



# Northwest Latine Farmworker Environmental Justice

Maya Rios



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## Creator Biography

My name is Maya Rios and I am a third-year student at the University of Oregon's Clark Honors College majoring in data science with a minor in Spanish. I am also a second-generation Mexican-American and have lived in and near Latine farmworker communities in the Pacific Northwest my entire life. Growing up, my family members shared stories about picking apples, peaches, and cherries in fruit orchards in Eastern Washington and how they experienced firsthand the systemic environmental, climate, and energy injustices that I will talk about in this zine. I have the privilege of attending the University of Oregon where I am able to conduct research about injustices in my community and take part in social activism efforts in order to eliminate these injustices. My family and community members have taught me that it is necessary that every human being has the right to a safe place to live and work. I am excited to share this project that highlights the efforts of local activists and how they have helped improve the lives of the members of my own community.



Dinuba, CA, 1971. My great-grandmother and two of her children harvesting beets.



Yakima, WA, 1975. My grandmother picking cherries.

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Here in the Pacific Northwest, the agriculture and forestry industries make up large sectors of the economy. Many Latine farmworkers, especially those who are undocumented, are frequently subjected to arbitrary methods of calculating earnings from their employers when working in these industries. Outside of work, farmworkers frequently face unsafe and unsanitary housing conditions provided by their employers in exchange for short-term labor. With climate change increasing the prevalence of droughts, floods, and wildfires, working in the agriculture and forestry industry is becoming an increasingly unsafe environment for both workers and their families.<sup>7</sup> What environmental and climate injustices exist in Latine migrant, farm-worker communities in the Pacific Northwest? What meaningful work has already been achieved by community activists? How can this work be translated into state and national legislation to achieve environmental and climate justice? Activists in Latine communities are working to combat climate and environmental injustices locally, but government action is essential in ensuring that Latine communities can be able to achieve justice on a large scale.



Megan Farmer/KUOW/NWPB

Environmental and Climate Justice for Latine farmworkers in the Pacific Northwest has a long and complex history in the United States. Continued efforts by community activists and state and federal legislation have helped to enact policies that help to combat these injustices, but there are still many systemic issues that Latine farmworkers face today. This zine will attempt to explain these issues and what can be done about them by answering three questions:

## What are the issues?



Street Roots

## What has been done?



United Farm Workers

## What do we do now?



PCUN

Key terms are used for defining and understanding important concepts within a space.

## **Climate Justice**

- "Climate Justice is a global movement that recognizes the intertwined relationships between global warming and social justice or power between people." <sup>1</sup>

## **Environmental Justice**

- "[Environmental justice] calls to recognize and halt the disproportionate burdens imposed on poor and people of color communities by environmentally harmful conditions." <sup>1</sup>

## **Migrant Farmworker**

- "A person whose principal employment is in seasonal agriculture, who has been so employed in the last 24 months, and who establishes, because of that employment, a temporary abode." <sup>2</sup>

# What are the issues?



The Counter

## Environmental hazards

It is well known that farm work is hard work. The Center for Disease Control and Prevention states that in 2020, 368 farm workers died from work-related injuries. As a result, the fatality rate for this occupation is 18.0 deaths per 100,000 workers<sup>3</sup>. Many of these deaths are attributed to on-site accidents, but overexposure to environmental hazards can lead to health complications, illness, and death. The two most common and most dangerous environmental hazards that migrant farmworkers face are pesticide illness and heat stress. Heat stress is caused by extended field or forest labor without access to water or breaks. Workers often wear long sleeve shirts and pants to avoid pesticide exposure, leading to an increased risk of severe dehydration and heat stroke.

# Pesticide Exposure



National Farm Worker Ministry

Pesticides are used to kill bugs that grow on crops. Workers who apply pesticides or who are exposed to “pesticide drifts” from neighboring fields are vulnerable to acute or server pesticide illness<sup>4</sup>. Unlike heat stress, pesticide illness can affect a worker’s family if a farmworker wears pesticide-exposed clothing around them. Pesticide illness can cause neurodegenerative diseases, fertility problems, depression, diabetes, and cancer<sup>4</sup>. The prevalence of heat stress and pesticide illness will only increase as climate change increases.



