change and the health problems in our communities.

Conclusion



Farmworkers and other residents of the Zapata colonia in the San Quintin Valley blockade the Transpeninsular Highway to protest corruption in the new government of the San Quintin municipality.

Farmworkers send a message to Mexico's President Claudia Sheinbaum

By David Bacon, The Nation, 2/20/26

In the dead of winter, Baja California's Transpeninsular Highway is the road strawberries take on their journey from the San Quintin Valley north to U.S. supermarkets. For a week this January, though, as waiting consumers froze in midwest cities, the huge semitrailers loaded with fruit ground to a halt, blockaded three hours south of the border by the people whose labor produces the harvest.

Every morning for over a week, hundreds of workers threw tires and traffic cones down on the highway's asphalt, and the trucks stopped. After sunset, huge crowds of men, women and children, dressed in the frayed clothing of field workers, milled around bonfires. The glowing red lights of the huge vehicles, lined up motionless into the distance, lit their blockade.

[Walberto Solorio Meza](#), president of the Growers Council of Baja California, warned that highway closures put the whole strawberry crop in danger. Last year San Quintin Valley companies harvested over [100,000 tons of berries](#), worth more than a quarter of a billion dollars.

Finally, on February 2, Mexican [President Claudia Sheinbaum came to the valley, in response to the conditions that sparked the blockades](#). There she announced the San Quintin Justice Plan, a commitment made at her inauguration over a year ago. Sheinbaum scolded leaders of her party for being more interested in taking selfies with her than attacking social problems like child labor and pesticide exposure. "San Quintín is an area with a lot of poverty [with] many struggles by farmworkers for their rights," she explained later. "I told them to go into the community, get close to the people."

Mexico plans to create a "[labor certification](#)" that exporters must have in order to send farm products to U.S. markets. Employers will have to ensure workers are enrolled in Mexico's Social Security system and abide by labor standards. The San Quintin Justice Plan includes an Integral Service Center, education initiatives, a Justice Center administered by the Federal Secretary of Labor and Social Services, and support for workers in gaining legal land titles.

The blockades here, and others like them elsewhere in Mexico, show how widespread desperation and anger have become in many rural areas. They highlight a growing danger for the progressive national administration that took power, with the huge election majority for past President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador eight years ago, and the even greater majority for Sheinbaum year before last.

Mexico's six previous administrations established a neoliberal system in which corporations, especially foreign ones, were given great freedom to operate in return for investment. That freedom included a system of low wages and company-friendly unions, and a water crisis that has made life almost unbearable for many rural workers and farmers. In San Quintin that system is still largely unchanged. While the blockades have complex political causes, they feed off popular anger that has accumulated for years.

The [San Quintin Valley](#) lies three hours south of San Diego, where about 80,000 workers pick strawberries and tomatoes for U.S. markets during winter months. Most are originally Mixtec and Triqui migrants recruited from the indigenous towns of Oaxaca, Guerrero and other states of southern Mexico. They provided the labor growers needed when industrial agriculture started here in the late 1970s.

Catalina Juana Lopez Reyes arrived in 1976, and lived, she remembers, "in a shack we built of sticks. We slept on tree branches for a year, and my husband had to go hunt rabbits because there was only work for three months each year." A midwife helped deliver her daughters, and charged seventeen pesos when that was the wage for a day's work. Her coworkers began to invade unoccupied land to build housing, led by a radical farmworker organization started by the Mexican Communist Party. Today, as a result, many homes are built on lots where the land title is in dispute, a problem Sheinbaum promises to fix.

It is a desert valley, whose water resources were never enough to support industrial agriculture and a growing population of workers. Who got the water, therefore, was the clearest demonstration of who had political power. Pumping groundwater to irrigate rows of berries led the water table to fall, and salt from the ocean invaded the aquifer.

Marcos Lopez, a researcher at the University of California Davis' Labor and Community Center, explains that corporate growers built over [80 desalination plants](#) for irrigation. Lopez says he doubts, however, that any plants serve Vicente Guerrero, the valley's largest town with 23,000 people, or San Quintin itself. Growers are basically selling or furnishing the towns water from their own facilities, he believes. More than 95 percent of the water in the valley goes for irrigation. The Reiter family that founded Driscoll's, the world's largest berry company, even built one small plant on the beach here, just to serve their home.

Luis and his daughter Joanne live in a settlement not far from the Reiters, where there are no water lines at all. They bought their lot for 1000 pesos a month, from a shady land developer in a rustic development on the outskirts of San Quintin. Some homes in town can get water from a main called "pipas", but it's so salty it's virtually useless. Luis and Joanne don't even have that, and instead spend 120 pesos four times a month for a truck to fill up the tank in front of their house. There's no electric line either, so the solar panels on their roof cost another 2000 pesos a month. Together it all absorbs half of Luis' wages, when he's working.

