

Artist Statement

Mexico is experiencing profound social turmoil. About 30 million Mexicans survive on less than 30 pesos a day – not quite \$3. The minimum wage is 45. The federal government estimates that 37.7% of Mexico's 106 million citizens – 40 million people – live in poverty, 25 million in extreme poverty. In rural Mexico, over ten million people have a daily income of less than 12 pesos – about a dollar. In the southern state of Oaxaca extreme poverty encompasses 75% of its 3.4 million residents, making it the second-poorest state in Mexico, after Chiapas.

The majority of Oaxacans are indigenous people. They belong to communities and ethnic groups that existed long before Columbus landed in the Caribbean. Oaxacans speak 23 different languages, and among Mexican states, Oaxaca has the second-highest concentration of indigenous residents.

Oaxaca is one of the main starting points for the current stream of Mexican migrants coming to the U.S. Thousands indigenous people leave Oaxaca's hillside villages for the United States every year. Lack of development pushes people off the land. And as they find their way to other parts of Mexico or the United States, the money they send home becomes crucial to the survival of the towns they leave behind.

This is an era of indigenous migration, when the numbers of migrants from communities and cultures which long predated Columbus, have now swelled to become the majority of people working in the fields. While dispersed inside Mexico and the US as a result of migration, the movement of people has created, in a sense, one larger community, located in many places simultaneously. Settlements of Triquis, Mixtecs, Chatinos and other indigenous groups are bound together by shared culture and language, and the social organizations people bring with them from place to place.

Farmworkers shows the hard working conditions faced by these communities. They highlight the issue of immigration, and show the consequences of economic dislocation in Mexico.

Farmworkers is a partnership between David Bacon, documentary photographer and journalist, and California Rural Legal Assistance and its Indigenous Farm Worker Project. It is supported by the Binational Front of Indigenous Organizations (FIOB), a network of Mexican indigenous communities in the U.S. and Mexico. The communities documented include Mixtecos, Triquis, Zapotecos, Chatinos, and Purepechas living in San Diego, Coachella, Arvin, Oxnard and Santa Paula, Santa Maria, Fresno and Selma, Salinas and Greenfield, Santa Rosa, Fairfield and Corning.

The photographs are taken from a larger project, called Living Under the Trees. Image from this project have been shown in community centers, city halls, libraries or schools, in the small rural towns throughout California where these indigenous communities are located. These exhibitions have provided multiple forums in which migrant communities have engaged in an internal dialogue among themselves, as well as broader dialogues and interactions with the larger communities in which they live, about problems of immigration, housing, work and culture. Exhibitions and community meetings have been held in San Diego, Los Angeles, Fresno, Merced, San Francisco, Santa Paula, Watsonville, Hollister, Greenfield, and Lamont, and others are scheduled for Santa Rosa, Del Mar, Camarillo and Bakersfield.

Immigration is one of the most important and hotly debated issues in the U.S. Yet most people have little understanding of indigenous immigrants, who overwhelmingly belong to transnational communities like those of Oaxaca's Mixtecs, Chatinos and Triquis. Today they make up a major percentage of the migrant stream. The farm worker communities where they live are often very polarized between immigrants and non-immigrants. Indigenous communities need greater understanding and acceptance in order to survive. This project provides a reality check about immigration, as well as a bridge between communities. It shows the actual working conditions people face as they put the food on the table for everyone.

- David Bacon
April, 2010

About David Bacon

David Bacon is a writer and photojournalist based in Oakland and Berkeley, California. He is the author of three books: *The Children of NAFTA* (University of California Press, 2004), a photodocumentary project sponsored by the Rockefeller Foundation, *Communities Without Borders* (ILR/Cornell University Press, 2006) and *Illegal People – How Globalization Creates Migration and Criminalizes Immigrants* (Beacon Press, 2008).

Bacon is an associate editor at Pacific News Service, and writes for TruthOut, The Nation, The American Prospect, The Progressive, and the San Francisco Chronicle, among other publications. He has been a reporter and documentary photographer for 18 years, shooting for many national publications. His work has been supported by the Rockefeller Foundation, Ford Foundation, Zellerbach Foundation, Diane Middleton Foundation, Vanguard Public Foundation, The California Endowment and the California Council for the Humanities.

Bacon was chair of the board of the Northern California Coalition for Immigrant Rights, and helped organize the Labor Immigrant Organizers Network and the Santa Clara Center for Occupational Safety and Health. He served on the board of the Media Alliance and belongs to the Northern California Media Workers Guild.

Bacon's photography has been exhibited widely in the U.S., Mexico and Europe, including at the Oakland Museum of California; University of California in Berkeley and Los Angeles; the National Civil Rights Museum; Mesa College Gallery, San Diego; Bread and Roses Gallery, New York City; Centro Cultural de Tijuana; the Autonomous University of Mexico City; Kultur/AXE in Vienna, Austria; Galerie Unterhaus, Passau, Germany; IG Metall Galerie, Frankfurt, Germany; Trade Union Congress, London, and other venues.

Bacon's photography and journalism have received the Max Steinbock Award, Project Censored Award, Los Angeles Press Club Award, New America Media Award, Domingo Ulloa Cultural Award, and the Distinguished Service Award from the Southwest Labor Studies Association. *Illegal People* was awarded the Best Book Award for 2007-8 by the Working Class Studies Association.

Bacon's photography illuminates issues of labor, immigration, indigenous communities and culture, and international politics. He travels frequently to Mexico, the Philippines, Europe and Iraq. He lectures widely at universities throughout the U.S. He hosts a half-hour weekly radio show on labor, immigration and the global economy on KPFA-FM, and is a frequent guest on KQED-TV's *This Week in Northern California*.

Prior to his career as photojournalist, Bacon was a labor organizer for unions in which immigrant workers made up a large percentage of the membership, including the United Farm Workers, the United Electrical Workers, the International Ladies' Garment Workers, the Molders Union and others. Those experiences gave him insight into changing conditions in the workforce, the impact of the global economy and migration, and how these factors influence the struggle for civil and labor rights.