Eulogio Solanoa is a Mixteco migrant from Oaxaca and was a farmworker for many years. After leading strikes and community protests, he went to work as an organizer for the United Farm Workers. Today, he lives in Greenfield, California where he told his story to David Bacon. Thanks to Farmworker Justice for the support for this project of documenting the lives of farmworkers.

I have been here in Greenfield since 1992, so that is twenty years. But I am from a small town called San Jose de las Flores in the Putla district in Oaxaca. My family has ejido land there—not a lot of land, just what they call a cajon, less than a quarter of an acre. That is about the amount of land everyone has there. We only have enough to live but not enough to buy a house or car. My father did not even own any land—the land we have comes from my mother.

The entire town is an ejido (communities created by Mexico’s land reform that hold their land in common), but everyone has his or her own little piece of land. We do not choose a different plot each year—whatever piece of land you first got is what you keep. That is what Emiliano Zapata fought for, so that everyone can have his or her own land. We did not have that before. But it is not enough land for a family to live on, only enough to grow corn and a few beans; it is enough to eat but not enough to grow crops to sell.

That is why we did not have clothes and had barely enough to eat. When I was fourteen and going to school, I still did not own a pair of shoes. I was barefoot. I really enjoyed going to school, though. My teacher said I was the brightest one in class. But I could not continue—I had to go to work with my family.

At first, folks from my hometown would leave to work in Morelos, where they would pick tomatoes. Then gradually people went to work in construction in Guerrero and Acapulco. Little by little, they began to travel further north, to Sinaloa, Sonora, and Baja California. When I heard that some relatives were going to cross the border to the United States, I decided to go with them. I had heard that money was so plentiful here you could literally sweep it off the floor. When I got here, though, I realized things were not as I was told.

I was twenty—the first in my family to leave. My entire world had been confined to our small town. My parents did not want to let me come to the United States, but since I was old enough, it was my decision. When I crossed the border and started sending them money, their attitude changed. In those years, nobody had a cell phone, so communicating with them—by letter—was difficult. To send money to them, I had to use the telegraph or money orders. I worked for a while and then returned home. When I decided to come north a second time, they did not worry as much. They knew I was coming here to work. My mother passed away sixteen years ago, but my father still lives...
in Oaxaca. I have been sending money back this whole time because people do not have anything back home.

The dollar is the only thing that counts in Mexico. If I work ten hours a day here, I earn $80. If I were to work that same amount of time in Mexico, the most I could hope to earn is 200 pesos—about $16. A kilo of meat in Mexico costs 120 pesos. You do not even earn enough to eat in Mexico. Here you do.

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When I first got here, I was afraid because people said gringos ate up people like us. Well, there is some truth to that. They do eat us alive but not in the way I first thought. They eat us alive in the sense that we leave our lives out in the fields. We come here to work in the fields at
the age of twenty or twenty-two, and by the
time we are forty-five, we can no longer do that
work anymore. It is a very difficult job, starting
at four in the morning until sundown. Fifty-
year-old men have already spent their lives out
in the fields, and then they cannot find work
there anymore. That is why indigenous people
think the gringos eat us alive. They do.

I crossed the border the first time in 1990,
with a friend, and we went to San Diego. We
lived under trees. In Carlsbad, we build a shack
out of cardboard we had collected. We cooked
with firewood and bathed in the river in freez-
ing water. That is how we saved money. I was
not even familiar with U.S. coins. I would go
and buy something at the store and simply take
out my coins for the cashier to take. They prob-
ably took more than I owed, but I had this blind
faith that people here were not like in Mexico
and were not going to rob me blind.

We lived under the trees there for three
months. Then we headed to Madera, where I
picked peppers and tomatoes. Then I picked
strawberries in Santa Maria. In Santa Maria,
many immigrants are from Sinaloa and
Guanajuato. They are tall and fair, and they
made fun of us for being short and dark. It made
me mad when they would call us Oaxacos or
Oaxaquitos because I am a Mexican just like
them. We do not call them Michoacanitos or
Guanajuatitos. The people that call us those
names think we are inferior. But we respect oth-
ers regardless of what Mexican state they are
from and ask for that same respect back.

In Santa Maria, I learned to speak Spanish.
In my hometown, we did not speak Spanish,
just Mixteco. The only person that spoke
Spanish was the schoolteacher. It makes me
think of the many places here in California
where teachers speak English and all the stu-
dents speak Spanish. That is the way it was for
us, growing up speaking Mixteco. In Mexico,
people made fun of us indigenous kids because
we could not speak Spanish properly. I knew
just a little Spanish before I came. As soon as I
got here, I began to attend community meet-
ings to learn Spanish and understand this coun-
try’s laws. This was a foreign country to me
then, and I wanted to learn more. I eventually
learned Spanish and became familiar with this
country’s laws so that I would know how to
defend myself.

