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We invite rural low-wage workers to join a vibrant bilingual organization and to become protagonists in a new story for timber country. A story where everyone can live in healthy, affordable housing, where health care and childcare are available to all, where family-wage jobs are abundant, and where the land and water thrive for generations to come.

ABOUT FIRELANDS

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A note...

This report was created by Firelands Workers Action/Acción de Trabajadores to speak to both our work and the work of our sister organization, Firelands Workers United /Trabajadores Unidos. Firelands houses two non-profit corporations through our fiscal sponsors.

Firelands Workers Action /Acción de Trabajadores is fiscally sponsored by 501(c)(4) social welfare organization Rural Peoples Voice and is home to policy advocacy and lobbying. This entity is responsible for and pays for all political and lobbying work mentioned in this report.

Firelands Workers United /Trabajadores Unidos is fiscally sponsored by 501(c)(3) charitable organization Latino Community Fund and is home to base-building, leadership development, narrative, education, and research work. These areas of work mentioned in this report were carried out by and paid for by Firelands Workers United /Trabajadores Unidos.
On a 75 degree day on October 15th, amidst heavy wildfire smoke, 250 of us — working class immigrants from Mexico and Guatemala, working class members of the Chinook Indian Nation, and working class white millworkers — brought our families to a Firelands Block Party in South Bend, WA to enjoy home-cooked birria, jump ourselves silly in a bouncy castle, play beautiful homemade carnival games to learn about wealth inequality, and celebrate striking millworkers with Firelands’ first-ever Working Class Hero Award. This was the joyful manifestation of years of hard work, diligent organizing, and passion that Firelands staff and leaders have poured into our community and the organization, as well as collaboration with other critical community organizations such as Pacific County Voices Uniting.

We have made huge advances in our work at Firelands this year. We won concrete policy changes for working people, invested deeply in emerging leaders and organizers, built our multiracial, multilingual base of workers in rural WA, formed a stronger network of organizations, and positioned Firelands to make statewide impact to expand life-changing programs for healthy homes and weatherization across WA.
Together, we crafted our legislative agenda

In fall 2021, Firelands volunteer members carried out nearly 500 deep listening conversations with our Rebuild Timber Country survey. We talked with low wage workers, tenants, and mobile homeowners in our communities about their daily struggles and needs.

Workers and retired seniors spoke about the fear of losing their homes due to dramatically rising rents and housing costs. Parents told stories of sleepless nights fearing a ceiling would cave in due to a roof leak, or that their kids might not continue to breathe throughout the night due to toxic mold. People spoke of the pain of being denied health insurance, electing not to call the ambulance during an emergency due to medical debt, or the indignity of being denied unemployment benefits during the pandemic and struggling to this day to make up for lost wages and savings. Across race, workers are angered that in a state with so many extraordinarily wealthy people—people who pay a far lower tax rate than poor and working people—so many vital public programs go underfunded and starved.

We defended our wins

We have continued to defend our wins and advance these campaigns throughout the year. For instance, we joined successful advocacy to ask federal agencies to allow WA State to extend health insurance to immigrants who are currently denied the right to buy health insurance through the Affordable Care Act. We worked with Congressmember Kilmer’s office to advocate for a federal dollars to help prevent federal loans from supporting predatory developers from purchasing mobile home parks and raising lot rents (as high as $350/month to $1000/month for Spanish-speaking working families and elders on disability income in Forks, WA). We are defending the capital gains tax in the courts—Firelands is part of a group Amicus Brief defending the capital gains tax before the WA State Supreme Court. We invited a journalist to tour our communities for investigative reporting on tax injustice, and contributed to a statewide report on community-defined decarbonization for rural communities and Native Nations.

Our victories!

Throughout the WA legislative session in 2022, 60 Firelands members testified and told our stories to lawmakers in 20 meetings.

And we achieved concrete victories including:

- **A $65 million investment in the 2022 state budget to expand housing health and weatherization programs statewide, including $10 million in state funds to create more good jobs and train more workers, provide healthy home repairs such as roof repairs and mold remediation, and include more people in weatherization programs.**

- **An urgently-needed pathway to health insurance to cover more working families, regardless of immigration status**

- **A plan to create more good jobs in rural WA restoring critical habitat for fisheries.**

These stories led into the policy priorities that became Firelands Workers Action/Acción de Trabajadores’ 2022 legislative agenda.
WE DEVELOPED STRONG RURAL ORGANIZERS

Each year, Firelands invites members to apply to join a leadership cohort to develop their skills as organizers. We anticipated 15-20 leaders would join in 2022, but the hunger for training and popular political education was greater than we expected—

30 leaders joined the program!

From July to November, this multiracial cohort of workers, tenants, and working-class homeowners speaking 5 different languages came together to learn about the systems that keep us struggling to get by and to develop their skills to organize for change.