In the 1980s, spontaneous strikes swept the valley, and one packinghouse was burned to the ground. In 2015, community activists transformed groups fighting for water access into a worker organization called the Alianza, and [struck the growers](#). When the police sent armed vehicles, called "tiburones" or sharks, to shoot strikers in worker neighborhoods, the local police station was torched. Meanwhile, highway blockades became the principal means workers used to hold the growers' berries and tomatoes hostage. The political leaders of today's highway blockades "learned a lot from the 2015 movement," according to Jesus Estrada, a Mixtec labor and community activist who's worked on both sides of the border.



Farmworkers and other residents in an informal settlement, or colonia, in the San Quintin Valley.



Farmworkers and other residents of the Zapata colonia in the San Quintin Valley blockade the Transpeninsular Highway to protest corruption in the new government of the San Quintin municipality.

One of the most important products of the 2015 strike was the creation of the [Sindicato Independiente y Democrático de Jornaleros Agrícolas](#), or the National Independent Democratic Union of Farmworkers (SINDJA). It is as much a community union and worker advocate as it is an organization in the workplace, in part because the old system of company-friendly unions is still in place. Almost every San Quintin grower has a *contrato patronal*, or bosses' contract, with the old unions that were part of Mexico's political structure for decades.

The labor reforms of the last few years, which supposedly give workers the right to choose independent unions like SINDJA, ratify contracts, and elect leaders democratically, have yet to touch Mexican agriculture. "Here everything is controlled by the old unions and the ranchers," Estrada explains. "Even the water. If people really organize themselves, things can be changed. But it takes a lot of work."

"Many of us have suffered reprisals, dismissals for wanting to organize, and they put us on the blacklist," charges Jyreh García Ramírez, SINDJA's recording secretary. SINDJA, and its sister organization, [MUDJI \(Women United in Defense of Farmworkers and Indigenous People\)](#) therefore use worker complaints of labor violations to organize. The union accompanies workers to meet with their bosses or with government agencies, and shows up when workers take action, usually in short work stoppages.

At present, there is no office of the Federal Labor Secretary in San Quintin. With no monitoring, therefore, worker activists report that well over 100 growers, producing strawberries for Driscoll's affiliate BerryMex and other corporate exporters, hire workers on a day-to-day basis and are paid in cash.



One frequent problem is discrimination based on indigenous identity. Many workers can't read work contracts in Spanish, and only speak Mixtec, Triqui and other indigenous languages. "Companies take advantage of this, giving them contracts with illegal wages or without benefits," Garcia says. Last year the union fought over 50 wrongful dismissals. A further source of corruption is the company practice of inventing Social Security numbers for workers, deducting contributions but keeping them instead of paying them to the government. Workers wind up with multiple numbers, robbed of the benefits they paid for when they need them.

For many workers, therefore, going to the U.S. with a temporary work visa is a more immediate solution than going on strike and risking their jobs. According to Estrada, "Two of the obstacles to organizing are the fear of being fired and the H-2A [work visa] program, with this dream of earning a lot instead of staying and changing things. Here it takes 8 hours to earn \$13 or \$15 and in the U.S. it takes one hour."

[H-2A recruitment](#) by labor contractors in the San Quintin Valley has mushroomed since 2015. Some recruiters funnel workers to growers north of the border. Other recruiters are growers themselves, who have operations in both Baja California and in the U.S. BerryMex, for instance, connected to the huge Driscoll's corporate complex, chooses workers in its own or contracted fields in Baja California, assesses and trains them for work in its operations in the north, and then gets them H-2A visas.

"The dream of so many workers is to go to the United States, because it is more income," Garcia says. "Here the companies use that hook a lot. They say, 'Stay with me for five years and I'll give you a visa so that you can go work there.' Many times workers have been at a company for ten years and they have never been given a visa. But they continue working with the promise of next year, and next year never comes. When we organize meetings the worker says, 'I can't go because the company will identify me and won't give me a visa.' So the companies use it so that the workers do not organize, do not join the union, do not speak out or say anything, do not demand rights."

Garcia started working with her mother in the tomato rows when she was 12. Today she and the children of the original migrants are adults, with their own families and expectations. They are pushing for change in the politics of San Quintin and Baja California, as the children of immigrants have done in Los Angeles and California.

The San Quintin Valley was formerly attached politically to the municipio (the equivalent of a U.S. county) of Ensenada, a larger city two hours north. In 2000 a Mixtec leader, [Celerino Garcia](#), became the first indigenous candidate for statewide office, running in the Ensenada district. Then, in February of 2020, the growing demand for an indigenous political voice led to the creation of a separate San Quintin municipio.



Professor Gonzala Ruano, Abelina Ramirez and residents at an informal settlement in the San Quintin Valley.

"San Quintín is a municipio of migrants," Estrada explains, "from Oaxaca, Guerrero - from every state. They came as migrants, as workers, and then their children were born here. All the movements, all the blockades, are organized by migrants - people who've been outside the system. And because it is a municipio of migrants, working people have not had a political voice. Now, today, they are fighting against local corruption, but this movement is something more than that. They're looking for a political voice and have been wanting it for a long time."

Nevertheless, behind the blockades are political interests with multiple agendas. Some, especially the workers at the barricades, want living and working conditions to change. Others are political opponents of Morena, the political party of Sheinbaum and Lopez Obrador, which now governs almost every Mexican state.

