

Farmworker tour spreads the word about Driscoll's boycott

Unions in Washington and Baja Mexico make common cause

The leader of an independent farmworker union in Burlington, Washington, is touring the West Coast to promote a boycott of Driscoll's berries. The union Las Familias Unidas por la Justicia (Families United for Justice) arose in 2013 in response to serious labor abuses at Sakuma Brothers Farms. In Northwest Washington's Skagit Valley, Sakuma Brothers employs about 450 farmworkers to pick its strawberries, blueberries, blackberries, and raspberries. In 2014, the company agreed to pay \$850,000 to settle a federal wage and hour lawsuit — reportedly the largest-ever wage settlement in Washington. According to the suit, Sakuma Brothers failed to pay for all hours worked and didn't give legally-required rest breaks. Sakuma Brothers agreed in the settlement to correct those practices. Familias Unidas also wants the company to recognize the union and negotiate a labor contract with wages of \$15 an hour. The boycott was called in 2013 in response to the company's refusal to do that.

Most Sakuma Brothers berries are sold and marketed by Driscoll's, based in Watsonville, California. Driscoll's has had se-



Left, farmworker union president Ramon Torres and member Lázaro Matamoros march outside a Whole Foods store at 28th and East Burnside in Portland. Inside, half-pint boxes of Driscoll's berries sell two for \$5; farmworkers in Mexico are paid \$5.75 a day.



rious labor problems of its own. Last March, up to 70,000 farmworkers in the San Quintín valley of Baja California Mexico waged intermittent strikes and blocked the region's main highway to demand an eight-hour workday, a doubling of their daily wage to 200 pesos per day [about \$11.50], health care and overtime pay, an end to widespread sexual abuse, and legal recognition of their independent union — the Alianza de Organizaciones por la Justicia Social del Valle de San Quintín. Driscoll's affiliate BerryMex was a primary target of the strike.

In clashes at the roadblocks, police fired rubber bullets, and dozens of strikers were injured and several hospitalized. Mexico's federal government intervened, and in May, brokered a deal with growers that met most of the strikers demands, with the government even chipping in to pay part of farmworkers' wages. But leaders of the independent Mexican union say employers haven't complied with the agreement. Protests began again this spring, and farmworkers took part in a four-day march to the U.S. border that ended March 20.

Familias Unidas president Ramon Torres and several supporters will also arrive at the border April 9 — from the U.S. side — as part of a 28-day 16-city West Coast tour promoting the boycott. The tour left Burlington March 17 and had its first stop in Portland March 18-19, followed by Eugene and Medford, Oregon.

The two unions have a pact that the Driscoll's boycott will continue until both unions have contracts — and that neither union will reach an agreement without the other.

The boycott is backed by the Washington State Labor Council and San Francisco Labor Council, among other groups. Familias Unidas became an affiliate of the Washington State Labor Council, AFL-CIO, in 2015.

Consumers are asked not to buy products under the Driscoll's or Sakuma Bros. labels — or Häagen-Dazs berry flavors. Boycott organizers are also targeting Whole Foods and Costco and are asking customers to call on those companies to stop selling Driscoll's berries.

Laid-off Nabisco workers push Mexican Oreo boycott

Highly profitable Nabisco laid off 277 of its Chicago workers March 23, with more layoffs to come. Mondelez, owner of the Nabisco brand, told the Bakery, Confectionery, Tobacco and Grain Millers (BCTGM) union last May that it was investing \$130 million in a new production line in Mexico, but would consider Chicago instead if union workers there agreed to \$46 million a year in concessions. The union refused, and the company moved to shift production to Mexico.

BCTGM has responded with a boycott, and is calling on U.S. consumers to check the labels, and not to buy Nabisco products made in Mexico.

To promote that message to labor organizations and community groups, BCTGM plans to send out "boycott education teams" made up of two or three laid-off workers. They'll focus

on large urban areas around the country, beginning in the Chicago area. In mid-April, one team will start in Washington state and travel south, and another will start in Atlanta and travel north.

"Nabisco's plans to lay off American workers, put their jobs in Mexico and then return the products to the United States to sell is the ultimate insult to both the American worker and consumer," said BCTGM President David Durkee in a press statement.

BCTGM's national contract covering 2,000 Nabisco workers expired Feb. 29, 2016. When the two sides last met March 11, BCTGM campaign coordinator Ron Baker says the company proposed to terminate its defined benefit pension for all workers — in what it called its "last best and final" offer. They'll meet again April 7-8.

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