**We put our skills and training into practice**

Participants attended 6+ political education trainings and 20+ hours of training, and then got to work putting their skills into practice. Leaders worked together to:

- Organize two block parties: one in a mobile park in Elma (Grays Harbor County), and another at a public park in South Bend (Pacific County)
- Hold an hour-long meeting with Congressman Kilmer in the backyard of a members' home in Aberdeen, WA to discuss solutions to the housing crisis and immigrant detention
- Practice one on one organizing and recruitment to build the base
- Attend 3+ political education trainings on our political economy and strategy
- Train on power mapping and campaign strategy with visiting trainers from Peoples Action
- Host Know Your Rights workshops on tenants rights and immigrant rights
- Speak local radio about the housing crisis
- Speak out in the media about WA state's unfair tax system
- Determine and launch Firelands’ first campaign for health homes, Rebuild Timber Country!
- Design and create inspiring art and fun educational games over the course of a whole week with visiting trainers from Look Loud, including t-shirts, yardsigns and bumper stickers for our Rebuild Timber Country campaign!
- Conduct deep listening surveys on healthy homes and weatherization in order to build our base and gather data for a needs assessment on healthy homes and weatherization
- Learned how to steward trauma — both primary and secondary — and cultivate mental health while doing this hard work in sessions with a professional bilingual counselor and trainer
- Went on the road to offer deep listening and narrative trainings for our sister organizations in Raymond, Wenatchee, and Omak
Some leaders showed up to trainings after 12 hour shifts at the cannery, others in the midst of family crisis. Leaders arranged carpools for each other when cars broke down, called each other to check in after a hospital visit, often reaching out in their second language. They cooked for each other, cared for each others’ kids, and supported each other to learn and participate. Firelands leaders shared hard and powerful life experiences across racial and language lines, made connections to the root causes of our suffering, debated strategic questions, and showed up again and again with love and commitment to each other.

At the end of the program, leaders evaluated their experience, and we heard overwhelmingly that participating with Firelands is the first time most of our leaders have felt belonging and hope that things could be different. Notably, we heard that our leaders love to learn and study and are serious about making change. Working class people are often told we are not smart enough to understand the systems that keep us struggling – that we don’t have enough advanced degrees to understand – let alone to create strategy to change those systems. The majority of Firelands leaders noted their favorite parts of the program were the political education and strategy trainings. Whether a leader has had the chance to attend school or not, whether she’s had the opportunity to learn to read and write or not, whether a speaker of English, Spanish or an Indigenous language, Firelands members are serious thinkers sharpening their analysis and bringing their intelligence to advancing our movement.

"I am a much more confident woman now, I feel empowered. Thanks to Firelands, I have overcome a lot of fear, I feel free like a bird, and I am fighting to make things better, not just for me, but for others. I am now a woman who is a fighter."

- Guadalupe Contreras, cannery worker, single mom, and Firelands Leader

"I've spent my whole life around men, in places run by men, and boy it’s different being in an organization run by women. We can really support each other and talk honestly."

- David Henson, retired veteran, former logger, and Firelands Leader
We built a more joyful, powerful base

After years of struggling through pandemic-organizing with masks, online and socially distanced, this year members came together in person to celebrate, play, learn and build an irresistible cultural center of gravity in Grays Harbor and Pacific counties.

From our biggest-ever event—our May Day celebration in Aberdeen that turned out nearly 500 people—to a community carnival in Hoquiam, and block parties in Elma and South Bend, more than 1,000 base members came out in person to Firelands public events this year.

With educational games on wealth inequality, beautiful hand made artwork, raucous games of musical chairs, bouncy castles, ice cream trucks and delicious home-cooked tacos and tamales, and music, we’re making Firelands an irresistible center of gravity where people come for training, resources, and building joyful community.

We sowed solidarity & unity with unions and residents of mobile home parks

In September, Weyerhaeuser millworkers, truckers, and loggers went on strike for the first time in 36 years. Firelands leaders voted to support the strike. We joined the picket line, brought food to striking families, supported the union with media and communications, and built trust and connections with union workers in our community.

Meanwhile, with our state’s booming real estate market, for-profit corporations, wealthy landlords and investment companies have bought up mobile home parks across the US. These companies have raised lot rents for families and seniors who have no way to move their homes out of increasingly expensive parks. In 2022, Firelands was invited to support four different mobile home parks across three counties to help address the crisis through organizing. In two parks, we are working closely with residents to organize with their neighbors and identify pathways for homeowners to stay in their homes.

This is how transformation and multiracial working class solidarity happens—by showing up for each other, sharing our stories and life experience, offering time, food, and a spirit of kinship to one another, and deliberately building trust through organizing. For the first time in decades, working class people in our region—across race and language—are standing shoulder to shoulder against the greed of big timber executives and corporate landlords.