**Insecticide**  
is the **#1 cause** of  
acute pesticide  
illness.

**Pesticide  
manufactures  
are not obligated  
to write warning<sup>4</sup>  
labels in Spanish**



**“(Farm workers) are involved in the planting and the cultivation and the harvesting of the greatest abundance of food known in this society. They bring in so much food to feed you and me and the whole country and enough food to export to other places. The ironic thing and the tragic thing is that after they make this tremendous contribution, they don’t have any money or any food left for themselves.”- César Chávez<sup>5</sup>**

## Low wages

The unfortunate truth is that the same farmworkers who plant and harvest the food that we eat often struggle to feed themselves and their own families.

Farmworkers nationwide face low wages and wage theft in every agricultural industry. In the Pacific Northwest, field managers routinely pay fieldworkers and tree planters below minimum wage or withhold a worker’s wage until the end of a work period in order to pay them less than an agreed-upon amount.<sup>7</sup> Employers sometimes deport farmworkers rather than pay them their wages.<sup>5</sup> Because of this, farmworkers receive one of the lowest annual salaries in the United States, with the average worker’s salary being just \$25,000 a year.<sup>5</sup>

Migrant farmworkers have generally two housing options:

## Government-provided housing

Migrant workers make up 75 percent of all agricultural workers in the United States. In order to qualify for government housing, workers have to be documented. More than half of all farmworkers are undocumented.<sup>11</sup> This means that government housing is unavailable and inaccessible to undocumented farmworkers.

## Employer-provided housing



Beyond Toxics



Street Roots

One-room living quarters at E&S Farms Inc. in Woodburn, Oregon. They house around 200 workers during peak season.<sup>11</sup>

Employer-provided housing facilities are often intentionally overpriced and under-serviced. Many farmworkers are housed in small living units and rent is typically taken out of a worker's seasonal wage.<sup>5</sup> The conditions of these houses are usually old, worn down, lacking basic utilities, and isolated from vital services like grocery stores, hospitals, and public transport. Lack of government oversight has led to private housing suppliers not being held accountable for providing unsafe housing conditions.



PCUN



Oregon State University Special Archives

## Issues Affecting Oregon Treeplanters

Forest workers in Oregon complete physically demanding tasks like hauling large seedling trees up mountains into remote areas in order to be planted. A study by the Willamette Valley Immigration Project (WVIP) in the early 1970s found that “A majority [of workers] worked six days a week and 19 percent worked seven days a week. Almost all (93 percent) well allowed less than half an hour for lunch, and almost one-third (30 percent) did not receive more than one break per day... One-third of the workers have some type of work-related injury, and nearly one-half reported unusual illness.” In the forestry industry, Pineros (tree planters) not only face deportation but the threat of being abandoned in the forest by their employers.

CBS News

PCUN



# What has been done?

## Early Activism

### United Farm Workers

Created in the early 1960s by César Chávez and Dolores Huerta, the United Farm Workers union was the first farmworker's union on the West Coast to create union contracts for workers that ensured overtime pay, fair wages, and protection against heat stress and illness.<sup>8</sup>



Dolores Huerta, United Farm Workers

### Bracero program

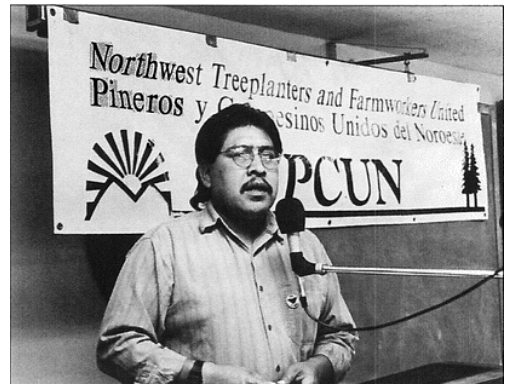
Created in 1942, the Bracero program granted short-term contracts to Mexican men to work legally in the United States. Braceros faced frequent discrimination and wage theft while in the U.S.<sup>7</sup>



