

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, and boycotts of Driscoll's and Häagen-Dazs strawberry ice cream, 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 many years.
- The union has about 400 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.

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.
- 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
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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 and from other labor unions 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 Häagen-Dazs, until a union contract is signed between the workers and farm owners.*

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

2015

- 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 Community to Community representative traveled to California 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 union contract with the workers. Driscoll's would make no commitment to intervening with Sakuma Bros.
- Familias Unidas won another victory when in July 2015 the Washington Supreme Court unanimously ruled that piece-rate farm workers must be paid separately for rest breaks.
- Sakuma Bros. is publically stating that they are paying some workers as much as \$27/hr and that every worker is earning at least \$10/hr. However, the farm workers who are currently employed have walked out of the fields in protest several days this July because production standards are so high that hardly anyone can make any bonus pay and those workers struggling to keep up are often earning less than \$10 dollars/ hr and being threatened with being fired.
- On July 11, 2015, the Board of Directors of the National Farm Worker Ministry voted to endorse the FUJ called boycott of Sakuma Bros. berries, Driscoll's berries and Häagen-Dazs strawberry ice cream.



Community To Community (C2C)

C2C is 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/>



Western Washington University Students for Farm Worker Justice

This is a coalition of over 150 students working with Familias Unidas por la Justicia in support of farm workers and their fight for just labor conditions. Visit the facebook page WWU Students for Farm Worker Justice for updates.

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>
- 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)