“I stood with striking millworkers on the picket line so they’d know they’re not alone—that we’re there together to fight for our rights. Giant companies want to get even richer off our labor without respecting our rights as human beings and people with hearts. But we know that if we’re united, one day, we can win a more dignified life! ”

— Guadalupe Paredes, childcare worker, mother, & Firelands Leader
Working people are leading solutions to the housing & climate crisis, together

The crisis of affordable housing derives not only from a flood of predatory rent increases and the corporate buy-up of mobile home parks, but the gradual loss of affordable housing stock from home deterioration. In one of the rainiest and wettest parts of the country, Firelands members battle against leaking roofs, indoor mold and chronic illness. With low wages and a lack of negotiating power with landlords, many homes go decades without necessary repairs. We are losing existing affordable housing due to a lack of investment in maintaining current housing. Additionally, if we are to meet our state’s energy strategy targets to reduce energy use across WA state—a key strategy to fighting climate change and adapting to a climate changed future—we need to address energy consumption in housing.

Today, WA state’s Weatherization Plus Health program—a set of programs that combine federal funds for weatherization and energy efficiency services to reduce energy use and bill with state funding to repair homes and mitigate indoor health hazards such as mold and collapsing roofs—serves less than 0.03% per year of the approximately 700,000 income-eligible households across the state. Listening deeply through canvassing and community events over the past several years, we realized the problem was much more complex than simply expanding outreach to make sure 100% of eligible families find out about these services. And though we are organizing to expand funding to the program, the problem is beyond funding alone.

By looking at this program deeply from the perspective of people who desperately need healthy homes repairs—our members who are tenants living in molding apartments, mobile homeowners paying $600 a month to heat a tiny single-wide trailer, salal-pickers whose wages don’t cover basic repairs, immigrants who are excluded from eligibility despite paying taxes towards the program, seniors who cannot find a contractor to install a heating system—we realized that the solutions we need to scale up this program hinges on solving for the enormous gap in workers trained to repair and weatherize homes.

This challenge comes with an exciting opportunity that is core to Firelands’ mission: if we are to scale up healthy homes for all, it will require generating many new living-wage green jobs across the state.

In summer 2022, Firelands teamed up with HR&A Advisors, a nationally-renowned research firm, to win a contract with the Washington State Department of Commerce to conduct the statewide Needs Assessment for Energy Efficiency Services for Low-Income and Hard-to-Reach Communities.

This fall, Firelands members and our partner Pacific County Voices Uniting carried out 60 home visits (over approx. 120 hours) with a deep survey on the housing and weatherization needs of families and prospective weatherization workers. We will continue our research in 2023, collaborating with organizations across WA state. Our findings will inform recommendations to scale up programs to improve indoor air quality and human health, maintain affordable housing, reduce housing cost burden, energy cost, and greenhouse gas emissions—and put hundreds of people to work with meaningful jobs caring for our communities through home repairs and weatherization.
We are proud to be building a lasting regional institution to organize with rural working people across race and language. Firelands is strong and healthy culturally, structurally and financially. This year, new donors and foundations joined us in funding our work. Firelands officially affiliated with Peoples Action and worked with numerous partners, including the Organizing Center and Hester Street to develop our systems and strategy. Having begun in 2019 as fiscally sponsored projects of Washington Community Action Network, we transitioned to fiscal sponsorship at Latino Community Fund, a 501c3, (Firelands Workers United) and Rural Peoples Voice, a 501c4, (Firelands Workers Action). In 2023, we will be filing for status to become our own independent 501c3 and 501c4.

In 2022, our Steering Committee – Guadalupe Paredes, Noemi Lopez, David Henson, Rosa Rodriguez and Patricia Figueroa – remained strong and committed. We developed member committees to design programs and strategy. We maintained our current staff: Patty Flores (senior bilingual organizer), Hannah Jones (trainings manager and organizer), Laura Baltazar (bilingual organizer), Lindsey Schromen-Wawrin (policy and partnerships manager), Edith Baltazar (bilingual organizer) and Stina Janssen (executive director). Becca Meredith transitioned from development consultant to part-time operations and finance manager. We hired Jeffrey Gustaveson as our Narrative & Media Strategist in December 2022, growing our staff to a team of eight people.

As Firelands grows, the fire in our bellies to win transformational change burns hotter each year. We can’t wait to build with you in 2023! Thank you to all the members, leaders, donors, partners, and funders who grew Firelands with your time, talents, and funds this year! Together, we are building healthy, resilient and vibrant organizations to carry out our purpose.

Thank you!
Join us!

Make a tax-deductable donation to Firelands Workers United/Trabajadores Unidos, or a gift to build political power to Firelands Workers Action/Acción de Trabajadores at www.firelandswa.org or via check (instructions on website).

Our work grows because we organize. Can you join us and organize one or more friends to give to Firelands?

FIRELANDS

Workers United/Trabajadores Unidos  
fiscally sponsored by Latino Community Fund of WA, a 501c3 public charity

Workers Action/Acción de Trabajadores  
fiscally sponsored by Rural Peoples Voice, a 501c4 social welfare organization

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