Marjory Collins, Library of Congress

### PCUN

PCUN was one of the first region-specific farmworker advocacy groups and recognized that Oregon tree planters experienced similar discrimination and injustices as field workers. They created a joint-advocacy group to fight for better conditions for all laborers in the Pacific Northwest.<sup>12</sup>



PCUN



United Farm Workers



United Farm Workers

# United Farm Workers

United Farm Workers (UFW) is one of the oldest and most well-known farm worker's unions in the United States. The Union was founded to improve working and housing conditions for farm workers in California, where, at the time, the majority of farm workers worked 10+ hour days, earned less than a dollar an hour, and lived in metal shacks without heat or plumbing. During the 1960s, United Farm Workers and their allied unions knew that Mexican, Chicano, and Filipino farm workers were the backbone of California's economy and organized worker strikes and boycotts on produce in order to leverage fair wages. One of the most well-known strikes, the Delano Grape Strike, was organized to raise worker wages from \$1.25 to 1.40 an hour (\$11.83 to \$13.24 in 2022) per box of grapes packed.<sup>13</sup> By making the American public aware of growers' exploitation of workers, customers stopped buying grapes and resulting in millions of dollars of lost revenue. By reducing company profits, United Farm Workers and other allied unions were able to get fair worker wages, ensure safe working conditions that prevented unnecessary illness from heat stress and pesticide use, force employers to provide workers with adequate housing, and create a lasting farmwork's union in California and inspire the creation of other unions around the country.

United Farm Workers



"The Aztec eagle is a historic symbol for the people of Mexico...The white circle signifies hope and aspirations. The red background stands for the hard work and sacrifice that the union members would have to give."<sup>13</sup>

United Farm Workers

Since the creation of the United Farm Workers Union, activist groups around the country have formed to ensure worker protection for specific crops grown in that area. Within Oregon, Pineros Y Campesinos Unidos del Noroeste (PCUN) was formed in 1985 to include fair wages and safe working environments for tree planters as well as field workers.<sup>8</sup> It is one of the largest and most active farm worker activist groups within the Pacific Northwest.

PCUN



PCUN



In 1998, PCUN signed an agreement with Nature's Fountain Farm that included seniority, grievance procedures, overtime, paid breaks, and union recognition. This level of worker protection was not commonplace in farms in the 1990s or today.<sup>8</sup>

University of Washington

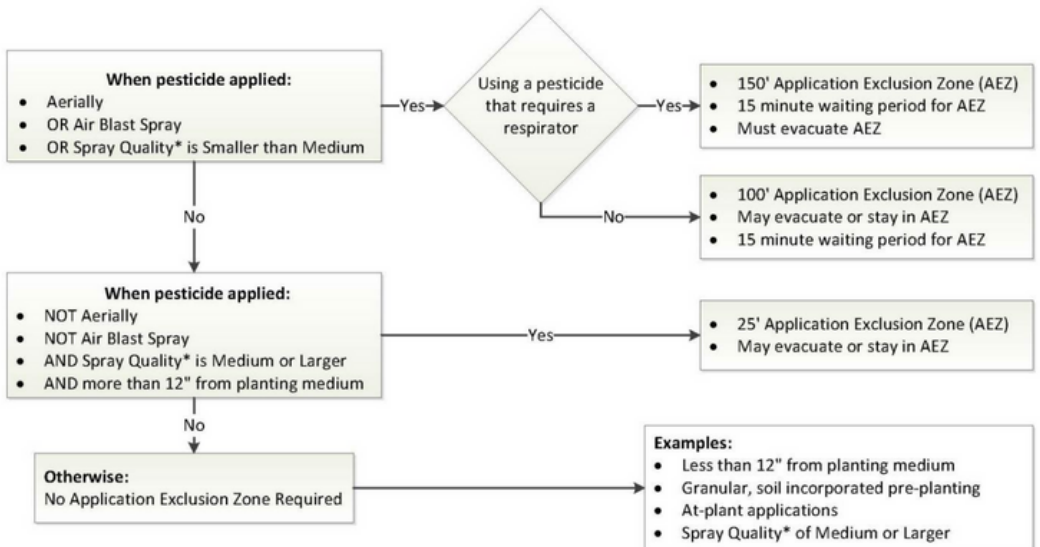


Mexican-American created the term "Chicano" during the Civil Rights movement as a rejection of White-American cultural assimilation. Chicano history is intertwined with farmworker advocacy and Chicano student activists have worked with PCUN, UFW, and many other organizations during boycotts and protests.<sup>14</sup>

