



# SIEMBRA

*A Newsletter for Farmworker Friends and Advocates*

*Winter 2005*

## **Human Rights Violations in Rural Oaxaca Defending the Rights of Indigenous Peoples and the Protection of their Ancestral Forests**

Richard Mandelbaum



**Members of San Isidro Aloapam meet together in Bridgeton, NJ to strategize on how they can continue to support their home community.**

Migration to the United States from Mexico has been occurring for centuries. Indeed, much of the southwestern United States belonged to Mexico before Mexican War of the mid-nineteenth century (which was instigated by the U.S.), and cultural and economic exchange took place long before the Conquest and process of colonization that began in 1492. However, in the past fifteen years the U.S. has seen a surge in migration from Mexico, an increase that can be attributed to neo-liberal economic policies including NAFTA and continued U.S. government subsidies to domestic farmers. These policies have served to undercut rural economies in Mexico and

elsewhere – leading to a level of desperation that forces more and more people to migrate. In recent years CATA has seen a marked increase in people migrating to the U.S. for work from more remote and indigenous regions of Mexico. Such people have deep ties to the land, and a deep reluctance to leave - and they maintain these ties to their home communities after emigrating to the U.S.

This migration of desperation is often exacerbated by local injustices, combined with the neglect – or even worse, complicity – of the Mexican government in human rights violations perpetrated against indigenous peoples. This past year CATA has begun aiding some of its members now living in Bridgeton, New Jersey, in seeking justice for their community of San Isidro Aloapam.

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***CATA is a non-profit,  
migrant farmworker  
organization governed by  
and comprised of  
farmworkers who are  
actively engaged in the  
struggle for better working  
and living conditions.***

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San Isidro Aloapam, a small Zapotec community located in Ixtlan de Juarez, Oaxaca, in southern Mexico, has for decades been locked in a struggle for justice with the larger neighboring municipality of San Miguel Aloapam. Since 1982, in collusion with the state government of Oaxaca, San Miguel has gradually usurped more and more land that rightfully belongs to the people of San Isidro, using such tactics as bribing local officials, intimidation, and violence. For instance, the state government has gradually reduced the official population count for San Isidro – a tally used in determining land use rights – despite the fact that the population of San Isidro has approximately doubled in the past twenty years. State agencies entrusted with protecting the environment and promoting sustainable forestry have continuously granted illegal logging permits to San Miguel – something the people of San Isidro believe has been achieved through bribery.

With land use rights comes the right to log the forest for sale, and the people of San Isidro watched helplessly twenty years ago as their forest was clear cut. They are determined not to let this happen again. Jorge Cruz, resident of San Isidro and member of CATA, explains, “The most important thing is the protection of the forest – that it not be logged anymore, that it not be exploited anymore.”

In 2000 the people of San Isidro began to mobilize to protect their rights and their forest, and submitted a legal challenge to the Agrarian Tribunal. In August of 2002 they protested when the municipal government of San Miguel seized yet more land belonging to San Isidro that was being used for growing crops, in order to plant more trees for their logging plantations. The peaceful protesters were retaliated against with violence, including an assault on a pregnant woman that resulted in miscarriage. Several residents of San Isidro were arrested on falsified charges, one of whom remains in prison to this day. “For having asked for justice, we are being imprisoned,” says Zenon Perez, resident of San Isidro and a CATA board member.

In addition to the organizing being done by CATA and other local organizations representing the people of San Isidro, international organizations and advocacy groups have begun to notice the human rights violations taking place there. Amnesty International described the August 2002 incident (UA 253/02 Fear for Safety, 13 August 2002), noting in their report that the men who had been arrested were all apparently beaten, and “a number of other people were seriously injured in the clash.” They also noted that police arrived at the scene and left without any attempt to stop the violence. The human rights violations occurring in Oaxaca have also been acknowledged by the United Nations Special Rapporteur for the Human Rights of Indigenous Peoples, Rodolfo Stavenhagen (E/CN.4/2004/80/Add.2; June 2003).

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With CATA's support the residents of San Isidro sent a letter to Mexico's President Vicente Fox demanding that any members of their community still in prison be immediately released, that all charges be dropped, and that their rights to their forest lands be officially recognized. In the letter they not only make the strong case that their rights are being violated, but also explain the wider environmental repercussions to come if the situation is allowed to continue: "If they continue to clear cut the forest, the springs that provide drinking water to our village and neighboring villages will dry up."