The foremen in the strawberry fields quickly
learned that indigenous people had already
worked on farms back home, and we were good
workers. They began to hire more of us. But
they wanted us to work really fast, as if we were disposable.

All the jobs I have done have been hard, but a lot depends on the foreman. I once worked for a foreman who herded his workers as if we were animals. I did not like that. Another foreman was very disrespectful. When one worker asked for a drink of water, after we had not had anything to drink for two hours, he grabbed his private parts and said that was the hose if he wanted water. But I have also worked for foremen who treated us well and knew we were just there to do our job. Some are good and some are bad.

Picking grapes is one of the worst jobs. Many workers get sick because of the sulfur on the vines. It makes your eyes and skin sting. My nose would become swollen, and I would not be able to work. Then you bring the chemical home on your clothes, and it hurts your family. Foremen would lure us to work in those fields by telling us they would pay us twenty-five cents more an hour. But when we got sick, they were not responsible. Of course, we had no health insurance either.

The hardest jobs I have had were picking peas and strawberries. Picking peas, you work on your knees all day. It is a delicate crop, so you cannot carry more than two or three pounds at a time. Your nails take the hardest hit. They give you a sort of metal finger so that you can cut the pods off of the vine, but you still have to use your nail. Sometimes it splits in half.

It is the same when you pick strawberries. You cannot really use your fingers. You have to use your nail because you cannot squeeze the fruit. You also work bent over all day, and soon your back really starts to hurt. You work that way from sunrise to sundown for eight months of the year. After a few years, you develop permanent back problems, and after you are forty or forty-five, you cannot do that work anymore.

The wages are not enough to support a family. Eight dollars an hour is very little. The price of food has gone up. Back when I was earning $6 or $7 an hour, the price of gas was from $1.49 to $1.99. Now the price of gas is close to $5 a gallon. We do not earn much more than we used to, but the price of everything has skyrocketed. When the housing market went up, our rent went up a lot. About ten years ago, you could rent a two-bedroom home for $450 or $500. Now that has shot up to $1,000 a month. Our hourly wage was $7.50, and it has not doubled just because the price of housing doubled. If our wages were to keep up with the high cost of everything, we should be earning $14 to $15 right now. Eight dollars an hour just is not enough. People working in restaurants or most

Maria Perez works in a crew of Mixteco migrants from San Vincente, a town in Oaxaca, Mexico. The earth in the beds is covered in plastic, while in between, the workers walk in sand and mud.
other jobs receive overtime pay after eight hours. The law says you only have to pay farmworkers overtime after ten hours instead. Of course, farmers like this law because it saves them money. But the unequal treatment of farmworkers comes from the government.

Wages are rising a little in this area because farmers cannot attract enough workers to pick their crops. They need workers, and it is not uncommon to see lettuce and broccoli machines with only half the number of workers. Plus, there have been work stoppages throughout the years because workers are trying for a raise in wages.

I worked for one grower, Amaral, for ten years. Years before I got there, the company had provided workers with work equipment like hats and shirts. To do the job, you also have to have rubber boots, because the fields are so wet, and knives to cut the crop from the plant. But in 1999, the owner stopped supplying that equipment, telling workers they had to buy their own. In addition, he said we had to contribute a dollar to purchase water for the crew. The foreman literally held out a hat and everyone formed a line and dropped a dollar in the hat for water. We were treated very badly.

Finally, in 2001, a group of workers walked out when one worker cut himself and the foreman would not report it. He told him to keep working, that he could easily go to the border and hire a new group of workers. But they did not really protest. They just left and got jobs at other companies that were paying more. Amaral’s owner had been paying $6.50 an hour and had to give workers a fifty-cent raise.

The foreman literally held out a hat and everyone formed a line and dropped a dollar in the hat for water.

Three years later, Amaral workers went on strike again, asking for higher wages. The owner promised to give us equipment again and to give us a thirty-five-cent raise. But it was all talk. In the end, he did not give us anything. Workers went on strike again in 2007. The UFW (United Farm Workers Union) came in, wanting to represent the workers. The workers were not interested, though, and said they would handle the situation on their own. They believed the owner would do the right thing and meet their demands. While union representatives were there, a truck full of work equipment pulled up and the company handed it out. But that was it. There was no increase or any improvements after that.
Another three years passed with no change. Foremen continued to mistreat workers. They paid them for ten hours when they would actually work for eleven or twelve hours. Workers were even asked to start fifteen to thirty minutes before the official start time and were not paid for that either. They had no water and had to purchase supplies on their own. So they decided to strike again last year. The UFW asked the workers if they wanted the union to represent them and were once again sent away. The owner brought in work equipment, and the workers once again fell for it.

This year, the workers finally asked the UFW to represent them. The union was skeptical and said they would only represent the workers if a majority were for it. They made the owner sign a written contract because he had promised so much earlier and had not delivered.

