

REPORTS FROM MEXICO
March 2007

FLOC President Baldemar Velásquez Meets with Members in México



FLOC President Baldemar Velásquez, Director of the Monterrey office Cástulo Bernavides Rogríguez (standing on left), and Presidents of local Worker Committees Melitón Hernandez Hernandez (seated on far left) and Cruz Díaz Montalvo (seated on far right), along with local officials, meet with FLOC members in a town in the mountains of San Luís Potosí.

FLOC represents some 15,000 workers in the Midwest and South, including over 6,000 H2A workers from México. This March, FLOC President Baldemar Velásquez made a trip to meet with FLOC members in the Huasteca region of San Luís Potosí and Tamaulipas. He was joined by Cástulo Bernavides Rogríguez, Director of the FLOC office in Monterrey, and Presidents of local FLOC Worker Committees in towns in the region, including Cruz Díaz Montalvo, Melitón Hernandez Hernandez, and Antonio Reyes.

The purpose of the meetings was to help the workers prepare for the coming season in North Carolina. Velásquez and Bernavides discussed worker issues with the FLOC members, including how the structure of the agricultural system affects farm labor, how the FLOC contracts provide workers with a direct voice on the job in a "right-to-work" state which denies important labor rights, safeguarding worker health against heat strokes and the right to file for Workers Compensation if injured or disabled on the job, and the development of a pension plan for FLOC members to safeguard the future of their families.



A number of former Bracero workers whose wage withholdings and pensions have disappeared also came to the meetings to see what could be done to recover the money they had earned over 40 years ago. Others who were interested in joining FLOC also attended the meetings.

FLOC leaders also met with various officials in different towns and municipalities and with national government and labor leaders to discuss issues like migration and protecting the rights of Mexican workers in the U.S.

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How Do Immigrant Conditions Affect Their Families and Communities Back Home?



FLOC President Baldemar Velásquez talks with the widow of Raymundo Hernández in a small village in the mountains of San Luís Potosí... through an interpreter who speaks the local Nahuatl language.

On March 7, church leaders and FLOC held a Lenten Remembrance for farmworkers who had died in the fields of North Carolina. (See [Remembrance](#))

One of these workers was Raymundo Hernández, an indigenous Nahuatl from the mountains of San Luís Potosí. Like many other subsistence farmers, Raymundo could not longer support his family, particularly the education of his son, so he migrated to North Carolina to work in the tobacco fields. In the summer of 2001, Raymundo suffered from heat stroke, and told his grower he was sick. The grower told him to get in the back of his pickup truck, and headed back to the camp. The grower stopped to talk with friends, and Raymundo got out and walked away unnoticed and was forgotten. Three months later, the grower's dog started barking at the edge of the camp, where they found a human skull. Other workers identified the shoes and clothes as Raymundo's.

The impacts of his death had a wide affect back home. Raymundo's extended family was left without a major means of support, and their poverty sank to a new low. Reymundo's wife was left without a husband, and his son without a father. Though his brother and an older cousin stepped in to help fulfill these responsibilities, there was still a grief and emotional vacuum in a close family that was difficult to overcome. Raymundo's death also left a gap in the functions of the community, particularly in village relationships and religious life.

A Worker's Compensation suit was subsequently filed by the N.C. Legal Aid program, and a fund was set up to help the family. Though the gap left by Raymundo's death is still there, the family's immediate needs were able to be met. Arrangements were made for Raymundo's son to continue his education and eventually to find a job in a city in the region. When FLOC staff and supporters went to visit the family, Raymundo's wife indicated that they wanted to bury his remains at home. FLOC learned that his remains had never been returned to the family, and made the necessary arrangements to help the family find some closure.

In the years since Raymundo's death, the extended family has made remarkable recoveries. The family's compensation fund has helped other children in the extended family go to school, and the house now has a concrete floor and shoulder-high cinder block walls with a thatch roof. A new cinder block extension has been built, and the home has running water and electricity.