# Local Legislative Achievements 15

In 2018 the Oregon Occupational Safety & Health Division (Oregon OSHA) decided to update its worker protection standards to include regulations about pesticide use and housing options. Beginning in 2019, employers became obligated to direct workers to close windows, turn off air conditioning devices, and are alerted of the exact times when pesticides will be sprayed.<sup>9</sup> It also ensured that if pesticide drift enters a worker's housing that it must be properly cleaned by the employer. Many Latinx activists and scholars, most notably Devon Peña and Laura Pulido, consider farmworker movements, especially campaigns against pesticide use, to be a key example of environmental justice in Latine communities.<sup>16</sup>

Worker Protection Standard, Application Exclusion Zone Decision Matrix



Oregon OSHA

This diagram describes how pesticides are now instructed to be sprayed in compliance with the updated worker protection standards.

# Federal Legislative Achievements

In March 2021, the Farm Workforce Modernization Act passed in the U.S. House of Representatives. "The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) may grant CAW [Certified Agricultural Worker] status to an applying alien who (1) performed at least 1,035 hours of agricultural labor during the two-year period prior to March 8, 2021; (2) on that date was inadmissible, deportable, or under a grant of deferred enforced departure or temporary protected status; and (3) has been continuously present in the United States from that date until receiving CAW status. The bill imposes additional crime-related inadmissibility grounds on CAW applicants and makes some other grounds inapplicable." This ruling allows over 300,000 migrant workers and 200,000 of their dependents to be classified as Certified Agricultural Workers, meaning they would now be eligible for certain federal benefits and tax credits. This bill also increases the number of people who can receive employment-based green cards by 40,000 per year.<sup>10</sup>



ufupdates

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Farmworkers in Washington DC supporting the Farm Workforce Modernization Act that grants hundreds of thousands of farmworkers federal benefits, United Farm Workers.



# What do we do now?

## Donate!

Donate to United Farm Workers, PCUN, or other organizations that support farmwork in your area. If you are unable to vote directly, keep up to date on boycotts of produce or corporations that are complicit with unjust labor practices.



Boycott Wendy's

Since 2005, Wendy's has refused to sign the Fair Foods Agreement in Florida, in which corporations promise to ensure fair wages and safe working conditions for workers. Instead, they make their employees harvest their tomatoes in overheated indoor greenhouses and have been accused of wage theft and not providing water and breaks for their employees.<sup>15</sup> Learn more at <http://www.boycott-wendys.org>

## Take Action!

Write to your representatives about the issues you want to be solved for farmworkers in your community. Below is a form to write to your representative to support the National Heat Regulation bill. This bill will ensure that employers provide water, breaks, and shade for farmworkers in extreme weather conditions.





@ufwupdates



@pcunoregon

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# VOTE

Only a handful of states, including Washington, Oregon, and California, protect farmworkers' right to unionize. The best thing that can be done to improve the lives of farmworkers is to vote for representatives that support fair wages, worker protections, and unions.

## Stay Informed!

Follow PCUN and UFW on Twitter, Instagram, or Facebook to stay up-to-date on legislation that improves the lives of farmworkers and ways that you can best support this cause.

**Instagram/ Twitter:**

UFW @ufwupdates

PCUN @pcunoregon

# Why this is important. 19

The right to live and work in a safe environment is a fundamental human right and the history of farm workers in America is American history. It is important to remember that the reason that many Latine migrant workers endure job insecurity, low wages, and unsafe working and living conditions is that there is not enough federal legislation to protect the workers who are the backbone of the American economy. Even though boycotting, protesting, and voting are effective forms of activism, it is not the consumer's responsibility to ensure fair labor practices. Employers and corporations need to be responsible for ensuring the safety of ALL workers and the government should hold these employers accountable if they do not comply. In my own personal experience, farmworkers will tell you that they are proud of the work that they do, but they do not want their children and children's children to have to endure the same injustices that they do.

@ufwupdates



@ufwupdates



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