BELLINGHAM, WA August 2, 2019 – This Sunday, hundreds of people will march 14 miles through rural roads of Whatcom County for the annual Farmworker March for Dignity, organized by Community to Community Development (C2C) and Familias Unidas por la Justicia. The march kicks off at dawn, the average time a Farmworker begins working in the field. Leaders from C2C, Familias Unidas por la Justicia (FUJ), and Cooperativa Tierra y Libertad will start the march at a Customs and Border Patrol station, the site of border militarization, detention and deportation impacting Farmworkers families in the region.

In Whatcom and Skagit Counties local farmers traditionally have not used the H2A labor program, instead providing jobs to local skilled workers and relying on migrant harvesters from Oregon and California that migrate to Washington State during peak harvest. These farmworker families have been living and working in local fields since the early 1950’s and they have become increasingly concerned about H2A workers in rural areas. They have witnessed the exploitation and at times have had to feed hungry guestworkers almost as soon as the first group was shipped in at Sarbanand Farms in the tiny border town of Sumas, WA. in 2015. The death of Sarbanand worker Honesto Silva Ibarra in August of 2017 caused the community to take action and they protested and organized to protect H2A workers. “It’s a shame that we farmworkers living in Sumas had to sneak in food to the labor camp to feed our hungry paisanos, we never thought we would ever see something like this” said Lucia Juarez, a local farmworker.

The only farm currently using the H2A guestworker program in Whatcom County is Crystal View Raspberry Farm. The march route was changed to specifically stop at Crystal View and bring attention to those H2A workers’ struggle. In 2018, 60 H2A Farmworkers at Crystal View went on strike to demand pay for wages they were owed and to protest excessive production quotas and unclean water in their living quarters at the labor camp. The Farmworkers resumed work after they called the farmworker union Familias Unidas por la Justicia and management agreed to pay back wages and rehire the seven workers they had suspended for not meeting the quotas. Despite meeting these minimal demands, workers have continued to face unhealthy working and living conditions “We know that retaliation always happens after workers complain. The owner of this farm is harsh and has a close business relationship to the worst farm labor contracting firm in the State, WAFLA. We want the 80 H2A workers to know we are here if conditions get critical, we do not want any more deaths in the fields,” said Ramon Torres, President of Familias Unidas por la Justicia.

Just last week, the US Department of Labor proposed revisions to the H2A agricultural guestworker program that would further entrench the exploitation carried out by corporate farms and lack of protections for guestworkers dependent on their employers to live and work in the US. These federally contracted farmworkers are denied workplace protections, economic bargaining power and the right to complain without retaliation. The advocacy organization Farmworker Justice has called the H2A program 21st century slavery. The DOL’s proposal would make it easier for corporate farms to hire hundreds of thousands of guestworkers, significantly change the wage rates and make it difficult to ensure a prevailing wage, weaken recruitment protections, and shift many of the costs onto the backs of contracted H2A workers.

The DOL’s proposal is another facet of the Trump Administration’s racist, anti-immigrant policies and demonization of hard-working immigrants. As the Administration accelerates deportations, undocumented
farmworkers, their families and rural communities are directly impacted. “Trump’s policies are hurting and separating families in our communities, creating an unhealthy environment of fear” said Ruby Castaneda, founder of Raid Relief to Reunite Families.

This year, the March follows two important legislative victories for Farmworkers and immigrant rights organizations. SB 5438, "Concerning the H-2A Temporary Agricultural Program" funds an oversight office and advisory committee to monitor labor, housing, and health and safety requirements for farms using the H2A program, as well as prioritizing outreach to domestic workers. Representatives from C2C and FUJ along with representatives from corporate agriculture will be on the committee. SB 5497, “Keep Washington Working Act” requires local law enforcement to strengthen protections for undocumented community members and limits local law enforcement's cooperation with ICE.

“We march with our friends and allies in the NW Sector of Homeland Security to highlight our presence as farmworkers and protest President Trump’s bigotry that seeks to create a revolving door for his racist policies of forced removal of immigrant families and a contracted legal slave labor force for agriculture and other industries. We want Crystal View Berry Farms to know that our community will not tolerate this type of exploitation in our back yard and that there are plenty of local workers who know their rights that can pick their berries,” said Rosalinda Guillen, from Community to Community.

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