A special fund for the family of Raymundo Hernández has had helped his son finish school and get a job, as well as making improvements to the family's home, such as cement floors and a new addition to the house with tin roofing and electricity, and providing an education for other children in the extended family.

The extended family and many people in the village are now FLOC members, and many go to work in North Carolina under union protections... feeling secure that their families don't have to suffer Raymundo's fate.

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Why Are Mexicans Coming to the U.S.?



Melitón Hernández, the President of a local FLOC members committee in San Luís Potosí, said he never considered migrating North to work, until his son was born with a birth defect that required an expensive operation that the family could not afford. The family has a very close relationship with each other, and he says he misses his wife and children a great deal while away... but feels he has to go to provide opportunities for his family. He reports a dramatic difference in the way he and fellow workers are treated not what they have union protections with FLOC.

Why do people leave their families and familiar way of life to go to a strange land? (See [Why Are They Here?](#)) On the recent FLOC trip to México, we talked with a number of people who have migrated or are thinking of migrating to the U.S.

Commitment to family is a major motivation in migration. Almost universally, people talked about their families, particularly being able to provide better opportunities for their children. Almost all said they preferred to stay home, but said they had to find ways to better themselves. Many said they had jobs or worked on their farm, but were not able to ensure their children could get a good education, have enough to eat, and be healthy.



Most Mexicans have a strong commitment to family and are hard workers. People who go to the U.S. almost universally say they need to support their families. For example, those from rural areas can help their families build small homes with tin roofs and running water, provide clothing, send their children to school, and otherwise ensure a better future.

Why can't many people fulfill this obligation to family in their home areas? There are not enough resources, particularly in small towns and villages, to support their families. One reason is globalization and the impact of "free trade" agreements like NAFTA (the North American Free Trade Agreement). One town official spoke of the impact of transnational corporations in his area, driving up prices. One worker said the rich people who run these corporations have no idea of the impact on local communities. He talked about how these corporations want to sell their products in the town where he lives, but give nothing back.

For example, indigenous subsistence farmers in the mountains of San Luís Potosí are being brought into cash economies as they seek to support their families with basic needs. Because U.S. farmers receive substantial subsidies, corn is now sold in México cheaper than local *campesinos* can sell their products, driving them deeper into poverty. It is estimated that for every train car of agricultural products that goes into México under NAFTA one undocumented worker comes into the U.S.

Of those who have gone North, some said they felt fearful and had doubts because they had heard stories about harsh treatment in the U.S. A few said that they had excellent bosses who welcomed them and showed respect for them, but most reported bad treatment, like verbal abuse and threats, being denied work and water breaks because the boss wanted to get richer, and poor working and living conditions. They indicated they had to put up with bad treatment in order to better their families.



A FLOC member in San Lu s Potos  who works in North Carolina discusses how conditions have improved since he has been under a union contract with the freedom to voice his concerns over problems in the fields and camps.

The FLOC members all reported significant differences now that they were working under union protections. They said that before they were afraid to speak up because they felt they would lose the ability to support their families, but now they have a voice and are not alone. One worker said that Baldemar Vel squez is dedicated to their well-being, and it is only a matter of time until all the workers will benefit from the union.

FLOC President Baldemar Vel squez says that he believes most Americans have a sense of fair play, but don't realize that immigrant workers are trying to meet their simple needs like most people. People are misled by sound bites like 'legalization rewards people who break the law'. He points out how the rich and powerful are regularly forgiven for breaking the law, including Nixon, Bush, and Haliburton. Vel squez says we need to educate Americans about the reasons for migration. These people are not trying to live off welfare or are terrorists, he says, and the U.S. is only reaping what it has sowed with "free trade" agreements designed only for corporations and the rich. This system devastates local economies, causing migration. He argues that we need trade that is fully "free", including the open flow of the labor market so people can seek opportunities to support their families wherever they exist.