

# ICE-y conditions

*Oregonians take pride in the state's "sanctuary" posture, but immigrant detainees from ICE are being held in county jails on a daily basis – for money. A movement in Oregon and elsewhere is pushing to get them out.*

BY JOANNE ZUHL  
STAFF WRITER

On a sunny Saturday in early May, Ramon Ramirez stands outside The Dalles' Northern Oregon Regional Correctional Center, or NORCOR, protesting in solidarity with the immigrant detainees incarcerated inside.

But for a moment, his eyes are on the sunlit hills that frame this breezy agricultural community.

"You see all those trees? Those are cherry trees," Ramirez said. "Right now those growers don't have anybody to pick those trees, and they're going to need picking soon."

Ramirez is the president of the farmworkers union PCUN – Pinos y Campesinos Unidos del Noroeste. The anti-immigrant policies emanating from the Trump administration, followed by aggressive tactics taken by U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, or ICE, is keeping workers away from Oregon's lucrative fields, he said.

"ICE is not going after the criminals," Ramirez said. "They're going after the farmworkers."

The contrast between the immigrant role in the local community and what's happening at NORCOR weighs heavy on Ramirez.

A few hundred yards away, inside the windowless NORCOR facility, five detainees of ICE recently staged a hunger strike protesting their conditions. They had been transferred to NORCOR from the Northwest Detention Center in Tacoma, Wash., and there is speculation at least one was moved to break up the hunger strike in Tacoma. There, for several weeks in April, an estimated 750 detainees held a hunger strike to raise awareness of the treatment of ICE prisoners. The strike has since been suspended, there and at NORCOR, but the community outrage at the facility's cozy relationship with ICE and the incarceration of immigrants continues.

At NORCOR, Ramirez is part of a coordinated opposition to the jail's relationship with ICE. The opposition is led by Gorge ICE Resistance, a coalition of organizations in the Columbia River Gorge that has formed to support the NORCOR hunger strikers, including Gorge Ecumenical Ministries, Somos Uno, Hood River Latino Network, Mid-Columbia Community Action Network, Gorge ReSisters, Community Action Network, Grassroots IMPACT and Protect Oregon's Progress.

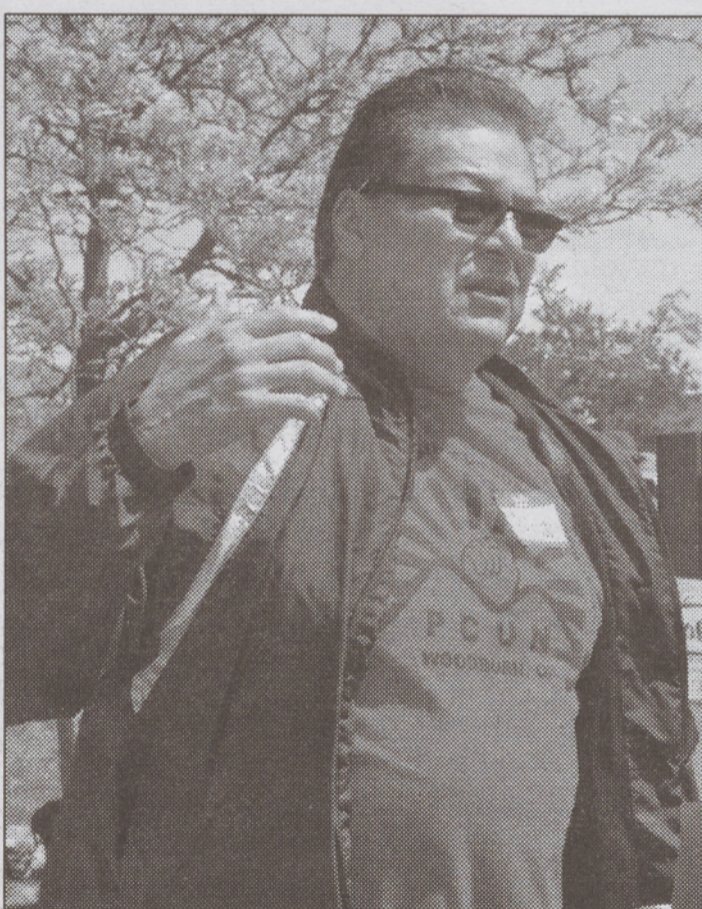
On May 6, they held a rally to protest the jail. They've held a presence there every evening since the start of May.

They are joined by the Rural Organizing



PHOTOS BY JOANNE ZUHL

Above, members of Gorge ICE Resistance and other organizations demonstrate outside the NORCOR jail in The Dalles on May 6 in solidarity with detainees inside awaiting deportation, and to call for an end to NORCOR's contract with U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement to incarcerate detainees in the jail. The protesters have had a presence there every evening since the start of May. Left, Ramon Ramirez with PCUN, the farmworkers union.



Project, which works with a network of grassroots organization across the state. The ACLU of Oregon is also involved, coming to the jail and talking with the detainees about their conditions and their rights.

The protesters say they aren't going to stop their daily demonstrations until ICE is out of NORCOR. Opponents to the jail say the relationship – in which ICE contracts with NORCOR to incarcerate immigration violators in the deportation process – violates state statute prohibiting comingling of local and federal resources. Nor should the detainees be treated as criminals – most

immigration-only violations are either misdemeanors or civil violations.

"There are other ways you can make money, not on the backs of immigrant workers, who, by the way, put food on the table, day in and day out, for Oregonians," Ramirez said. "And we should be proud that we have a workforce that's working for cheap to put food on the table, and yet this is what we afford them? This is how we recognize their contributions to our livelihood, by imprisoning them in a place like this at taxpayers' expense? That's not right."

"What kind of message are you sending to the state of Oregon and these farmers who employ thousands and thousands of farmworkers and then you have a jail here that houses them?" Ramirez said. "What worker in their right mind is going to want to work these fields. The state has got to come out and say, 'NORCOR, you've got to end your contracts.'"

The ACLU of Oregon is looking into the legal side of the relationship.

"In Oregon, we think that it is a clear violation of state law for local facilities to house ICE detainees and we are currently deeply investigating the various ways in

which we could take action," said Mat dos Santos, legal director of the ACLU of Oregon. "They built a facility they cannot afford to run so they're trying to use the federal government funding to correct for their bad financial planning."

NORCOR opened in 1999, a four-county collaborative of Wasco, Hood River, Gilliam and Sherman counties, which all pay set percentages to cover the jail's costs. The jail is overseen by a board of directors and a rotating sheriff representative, and is run by an administrator. By its own account, NORCOR is one of only a handful of facilities in the country that apply a multi-county approach to the management of inmates.

The construction bond for the jail was paid off in 2016, but now the facility is seeking a levy on the four counties to help cover future expenses, which will approach \$9 million, according to the 2017-18 budget.

NORCOR took in more than a half million dollars last year locking up ICE detainees. This year, the jail is anticipating twice as much activity, and has budgeted more than