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# Farmworkers ratify historic first union contract

After a four-year campaign, 200 Washington farmworkers get \$15 an hour and job protections.

By Don McIntosh

An independent union of Northwest Washington farmworkers pulled off a remarkable achievement June 15: They ratified their first-ever union contract, which will raise wages for about 200 farmworkers at the giant Sakuma Brothers berry farm.

The contract is the culmination of a four-year struggle that began with strikes at the farm, and escalated into a multi-state boycott campaign targeting Driscoll Berries, which buys most of what Sakuma Brothers produces. Sakuma Brothers grows strawberries, blueberries, blackberries, and raspberries in the Skagit Valley, about an hour north of Seattle. The union — Familias Unidas por la Justicia (Families United for Justice) — suspended the boycott last September when Sakuma Brothers agreed to a process for holding a union election and negotiating a collective bargaining agreement.

Familias Unidas spokesperson Maru Mora Villalpando says the new contract delivers what workers set out to achieve: \$15



an hour, and protection against unfair discipline. The contract sets a floor of \$12 an hour, one dollar above Washington's current minimum wage. Piece rates are then set for each kind of berry — for example, \$4.25 per tray of blackberries — so that workers will earn on average \$15 an hour. Workers will also have seniority rights in hiring and layoff. And they'll have standard union "just

cause" protection, meaning that the employer has to have a fair reason, and document it, for disciplining a worker, and workers have the right to have a union representative defend them. The contract will run two years, through June 2019.

Villalpando said Sakuma Brothers workers ratified the contract by an 85 percent margin. The agreement came just in

time — days before the beginning of berry-picking season. Had the two sides not reached a deal, the contract would have been settled by binding arbitration under the agreement they reached last September.

The overwhelming majority of the union's members speak neither English or Spanish, Villalpando said; they are indigenous speakers of Mixtec and Triqui from the Mexican states of Oaxaca and Guerrero. Familias Unidas is an independent labor organization that claims about 500 farmworker members in the Skagit Valley. It's not part of United Farm Workers, but has been affiliated with the Washington State Labor Council, AFL-CIO, since 2015.

It's exceedingly rare for farmworkers to be covered by a union contract, and there are only one or two other farmworker union contracts in Washington. Farmworkers were specifically excluded from coverage under the 1935 National Labor Relations Act, which regulates private sector unionization, so farm employers have no legal obligation to recognize or bargain with unions — except in California, which has had a state farmworker union law since 1975.

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