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UFW signs pact with Mexican state for guest workers on U.S. farms

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The United Farm Workers union has signed an agreement with a Mexican state to help recruit guest workers to labor on U.S. farms legally – and under union contract.

"If this is something that's going to be utilized more in the future, then we've got to get in on it," UFW President Arturo Rodriguez said of the H-2A guest worker program. "We're looking for enlightened employers who are willing to sit down and do this with us."

The agreement was signed in early April in the western state of Michoacan, which has a long history of migration to California and is governed by the leftist Party of the Democratic Revolution.

The agreement is a significant example of the UFW's acceptance that foreign laborers are an inevitable part of U.S. agriculture. The union was founded in the 1960s as an ardent foe of the old bracero farm guest worker program with Mexico.

In 1986, however, the UFW helped farmworkers obtain legal status during an amnesty. Over the last decade, the UFW has also joined farm groups to lobby Congress to pass a bill allowing farm laborers to receive conditional legal status and then green cards if they continue to work in agriculture for three to five more years.

Even if they achieve passage of that proposal, the UFW and growers say, legal workers would eventually move out of the fields, and others would be needed.

Growers also say they're worried that federal agents will crack down on illegal immigrants in the near future and leave them without workers.

The federal H-2A program allows growers to sponsor workers for short periods and requires them to provide housing. It is rarely used in California – the nation's biggest food producer – because undocumented workers are so plentiful. Employers complain the program doesn't admit workers fast enough to meet harvest needs.

The union's goal, Rodriguez said, would be to get involved in the H-2A program to stop abuses that riddle recruitment in Mexico and after workers arrive in the United States.

Rodriguez said the union plans to seek out employers, especially in California, willing to sign transnational contracts that guarantee rights in Mexico during the recruitment process and in the fields here.

The government of Michoacan would help find interested workers, and the UFW would match companies with workers with skills that are needed.

Jack King, government affairs director for the California Farm Bureau, said farmers "face a different world in contracting labor in the future."

"I expect there will be a lot of groups forming to bring workers into the United States," King said. "I guess we would welcome the UFW as well."

Growers in the Southeast and Midwest are the chief employers of H-2A workers now. A labor union

that operates in those regions, the Farm Labor Organizing Committee – or FLOC – already represents H-2A workers on both sides of the border. In 2004, it signed transnational contracts with growers associations in North Carolina and other states representing 7,000 Mexican H-2A tobacco and produce workers.

FLOC leader Baldemar Velasquez – who has talked with the UFW about transnational contracts – said, "The key is whether workers are empowered to defend themselves during all parts of the process," from recruitment to work. "That's what makes this agreement the cleanest operation for any of these guest worker programs in the United States."

FLOC's work helping Mexicans become U.S. guest workers has proven dangerous. FLOC's Monterrey, Mexico, office received threats from people they suspect viewed them as competition. A year ago, their Monterrey-based organizer was murdered in the union office, Velasquez said. Mexican police arrested a suspect with a history of human and drug smuggling.

Manuel Cunha, president of the Nisei Farmers League in Fresno, predicted that most farmers won't be interested in working with the UFW to bring in workers under union contact. However, he said, as times change, "like any of us, I think it's smart of the UFW to communicate with those countries" that farmworkers are likely to come from.

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