

## Overview

### Familias Unidas por la Justicia (FUJ) & the Boycott of Sakuma Bros. Farm berries

A resources of the National Farm Worker Ministry—June 2015



*Familias Unidas por La Justicia (FUJ) in Washington State first called a boycott of Sakuma Bros. Farm berries in 2013, as well as secondary boycotts of Driscoll's and Häagen-Dazs, purchasers of the majority of Sakuma berries, in 2014. This resource provides an overview of the farm workers who work at Sakuma Bros. and the labor dispute which led them to call the boycotts.*

### The Farm Workers

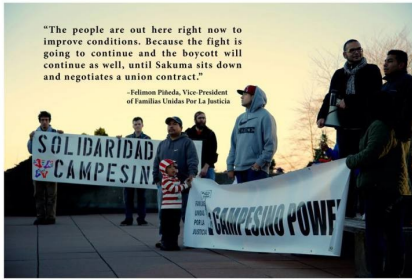
- Familias Unidas por la Justicia, an independent farm worker union (recognized by the WA State Labor Council AFL-CIO) based in Burlington, Washington, formed in the summer of 2013 in response to racial harassment, wage theft, and other unjust labor practices faced by farm workers at the Sakuma Bros. Farms, Inc. in Skagit valley. Many of the leadership and membership have worked for Sakuma Bros. for over a decade.
- The union has more than 300 members. Some are local workers, but over half are migrants from California. They are predominately immigrants, coming from indigenous towns in Oaxaca and southern Mexico where people speak languages such as Mixteco and Triqui.
- FUJ is led by a leadership team, including Ramon Torres, President and Felimon Pineda, VP.

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### Sakuma Bros. Farm

- A family-owned, vertically integrated business including Sakuma Bros. Farms, Inc., Sakuma Bros. Processing, Inc. and Norcal Nursery, Inc. (in CA).
- One of the largest berry growers in Washington, where berries are big business, with annual sales of \$6.1 million. Hires 700 to 800 people to pick strawberries, blueberries, and blackberries each year.
- During World War II, the Sakumas were interned by the U.S. government because of their Japanese ancestry, and would have lost their land had it not been held in trust for them by another local rancher until the war ended.
- In March 2015, Sakuma Bros. hired a new CEO, Danny Weeden - the first time a family member has not headed the company.





## History of the Labor Dispute

### 2013

- In July 2013, 248 out of 278 farm workers at Sakuma Bros. farms went on strike after Federico Lopez, an employee at the time, was immediately fired upon asking his foreman for a raise. These workers confronted management with a written list of demands including better living accommodations, sick leave, a raise in the piece rate wage since some workers were not making even the minimum wage, and an end to disrespectful and racist derision by farm supervisors. [Original Demands \(Spanish\)](#)
- While the Sakuma management let go of one discriminatory supervisor and initially negotiated a more reasonable wage with the workers, this agreement was later revoked, which led to additional work stoppages that summer. The company dealt with these by firing all pickers associated with FUJ, citing poor picking quality and inexcusable absences from the strikes. Sakuma also hired private security guards who followed the workers during working hours, throughout the residential labor camps, and on public highways.
- Sakuma had been certified to bring in 160 H2A guestworkers and the farm workers already employed at Sakuma were also concerned about negative impacts on their jobs and pay.
- By the end of August, the farm workers had formalized representation as FUJ and 246 pickers voted to authorize a boycott of Sakuma berries. Community support grew, pickets at area markets were held and some retailers in the Northwest joined the boycott.
- Sakuma Bros. was reported to have hired anti-union consultants.
- Gains were made when, in September, Superior Court Judge John Meyer ordered Sakuma to remove security guards from housing units. He found that the workers "have a clear legal right to... full freedom of association, self-organization," and they "have a well-grounded fear of continuing invasion of those rights."

### 2014

- When pickers returned for the 2014 berry season, they continued to face discrimination, anti-union coercion, and an unfair disciplinary and firing system. Sakuma barred workers from allowing family members and guests to enter the labor cabins. A court ruled against these bans, finding them to be in violation of the worker's rights as tenants.
- Sakuma Farms again applied for H2A work visas for 438 workers, saying that the strikers weren't available to work because they had all been fired. FUJ submitted 300 letters of intent to work to Sakuma. Under worker and community pressure, the U.S. Department of Labor did not approve Sakuma's H2A application.

