

PIÑEROS Y CAMPESINOS UNIDOS DEL NOROESTE

Farmworkers' Union improves healthy food access and physical activity opportunities

Ramon Ramirez of PCUN, *Piñeros y Campesinos Unidos del Noroeste* (Northwest Treeplanters and Farmworkers United) has been organizing farmworkers in Oregon since PCUN started with less than 100 members in 1985. Now, with over 5,300 members, more than 95% of whom are Mexican and Central American, PCUN has built a movement of farmworkers empowered to influence working and housing conditions as well as the ways food is grown and distributed. Above and beyond core efforts to improve labor conditions, PCUN works to improve many aspects of farmworker health, including pesticide exposure and access to healthy food and physical activity opportunities.

“We’re seeing a lot of farmworkers getting diabetes,” says Ramirez as he enumerates half a dozen of his staff with diabetes who are also obese. “Our children are susceptible and many of the people with diabetes are indigenous people from Oaxaca and Michoa-



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QUICK FACTS

LOCATION Woodburn, OR

POLICY JURISDICTION

■ Local □ State □ Federal

POLICY ORIENTATION

■ Policy □ Poised □ Education

APPROACH

■ Environmental/Institutional □ Services/Programs

EQUITY FOCUS Strong

ISSUE AREAS . . . Nutrition and Other

POLICY DOMAINS

- Affordable Housing
- Agriculture/Sustainable Food Systems
- Economic Development
- Pollution/Toxin Reduction
- Food Safety
- Immigration Reform

WEBSITE www.pcun.org

can, so we take the responsibility to explore options for improving health of our people very seriously.” Through *Radio Movimiento: La Voz del Pueblo*, PCUN’s recently licensed FM radio station, PCUN reaches millions of people around the country touching on health issues from pesticide exposure to sustainable farming and has recently begun to cover healthy eating and diabetes prevention.

Many of PCUN’s policy successes have simultaneously addressed farmworker health and food access. PCUN has worked intensively to curb pesticide spraying, develop policies to ensure that workers know what chemicals they are using, and convince growers to go



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from conventional to organic farming when feasible and safer. PCUN has also developed a union label process which certifies corn and strawberries as union-grown products that are cultivated with little or no pesticides. Through relationships with local churches, markets, and Willamette University, farmworkers have helped distribute and market union label produce because it is grown under humane working conditions. Not only does union certification represent a seal of approval for workers rights, but it has also increased local access to fresh fruits and vegetables. Just last year, PCUN sold 6 tons of organic produce grown by small and organic farmers to mom and pop shops in Latino communities that would not otherwise have carried such produce. “It just would not have happened without PCUN’s push for these local markets to carry the union label vegetables,” according to Ramirez. Soon, PCUN’s market will expand to Lewis and Clark University.

Based in Woodburn, Oregon, a town of about 20,000 that is more than 50% Latino, PCUN has built a labor-community union which extends beyond its immigrant workforce into the lives of families. PCUN supports youth organizing for better educational opportunities, women working toward economic development, and improved housing conditions for immigrants. Through their *CAPACES* program, PCUN builds capacity among workers to hone their leadership, organizing, and political skills to help grow and sustain the movement. As part of their coordination efforts, PCUN convenes union members, youth leaders, and women organizers at monthly meetings to

discuss joint concerns. Ramirez admits that health issues like diabetes have been “front and center for the past six months.”

Even though PCUN is first and foremost a labor-union, it has never backed down from issues that negatively impact immigrants and their families. Ramirez believes that food access, physical activity, working conditions, housing, voting rights, educational opportunities, and economic independence are all interconnected. As an example, without improved housing, PCUN would have never been able to offer activity classes to local residents. Ramirez sadly recounts hosting an international fact-finding delegation. After having visited labor camps in Uganda, Namibia, and The Philippines, the delegates revealed that the Mexican farmworkers in Oregon lived in the worst housing conditions of all. This revelation was a turning point for Ramirez. He pushed for PCUN to work with partner organizations to establish a community development corporation that would build quality, affordable housing for farmworkers. New housing projects liberate farmworkers from harsh living conditions and, now, each housing development has a community center with health, education, and safety programs supported by PCUN. Residents can now participate in yoga and dance classes in their housing complexes and although the residents are having fun, Ramirez notes, “The dancing and the yoga are not just for fun, they are for health, too.”

PCUN started the farmworkers union from scratch at a time when the labor movement was in a downward spiral. Now PCUN has grown into a vibrant and vocal vehicle for Latino farmworkers and their families in the northwest. PCUN’s consciousness about the connections between food, economics, human dignity, and the environment provide a powerful example of how truly good solutions solve multiple problems. Looking forward, Ramirez sees the work of PCUN as empowering workers and their families to speak up about basic issues such as access to fresh water and restrooms in the field, to continuing on the path of putting issues like how food is grown, where it comes from, and who has access to healthy options on the public agenda.