Both the state and federal governments have officially acknowledged receipt of the letter, but have not yet replied in a substantive way. CATA plans to continue the campaign and is preparing a letter of support to increase pressure on the state and federal governments to remedy the situation (*see below for ways to help*). This past December President Fox issued a public declaration of his government's commitment to ensuring the human rights of all Mexicans, and he must be held accountable to this pledge.

The goals of the people of San Isidro Aloapam are clear: "We want the federal government to recognize our rights to the land that belongs to us," says Perez, "and allow us to protect the forest. What we want is the defense of our human rights – justice – and no more violence. Whether people are brown skinned or black or white, tall or short, big or small, we are all

children of God, and justice should not be just for rich people, but for the poor as well."

### What can you do to help?

Contact your nearest Mexican consulate and voice your concern for the human rights violations being perpetrated against the people of San Isidro Aloapam, Oaxaca. Tell them that this is an opportunity for President Fox to back up his December declaration with strong action.

Consulate of Mexico – Philadelphia  
Consul General Erika Spezia  
111 S. Independence Mall E  
Suite 310 Bourse Building  
Philadelphia, PA 19106  
Tel: (215) 922-3834  
Fax: (215) 923-7281



Sign a letter of support that CATA is preparing. Contact Richard Mandelbaum at the phone number or email address below.

Donate to CATA's campaign, or for more information, contact Richard Mandelbaum at (845) 796-1883, or [richardmandelbaum@hotmail.com](mailto:richardmandelbaum@hotmail.com).

People fluent in Spanish can also contact the following agencies directly:

**Comisión Estatal de Derechos Humanos de Oaxaca;** tel. 011-52-951-351-85

**Gobernador de Oaxaca, Jose Murat,** tel. 011-52-951-659-66

**Presidente de la Comisión Nacional de Derechos Humanos, José Luis Soberanes;** tel. 011-52-563-100-40

# The Fight to Raise the Minimum Wage

Jessica Culley

CATA members in Southern New Jersey recently joined a growing effort to push through legislation in 2005 to raise the minimum wage in New Jersey. New Jersey's minimum wage has been stagnated at \$5.15/hour (the federal minimum wage) for the past six years, despite the fact that New Jersey is one of the most expensive states to live in. We have a cost of living that is 1/3 higher than the national average, and the average median income in the state is 35% higher than the national average. Currently the minimum wage (when adjusted for inflation) has a purchasing power of only \$4.48, lower than the adjusted rate for any year since the minimum wage was established.

When the minimum wage was established in 1966 in New Jersey, \$1.25/hour allowed a family of three with one full time wage earner to live above the federal poverty line. Now, a full time worker earning the minimum wage (\$5.15/hour) earns only \$10,712/year, more than \$4,000 less than the federal poverty guideline for a family of three (\$14,824) and even less than the guidelines for a family of two (\$12,490). An average family earning the minimum wage must dedicate 62% of their total income just to cover rent and utilities.

Currently, thirteen states have minimum wages higher than the federal minimum wage. New Jersey has not raised its minimum wage since 1999, when it was raised

just \$.10 over the 1992 standard of \$5.05.

Migrant and immigrant families feel the inadequacy of this substandard wage even more intensely since much of the work they do is seasonal, and most of the time they are supporting a family in Mexico as well as themselves on only one income. Housing costs have skyrocketed in South Jersey. As a result, workers pool together their resources, often sharing a house with seven to ten other workers in order to have the resources to send home to their families.



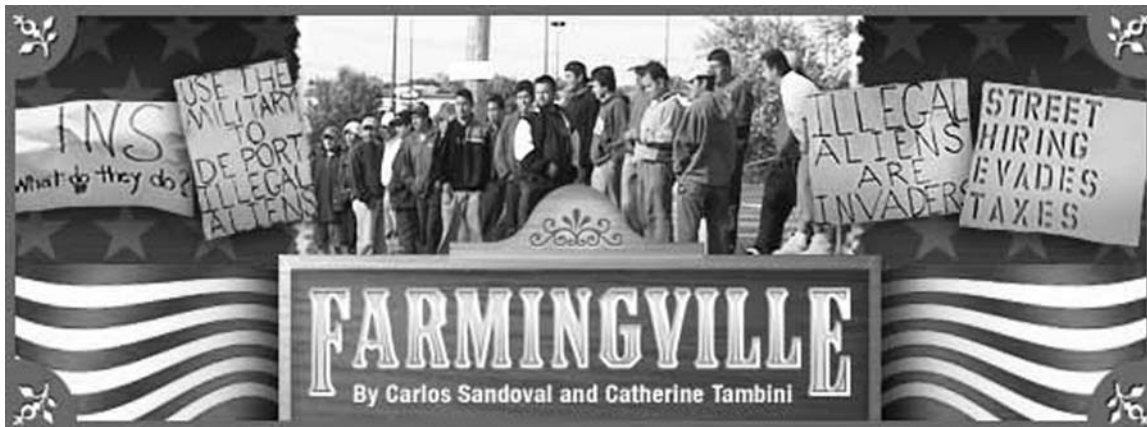
In December, in the annual Farmworker Summit, workers decided that raising the minimum wage is one of their top priorities. They agreed to gather signatures from immigrant farmworkers in Southern New Jersey in order to make their voices heard as momentum gathers around the state to push through legislation. CATA's Regional Concilio in New Jersey agreed to take on

