

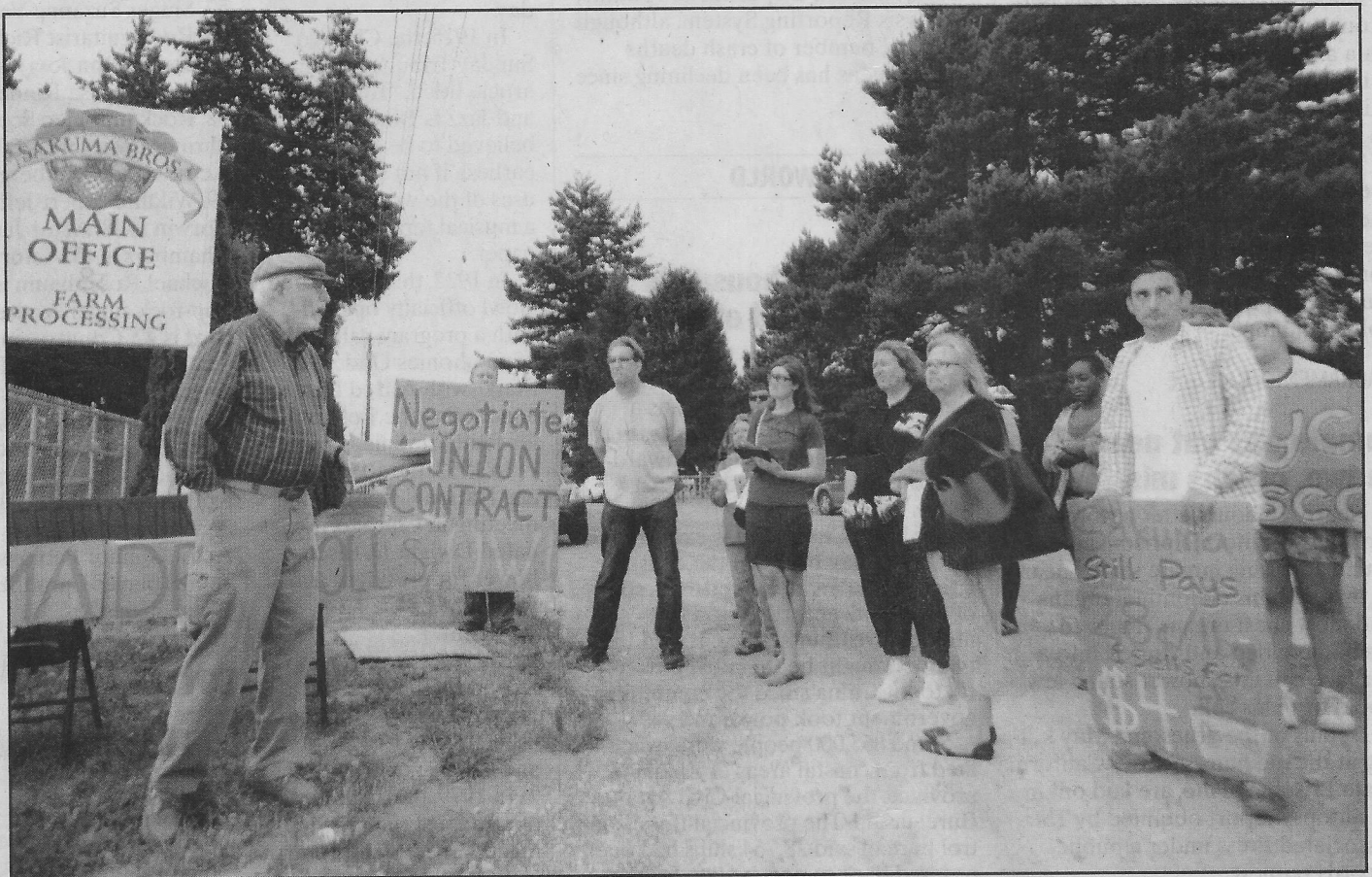
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Union leaders, labor activists rally for Sakuma Bros. farmworkers



Photos by **Brandy Shreve** / Skagit Valley Herald

Sam Trickey, with the Farmworkers Ministry, talks to a crowd gathered outside of the processing plant for Sakuma Bros. Farm on Friday in Burlington. He and others came together to show their support for the farmworkers and encourage Sakuma Bros. to allow its workers to collectively bargain for better wages and working conditions.

By EVAN MARCZYNSKI
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BURLINGTON — Union leaders and labor rights activists joined farmworkers Friday morning in front of Sakuma Bros. Farms to support calls for the company to allow its workers to collectively bargain for better wages and working conditions.

“We want to show solidarity with the farmworkers,” said Rosalinda Guillen of Community to Community Development, who led the event.

Familias Unidas por la Justicia leaders and representatives from groups including National Farm Worker Ministry, Washington Public Employees Association, the International Longshoreman and Warehouse Union and the AFL-CIO Solidarity Center in Mexico spoke to about 30 farmworkers and supporters in front of the entrance to Sakuma’s processing plant on Cook Road.

Familias members have been



Juana Sanchez (left) and Tomas Ramon gather with other farmworkers and community allies at a news conference Friday in front of the processing plant for Sakuma Bros. Farms.

frustrated with Sakuma’s refusal to negotiate over a new pay structure introduced earlier this year, in which workers are paid a base rate of \$10 an hour and can receive production bonuses

based on how many pounds of berries they harvest. Workers say the amount of berries they must pick before the bonuses kick in is too high for most of them to reach.

Sakuma spokesman Roger van Oosten said last week that company leaders believe the new pay system is more than fair and that the farm’s blueberry fields look plentiful enough this year to allow workers to earn more than the minimum rate.

Farmworkers Benito Torrez-Lopez and Tomas Ramon said through an interpreter Friday that most workers are finding it nearly impossible to pick enough berries to earn more than \$10 per hour. They added the new pay system makes it more complicated for workers to check whether they are being paid the correct amount for their work.

“That is why they’re asking for negotiation, to sit down with the company and figure out a process that’s clear and simple and understandable and the workers can figure out how much they’re getting paid,” Guillen said.

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Sakuma

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Speakers gave comments while standing in front of a prop negotiation table and two folding chairs with cardboard signs reading: “Sakuma” and “Driscoll’s.”

Sakuma Bros. is an independent grower for Driscoll’s, which is headquartered in California. Driscoll’s has stayed out of the dispute, saying it does not interfere in labor

issues between growers and farmworkers.

Familias members have led boycotts of both companies, picketing stores in Skagit County and elsewhere that carry their products.

Several farmworkers and supporters, including members of the advocacy group WWU Students for Farmworker Justice, stood Friday on either side of Cook Road outside the processing plant holding signs and banners displaying pro-negotiation and pro-boycott messages.

Several speakers Friday said Driscoll’s should push Sakuma to negotiate with its workers.

Colette Cosner, executive director of the Seattle-based Domestic Fair Trade Association, said a union contract for Familias Unidas would help rebuild trust between farms and farmworkers and would also be welcomed by consumers.

“This recognition of them as a union is not only important in adhering to their own standard as a supplier, but also to con-

sumer trust,” Cosner said.

Familias members plan to march Saturday morning west from the intersection of Cook Road and Old Highway 99 in Burlington to the entrance of the Sakuma Bros. processing plant to continue demanding a union contract and mark the anniversary of the labor group’s formation in 2013.

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