

## **Familias Unidas por la Justicia is helping improve many farm worker's lives**

by Debi Covert-Bowlds, Co-President, Farm Worker Ministry Northwest  
October 20, 2017

Ramon Torres, union president of Familias Unidas por la Justicia (FUJ) reports that the first season under a union contract between FUJ and Sakuma Bros. Farms was a success on many levels.

All the previous workers at Sakuma Farms who applied were hired this summer, and all workers reported they were happy with higher pay, good conditions in the field and also in the farm camp housing. This was the first season in recent memory where there were no complaints!

In the contract, price and quota are based on test picks, and more FUJ members were trained and paid \$15/hour doing this work. There were grievances based on poundage being increased without an increase in piece-rate in both the blackberry and blueberry fields that led to FUJ taking Sakuma to court, where they won, and through arbitration, Sakuma paid back wages.

Ramon also reported on the ongoing investigations into the labor dispute that occurred last August at Sarbanand Farms in Sumas, Washington when seventy-five farm workers, working under the H2A visa program, walked out after one worker became seriously ill in the blueberry fields, was forced to return to work under high heat and smoked-filled unhealthy air quality, later collapsed in the health clinic, was sent to the hospital and eventually died. (See "Farmworker Death in Washington State"

<https://us14.campaign-archive2.com/home/?u=d662768225804dedc8254ed20&id=dea9cb42bb>

Investigations by state and federal agencies continue. Most of the Sarbanand Farms H2A workers returned to Mexico voluntarily, where some are applying for U-Visas. (The U nonimmigrant status visa is set aside for victims of certain crimes who have suffered mental or physical abuse and are helpful to law enforcement or government officials in the investigation or prosecution of criminal activity) A handful of the Sarbanand H2A workers have remained in the U.S. and applied for T-visas. (A T visa is a type of visa allowing certain victims of human trafficking and immediate family members to remain and work temporarily in the United States, typically if they agree to assist law enforcement in testifying against the perpetrators.)

Ramon said that FUJ also supported H2A workers in Quincy, Washington, who held a walkout, and Ramon helped negotiate an agreement between workers and the farm owner. For more information go to:

<https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/foreign-farmworkers-unusual-strike-in-central-washington-shows-new-labor-muscle/>