- In June, the farm management also agreed to an \$850,000 settlement (\$500,000 to the

(cont. next page)

## 2014 cont.

- workers) after more than 400 farm workers filed a federal class-action lawsuit over stolen wages. The settlement didn't resolve whether piece-rate workers are eligible for additional pay for the time they spend on break. The judge referred the question to the state court.
- Community support, led by Community to Community and Students for Farmworker Justice, grew as did support regionally for the boycott. In July, FUJ and supporters celebrated the formation of FUJ with a rally and march. The WA State Labor Council AFL-CIO passed a [resolution](#) recognizing FUJ as a member union and endorsed support for the boycott.
- Driscoll's, the largest supplier of fresh berries in the world, confirmed Sakuma Bros. is a source of their berries and admitted to providing "dedicated resources" to support Sakuma Bros. Inc.
- *Despite the victories gained, Sakuma Bros. continued to fall short in providing farm workers a fair wage, decent living facilities, and paid rest breaks. Thus, Familias Unidas por la Justicia called a boycott of Sakuma's berries and then expanded the boycott to include Sakuma's largest customers, Driscoll's and Haagen-Dazs, until a union contract is signed between the workers and farm owners.*

Detailed timeline July 2013 – November 2014 <http://boycottsakumaberries.com/timeline/>

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## 2015

- In January, the Board of Directors of the National Farm Worker Ministry voted to hold their summer 2015 semi-annual Board meeting in Bellingham, WA to learn first-hand from farm workers involved in the labor struggles with Sakuma berries and to act in solidarity with the farm workers of Familias Unidas por la Justicia (FUJ). NFWM is scheduled to meet with workers on July 10th and join FUJ on July 11 for a 3 mile march on the 3rd anniversary of the farm workers first work stoppage.
- In March, the Washington Supreme Court heard oral arguments on the case brought by Sakuma workers that they should be paid for breaks based on their piece-rate earnings since without separate pay there is no incentive for workers to take their breaks. The United Farm Workers among others filed a brief in the case. No ruling has yet been made [Article](#)
- In April, Sakuma Bros. announced a new pay plan; FUJ President Ramon Torres said the group wants to negotiate a flat rate of \$15 an hour because not everyone will be able to achieve the production bonus. [GoSkagit.com article](#)
- In May, FUJ leadership and Rosalinda Guillen traveled to CA and met with Driscoll management. They asked Driscoll to put pressure on Sakuma Bros. to ensure that there would be no retaliation of union workers this hiring season and also to negotiate a contract with the workers. Driscoll's would make no commitment to intervening with Sakuma Bros. to encourage them to negotiate a union contract with the workers.
- Also in May, Sakuma Bros. announced that for the 2015 harvest season, they will not be opening their U-pick fields and Market Stand in Burlington, WA.
- In support of the workers who feared that Sakuma would retaliate against the union by not re-hiring union members for the 2015 season, NFWM sent a letter to Sakuma Bros. CEO Weeden on June 1st, urging the company not to retaliate. (*Letter is page 5.*) Sakuma Bros. has hired all the union members who applied for the season.



## Related News

Early in 2015, thousands of farm workers in San Quintin in the Mexican state of Baja California go on strike, demonstrating against low wages, horrible housing, and harsh working conditions. *(There is a good deal of press on this.)* In April, the independent farm worker union, Alliance of National, State and Municipal Organizations for Social Justice, called for a boycott of Driscoll's, whose supplier BerryMex is at the heart of this labor dispute.

*In These Times: Alleging Labor Abuses, U.S. and Mexican Workers Call for Boycott of Driscoll's Berries*

## Community To Community (C2C)

The support partner that has worked closely with FUJ since the beginning of their struggle.

C2C's Executive Director Rosalinda Guillen is a widely recognized farm worker and rural justice leader. The oldest of eight, she was born in Texas and spent her first decade in Coahuila Mexico. Her family emigrated to LaConner, Washington in 1960 and she began working as a farm worker in the fields in Skagit County at the age of ten. Rosalinda has worked in the UFW and has represented farm workers in ongoing dialogues of immigration issues, labor rights, trade agreements, and strengthening the food sovereignty movement.

C2C is a self-governing solidarity economy center fostering political movements defining their own agenda. C2C believes "that another world is possible and we are active participants with other popular people's movements. We strive to reclaim our humanity by redefining power in order to end settler colonialism, capitalism, and patriarchy in their external and internalized forms."

<http://foodjustice.org/>



## Further Reading / Learning

- Familias Unidas por la Justicia website: <http://boycottsakumaberries.com/>

- Familias Unidas por la Justicia facebook page

- "Our Work is Life" - filmmaker Luke McKinley

*The short film follows members of Familias Unidas por la Justicia as they migrate to harvest multiple crops between Washington state and California. The film is narrated collectively by the farm worker union's President and Vice-President as well as rank and file union leadership.*

<http://boycottsakumaberries.com/how-you-can-walk-with-familias-unidas-por-la-justicia/>

- THESE THINGS CAN CHANGE, Photos by David Bacon, Text by David Bacon & Rosario Ventura "In 2013, Rosario Ventura and her husband Isidro Silva were strikers at Sakuma Brothers Farms in Burlington, Wash....."