this challenge.

Acting Governor Codey has also made increasing the minimum wage a priority. In his State of the State Address given in January of 2005, he proposed to raise the minimum wage by two dollars. He said, "If a man or a woman puts in an honest day's work, they should be able to earn a living wage...That's a fair proposition, one that workers of this state deserve and a proposition we should all support."

*\*Statistics Taken from "New Jersey's Shrinking Minimum Wage," A Report from the Poverty Research of Legal Services of New Jersey. Report available online at [www.lsnj.org](http://www.lsnj.org).*

## Philadelphia Premiere of Farmingville



**On Friday, May 20 at 7:00 pm Farmingville will premiere in Philadelphia at the International House with Filmmakers Carlos Sandoval & Catherine Tambini in person.**

The shocking hate-based attempted murders of two Mexican day laborers catapult a small Long Island town into the national headlines, unmasking a new front line in the border wars: suburbia. For nearly a year, Carlos Sandoval and Catherine Tambini lived and worked in Farmingville, New York, so they could capture first-hand the stories of residents, day laborers and activists on all sides of the debate. Blending their stories, this film reveals the human impact of national immigration policies. *Farmingville* has won numerous awards, including the Special Jury Prize at Sundance 2004, Best Documentary CineFestival and San Diego Latino Film

Festival. And it was one of five films chosen to represent the United States at IN-PUT 2004, an international gathering of public television makers.

The event on May 20th will be held at International House at 37th and Chestnut Streets in Philadelphia as part of Scribe Video Center's 2005 Producer's Forum and Discussion Series. There will be a \$10 entrance fee. After the screening of the film, there will be a discussion on local labor issues and also a question and answer time with the filmmakers.

This event is co-sponsored by Scribe Video Center and CATA - Farmworkers Support Committee.

For more information about the event, the film, and the filmmakers, you can check out Scribe Video Center's web page at [www.scribe.org/eaw/producers.html](http://www.scribe.org/eaw/producers.html).

## Felicidades

**The 4 year boycott of Taco Bell is over!!** On March 8, 2005, the Coalition of Immokalee Workers reached an agreement with Yum Brands (the largest restaurant company in the world, and owner of Taco Bell) for increased wages and an improvement in working conditions of tomato pickers in Immokalee, Florida. Taco Bell agreed to pay the penny-per-pound surcharge demanded by workers, will work with CIW to raise farm labor standards within the supply chain and across industry as a whole. This unprecedented victory is proof that major multinational corporations can be held accountable for upholding the rights of workers throughout their supply chains! For more information about CIW, check out their website at [www.ciw-online.org](http://www.ciw-online.org).

## *Announcements*

**On Sunday, March 20** join in Solidarity with the People of El Salvador to Commemorate the 25th Anniversary of Archbishop Oscar Romero's Assassination & to Call for an End to the War in Iraq! Music and Rally will take place from 12:30pm-2pm. Location TBA. For more information, contact **School of the Americas Watch NorthEast** at [www.soawne.org](http://www.soawne.org) or call 215-477-5892.

Join the **New Jersey Environmental Federation's 19th Annual Conference "Getting New Jersey Back on the Right Track"** on **Saturday, April 2nd from 8am - 5pm** at Jackson Memorial High School Fine Arts Center, located in Jackson, NJ to learn new skills and facts, sharpen those you already possess. Together, we can protect natural resources communities, and our health from environmental injustices, toxins and sprawl. For more information on the conference and how to register check out their website at [www.cleanwateraction.org/njef/events.htm](http://www.cleanwateraction.org/njef/events.htm).