I supported the strikes, but at first, another worker led them. He did not do a good job. When they planned their work stoppage, and all of the workers respected the action and stayed home, he actually went to work. The workers were so angry with him they almost beat him. Later, I led the effort with other workers. There were many indigenous workers, and I translated when they communicated with the foreman, so he accused me of being the instigator. But I liked helping in that way. That is when I began to work with the union, participating in the marches and meetings.

Then the union invited me to work for them. Because it was winter, I was not working in the fields, so I decided to take the job. I worked for them for three and a half years and just recently went back to work for them again. The UFW recently signed a contract with D’Arrigo Brothers Produce and assigned me to work with workers in the mustard and lettuce departments.

Workers are not a disposable product. They are the sole reason why everyone in this country has food on their table.

We are currently working with workers in non-union companies, too. They have real bargaining power right now because the growers need workers. It is a good time to ask for family health insurance benefits, holiday pay, bonuses, and fair treatment. César Chávez fought for all of those things. All workers deserve those benefits. Workers are not a disposable product. They are the sole reason why everyone in this country has food on their table.

I think the union saw all I did for my community on a voluntary basis. My previous work and service spoke for me. I did not ask them for
a job. It was God’s will to put me in their path. Over the years, the union has hired people who speak indigenous languages and that is where I fit in. When they could not communicate with some workers, they brought me in to help. There are many workers who do not speak Spanish well, and they are abused because of it.

That is part of the reason for the injustices we faced in Greenfield. People arriving here come from places where they did not even own a mule and have certainly never owned a vehicle. They live eight or ten to a house. Folks around here are not used to seeing that. But we came here to work, and we are residents of this community. We spend our dollars here.

If you look around at local stores and laundromats, all you see are Oaxaqueños. But immigration raids began and they arrested twenty-seven Triquis. We began holding informational meetings, but the city police began to hound Triquis, Oaxaqueños, and anyone indigenous. They would arrest them and impound their vehicles. So we began to work with the police department, to teach them about where we come from and about our people and culture. We met city council officials and many non-profit and government agencies, asking for justice and trying to educate them.

In 2001, the city council passed a resolution that said immigration officials could only come into town if they had a list of criminals they were looking for. But some residents began trying to repeal it. Many of us fought back, and seven hundred people protested with the support of the UFW in front of City Hall, asking for an end to racism. We also celebrated César Chávez’s anniversary in a large public celebration.

In 2003, the indigenous people living in Greenfield held a meeting and hosted a celebration in appreciation of the information that had been shared with them, thanking the police department, city leaders, state representatives, school officials, and mainly the UFW. The UFW president, Arturo Rodriguez, and Dolores Huerta had come.

We started holding monthly meetings to inform residents of what is and is not allowed in this city, county, and country. People who did not like them called them the Oaxaca meetings, but any resident could attend the meetings. The chief of police was simply providing information to whoever wanted to hear it, about drivers education and local laws. That is when some longtime Greenfield residents got angry. They eventually fired the chief of police with a ridiculous excuse—that he had once appeared on a Spanish television news show without asking his supervisor for permission.

In reality, he was fired because of racism toward the indigenous community. Farmworkers
came out to defend him and protested. But there was political division among the city leaders. Some listened to those longtime residents and they won. I am not a citizen yet, but I know that was an injustice.

I am proud I have served my community. I really enjoy what I do, and I have learned a great deal, especially working for the union. I have five children, and my wife and I make seven. My oldest son is eighteen, and my youngest daughter is two. I know they will speak three languages—Mixteco, English, and Spanish. They are learning a great deal, and I see a bright future for them here. Speaking three languages will allow them to communicate with many people. They are great kids, and I hope they find good jobs. I think they will always live in the United States because this is their home; but if they want to visit or live in Mexico, that is their decision.

We eat our traditional Mixteco meals. The meat here has many chemicals, so we try and stay true to our Mixteco diet because it is healthier. If we ate American food, we would be obese in three months. We stick to eating mole and chakatan and quelite, which are plants. There are some who make fun of us and say we are cheap and prefer to only eat plants. They think we are stupid, but, in fact, it is a healthier option than hamburgers and pizza.

As long as I am alive, they will continue to stay connected to our culture. We still speak Mixteco. Even the youngest can speak it. I would love for them to speak as many languages as possible. Whether my grandchildren will also speak Mixteco will depend on them, but as long as I live, I will continue to insist they learn our language. It is a gift from God, and as our vows say, “What God has made, let man not separate.” It is the same thing with our culture. Man should not take away the gift that God gave us.

Author Biography

David Bacon is a California writer and documentary photographer. A former union organizer, today he documents labor, the global economy, war and migration, and the struggle for human rights. His latest book, The Right to Stay Home (Beacon Press, 2013), discusses alternatives to forced migration and the criminalization of migrants.