<http://www.dollarsandsense.org/archives/2015/0315bacon.html>

- <http://sakumaboycottexposed.com/>

NFWM staff is unable to determine ownership of this website other than an annotation "Copyright © 2014 Sakuma Boycott." However, it appears to be a creation of or for Sakuma Bros. It rails against Worker Centers, supposed FUJ "lies", and takes considerable umbrage with Rosalinda Guillen and her work.

- Sakuma Brothers Berry Boycott: Workers at a Farm Outside Seattle Demand Better Conditions and Wages, The Stranger, Seattle WA, Oct 2, 2013

<http://www.thestranger.com/seattle/sakuma-brothers-berry-boycott/Content?oid=17869474>

- Northwest Public Radio, March 23, 2015 - <http://nwpr.org/post/washington-supreme-court-weighs-changes-orchard-piece-work-rest-breaks>

- freshfruitportal.com, March 30, 2015 - [U.S.: Driscoll's stands behind Sakuma Brothers Farms](http://freshfruitportal.com/2015/03/30/us-driscolls-stands-behind-sakuma-brothers-farms)

- [FAQs: Community Food Co-op Board of Directors' Decision to Drop Driscoll's Products](http://www.communityfoodcoop.org/faq)

- Press release: [03-25-15-Fair World Project-Driscolls-Petition](http://www.fairworldproject.org/press-releases/03-25-15-fair-world-project-driscolls-petition)

- NPR KUOW - June 17, 2015: Washington Berry Pickers Push For Elusive Union Contract

[http://www.npr.org/sections/thesalt/2015/06/17/414986134/washington-berry-pickers-push-for-elusive-union-contract?sc=17&f=1001&utm\\_source=iosnewsapp&utm\\_medium=Email&utm\\_campaign=app](http://www.npr.org/sections/thesalt/2015/06/17/414986134/washington-berry-pickers-push-for-elusive-union-contract?sc=17&f=1001&utm_source=iosnewsapp&utm_medium=Email&utm_campaign=app)



June 1, 2015

Danny R. Weeden, President and CEO  
Sakuma Bros., Inc.  
17790 Cook Road  
Burlington, WA 98233

Dear Mr. Weeden,

We are writing to you on behalf of the National Farm Worker Ministry (NFWM). NFWM is a national, faith-based organization that represents hundreds of thousands of people of faith of Protestant, Catholic and Jewish communities around the U.S. For more than ninety years, the National Farm Worker Ministry has stood in solidarity with farm workers and their struggles to gain the dignity their work deserves, the self-determination their humanity requires, and protection of their basic human rights. NFWM is proud that many times over our history we have persevered with farm workers in their campaigns; and that we have done so for as many years as it takes for farm workers to gain freedom of association and self-determination. NFWM holds to that mission and to that privilege.

NFWM has become increasingly aware of the serious abuses of farm workers which have taken place, and continue to take place, at Sakuma Bros. Berry Farm. We are so concerned about what we are learning that the Board of Directors of NFWM decided to hold their summer 2015 Board meeting in the Bellingham, WA area so that they can learn first-hand from farm workers who work on your farms what they are experiencing.

We are writing today in an urgent call for action during the strawberry harvest season hiring that is about to start in Skagit County. NFWM calls for Sakuma Bros Berry Farm to rehire all members of Familias Unidas por La Justicia who apply for work this season.

We understand that on May 8<sup>th</sup> members of the Board of Familias Unidas por La Justicia met with Driscoll's management at their headquarters in Watsonville, CA. The meeting was called in response to the delivery of letters and signatures on petitions from the Fair World Project, the National Domestic Fair Trade Association and the Organic Consumers Association calling on Driscoll's to stop sourcing from Sakuma Bros. Berry Farm until the labor dispute there ended in a union contract with Familias Unidas por La Justicia. This meeting provided an opportunity for farm workers from Washington State to share with Driscoll's their experience of wage theft, racial discrimination, poor housing, as well as retaliation for organizing at the hands of Sakuma Bros. Berry Farm.

One of the main issues brought up by the farm workers at that meeting, which necessitated this letter, was the concern that Sakuma Bros. Berry Farm would continue to retaliate against the members of Familias Unidas por La Justicia by not hiring them this season because of their participation in strikes during previous years.

NFWM stands in solidarity with Familias Unidas por La Justicia and National Farm Worker Ministry calls on Sakuma Bros. to do the right thing and rehire all the workers who stood up for their rights, especially the leaders that have been unjustly fired: Ramon Torres, Cornelio Ramirez, Patricio Santiago and Federico Lopez. For many years, your company has profited from the skill and hard labor of men and women who work your fields and packing plants and you can honor their contributions and work by rehiring all Familias Unidas por La Justicia members who apply for work this season.

We look forward to your timely response regarding the status of the employment applications of the members of Familias Unidas por La Justicia.

Sincerely,

Sylvia Campbell, President, NFWM Board of Directors

Susan Alan, Interim Executive Director, NFWM

CC: Kevin Murphy, CEO and Chairman, Driscoll Strawberry Associates, Inc.  
Familias por La Justicia