On January 23 the Baja California state government announced it was hiring outside accountants to audit the administration of Miriam Cano, mayor of the new San Quintin municipio. She's been accused of corruption and diversion of funds for social services. Among her accusers is her opponent in the 2024 election, Gisela Tomez of the Partido del Trabajo (Labor Party). They demand Cano's resignation and that of 10 other municipal officials. Although Cano co-founded Morena in Baja Californiam and supported Sheinbaum in 2024, the president [did not greet her](#) during her visit to San Quintin.

Some workers in the highway blockades support the charges, cynical about progressive organizations and Morena itself. Widespread cynicism also impacts efforts to change the conditions protested by the people standing in front of the trucks, affecting the organizing work of SINDJA.

"Many times workers tell us a union is useless and does not solve anything," Garcia says. "They confuse us with the company unions and say we are on the side of the boss. So we demonstrate with facts and our commitment that we are not the same, that we are independent. We will always be on the side of the worker because we are workers ourselves. We know the violations because we live them."

Farmworkers in San Quintin will judge the government by the same yardstick - whether its plan makes changes on the ground, or is just empty words - whether Morena is really for them or for the growers. The San Quintin Justice Program starts in April, but similar reforms for agricultural labor will apply first to avocado growers in Michoacan, 1500 miles south of San Quintin, before it hits the tomatoes and berries of San Quintin.

Whether these reforms become a reality will depend on how the government makes its choice in priorities. Enforcing labor rights, raising family incomes, forcing the growers to subsidize water for residents, giving workers a decent life in San Quintin instead of leaving for the U.S. - these changes will have to be enacted and then enforced. They will face opposition by the corporate elite that has ruled Baja California for decades, forcing the government to choose who it will serve.

This is not a problem unique to San Quintin. Two years ago [highway blockades there](#) highlighted a similar conflict in priorities - between satisfying the water needs of corporate investors and the welfare of farmers and rural communities. In the [Cuencas Libres Oriental basin](#), in the states of Veracruz and Puebla, farmers have fought pitched battles since the implementation of the North American Free Trade Agreement against industrial pig farms and strawberry and vegetable growers.

This large valley has no outlet to the ocean, so pollutants in its aquifer, particularly the animal waste from Smithfield Farms' huge network of pig-raising farms, is slowly poisoning the water. At the same time big corporate water users - from strawberry growers supplying Driscoll's to the broccoli farms of former President Vicente Fox to Smithfield's pig-raising subsidiary, Granjas Carroll - all get permission to pump water in huge quantities. At the same time small farmers are told that water scarcity requires denying them access.

We have been six years with no harvests," charges Renato Romero, a member of the Movement in Defense of Water in the Libres-Oriental basin. "For three years we haven't even had water for planting. I'm 63, and my land belonged to my mother. I've lived my whole life here. But we have no way to farm anymore."

Like San Quintin, the valley's history of protests goes back decades. In 2024 one blockade in front of Granjas Carroll's feed processing mill was attacked by the Veracruz state police. When Don Guadalupe Serrano, an old man who'd led earlier protests, was put in handcuffs and shoved into a police car, farmers surrounded it and freed him. Then the police began beating and shooting the demonstrators, [killing two brothers](#), Jorge and Alberto Cortina Vázquez.

Veracruz Governor Cuitláhuac García Jiménez announced that the special police unit that shot the farmers, the Fuerza Civil, would be dissolved. A nearby Granjas Carroll facility was partially and temporarily closed. But then last July, [Romero was arrested](#) on Federal charges for occupying a site where a company was installing equipment for pumping water. An outcry by over [50 environmental and human rights organizations](#) forced his release, but the charges have not been dropped.

Social conflicts in Mexico's countryside over water access, environmental degradation and labor rights are the product of continuing contradictions, with roots in the neoliberal policies of Morena's predecessors. And today the Mexican state is administered by people who fought those neoliberal policies in their youth. Both Baja California Norte and Veracruz are governed by Morena. As a student, Veracruz Governor García Jiménez belonged to the Mexican Socialist Party and was a follower of Heberto Castillo, a historic figure of the Mexican left.

"Morena's economic policies rest on the development of safety nets for poor people especially, with cash transfer programs, including pensions and education subsidies," explains Gaspar Rivera-Salgado, director of the Center for Mexican Studies at UCLA. At the same time, however, López Obrador and Sheinbaum inherited an economy heavily dependent on foreign investment. "The money for those programs depends on healthy economic growth, and that in turn depends on investment and increased ties to the U.S., Mexico's number one trading partner. Now we see the contradictions."

So the government faces hard choices. García and the union have their expectations, but don't want to simply depend on Morena making the right one in San Quintín. "I believe soon there will be a strike demanding improvements for everyone," she hopes, "not just on one ranch or for one person, but in general. If many workers join we can achieve collective agreements and change for everyone. For everyone."

For more information, watch the video, ["Justice Plan for Farmworkers: San Quintín, Baja California."](#)