**Prophets & Martyrs: Interfaith Service Remembering Archbishop Oscar Romero and Martin Luther King.** Please join us in celebrating Archbishop Romero's life and legacy in an **interfaith prayer service** on **April 3 at 3:30 at the Episcopal Cathedral at 38<sup>th</sup> and Chestnut Streets** in Philadelphia. The service will commemorate the assassinations of Archbishop Romero and the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. (assassinated April 4<sup>th</sup>, 1968) in a celebration of these two holy martyrs of the Americas. A list of additional events in the Philadelphia area commemorating Archbishop Romero can be found on the Romero Interfaith Center Website, [www.romerointerfaithcenter.org](http://www.romerointerfaithcenter.org).

**Earth Share of New Jersey (ESNJ) and Whole Foods Markets promote Earth Day, Every Day throughout the month of April!** CATA is a proud member of ESNJ. During the month of April, customers can make a donation to ESNJ at the register in Whole Foods Markets' stores in Connecticut, New Jersey, and New York. Participating store locations in New Jersey include Edgewater, Madison, Millburn, Montclair, Ridgewood, Marlton and Princeton. ESNJ was founded by and represents environmental and conservation organizations and distributes funds to more than 50 local and national non-profit organizations working tirelessly to help protect and preserve public health and our air, water, land and wildlife. For more information, check out their website at [www.earthsharenj.org](http://www.earthsharenj.org).

**The Barbara Smith Community School** of The Bread and Roses Community Fund in Philadelphia is now in their winter/spring 2005 session. From March through May, workshops on **Building an Activist Board, Making Meetings Work, and Entering Philadelphia Politics** will be held. **For more information on how to participate, contact 215.731.1107 x202 or email [denise@breadrosesfund.org](mailto:denise@breadrosesfund.org).** Registration forms can also be printed from their website at [www.breadrosesfund.org](http://www.breadrosesfund.org).

**From May 23-25, Advancing Regional Equity and Smart Growth: The Second National Summit will take place in Philadelphia, PA.** Join neighborhood, labor, rural, and faith leaders; representatives of foundations; academics; and members of regional, state and national organizations for three days of enlightening presentations and engaging conversations about strategies for advancing economic, environmental, and social equity. For more information, contact: **PolicyLink** at [www.policylink.org](http://www.policylink.org) or **Funders' Network for Smart Growth and Livable Communities** at [www.fundersnetwork.org](http://www.fundersnetwork.org).

## THANK YOU TO ALL CATA'S SUPPORTERS

CATA would like to take this opportunity to thank all the individuals, organizations, and funders who supported our work in 2004. We greatly appreciate your commitment to CATA's goal of empowering the farmworker community to address the social, economic, and environmental justice issues affecting them and the larger community. Through assistance from supporters like you, farmworkers and other low-wage immigrant workers throughout the region have been able to fight for their basic human rights. **We also wish to express special thanks to those who joined CATA's 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary "Supporters for Justice" campaign in helping us build our capacity to become more self-sufficient.** Know that you are all a vital part of the farmworkers' struggle for justice and that we rely on your continued support. **THANK YOU!**



## Host a CATA presentation

Would you be interested in hosting a presentation at your church, union or community meeting about issues affecting farm or immigrant workers? CATA staff and members would love to come to show a video ("Los Trabajadores" or "Pesticides: From the Fields to Your Table") and facilitate a time of dialogue.

**"Los Trabajadores"** *The Workers*, was produced in 2001-2003. Planned, filmed, and edited by a team of farmworkers, volunteers, and staff, "Los Trabajadores" tells the story of farmworkers, the reasons and conditions that move them to travel to the U.S.A. and the types of conditions that they confront in the workplace. Lastly, it tells the story of CATA, and the role that workers' organizing efforts play in creating lasting changes in the community.

**"Pesticides: From the Fields to Your Table"** was produced in 2004 by the Farmworker Health and Safety Institute. The documentary takes a look at the reality of farmworkers in this country and their exposure to pesticides as they plant, tend to, and harvest the food that we eat. We see an intimate connection between farmworkers' health and safety and the well-being of consumers regarding the use of pesticides in food production.

If you are interested, please call Marge Niedda at 856-881-2507 or by email at [marge@cata-farmworkers.org](mailto:marge@cata-farmworkers.org).



**CATA**  
**P.O. Box 510**  
**Glassboro, NJ 08028**

**We rely on your support to further the farmworkers’  
struggle for dignity, respect, and justice!**

\$25 \_\_\_\_\_ \$50 \_\_\_\_\_ \$75 \_\_\_\_\_ \$100 \_\_\_\_\_ Other \_\_\_\_\_

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