My name is Ramon Torres. I am the President of Familias Unidas por la Justicia, the first independent farm worker Union made of indigenous people in the state of Washington with a membership of 789. For many years we as farm workers have been ignored in the law. Be we proven that we will no longer let this continue.

We are the ones who produce the food you eat. We are the skilled workers who ensure that the agricultural economy in our state continues to grow. We as the farm workers members of Familias Unidas por la Justicia were told by many that farm workers could not start or much less sustain a union in this state that does not have an Agricultural Labor Relations Act to protect us. But we decided that we would form a union so that farm workers could work with a Union Contract with dignity and we accomplished that.

I am here after a summer of good and bad. This summer, members of FUJ were able to work under their first union contract at Sakuma Brothers Farms in Burlington. We are proud that we were able to do this but it is only the beginning.

This year in Sumas Washington, a farm worker died, Honesto Silva Ibarra. He was 28 years old and the father of two children. His death would have been ignored but for the courage of his co-workers who walked off the farm and called us, the Union and had the courage to tell their stories of inadequate water, of substandard food, of the farm supervisors ignoring health and injury concerns and lack of adequate or timely wages. Honesto was a seasonal worker, brought here from Mexico on a H2-A visa to work in the blueberries. His sickness without the needed medical care and exploitive working conditions plus the abuse from his supervisors led to his death.

There is and always has been systemic problems with many farms that produce apples and berries in the state of Washington but especially in farms that import seasonal temporary workers. The workers are immediately put in a subordinate position and in all honesty slavery. They have no transportation for themselves, they cannot leave the labor camp without the permission of the supervisors or owners. If they complain, it is either ignored or they are threatened that they will be fired and that immigration will be called so they can be placed in deportation proceedings. In discussions with state agencies that try to protect the rights and safety of workers, they told us that they are sometimes denied permission to enter the labor camp for routine inspections.

In the case of the Sumas workers, basic necessities were denied and those workers had the courage to walk off the farm and strike. Before they left the labor camp, they toiled in the high temperatures and difficult conditions, and making it worse was the smoky conditions from the fires in Canada with inadequate access to water, inadequate food, lack of consideration about workplace injuries and their complaints were ignored. Until forcing the employer into a corner with the support of the Union and others, they finally received pay that they deserved. This was not an isolated incident of H-2A guest workers experiencing substandard conditions, wage theft and exposure to unsafe and unhealthy conditions. Our union is receiving calls from all over the state from Kennewick to Quincy to Royal City and in our own little area of Whatcom and Skagit. Many of these workers have left the labor camps and fields, with the threats of deportation and blacklisting from ever being able to work anywhere in Washington again. So we know the conditions have to be bad in order for them to walk out. There are those that promote the H-2A guest worker program like Dan Fazio and WAFLA that there is a shortage of agricultural labor in our state. LIES! There is not such a worker shortage that would require such a substantial need in seasonal workers. We believe that the requests for guest workers is based upon a false
narrative, one that is attempting to defeat the farm worker movement toward organizing and sustain the control of a few growers and corporations over the farm workers.

The guest worker program is a disgrace and something our state needs to work really hard to find a way to eliminate or at minimum slow until such time as the state can guarantee that the abuse of those workers stops and that there is a true system in place that seeks domestic labor. The growth of the guest worker program has far exceeded the capacity of the state agencies to ensure the safety of the workers brought in. The growth of this federal program has taken work and stolen wages from thousands of farm worker families in the State of Washington. The poverty of the families of domestic farm workers that have helped to grow the Agriculture Industry in this State is growing.

The guest worker program has two very main problems. Number One: The process for notifying domestic farm workers of local jobs before guest workers are brought in is inadequate and less than fully transparent. The employer is supposed to seek domestic workers as part of their being allowed to even gain guest workers. This process fails to adequately notify workers of possible jobs. It appears to be a rubber-stamped process where minimum employment advertising for the work is done and then the guest worker visas are approved. The ads are not reaching the domestic workers that could fill those spots.

Second, many of the workers that do come here are mistreated. Sumas was not isolated and the problems will continue next season if there are not major changes. We need more investigators dedicated to the H-2A farms, that the law allows those investigators to go onto the farm with or without complaints. We need more people that can be checking and are allowed to check those farms for adequate water for the workers, for adequate food and nutrition, that their health and safety is being protected as well as ensuring the fact that they are being paid what they are supposed to be paid. With the growth of the program, today, our state agencies are simply not adequately equipped to deal with the problems at these farms and the bad actors count on that.

There will be resistance to any positive change to the guest worker program. I have heard that this is a federal law, that we cannot change federal law, and many times also that this we are not the ones that manage this program and that the state agencies are doing all that they can. This is not be the response. Our demand is that every person that is brought here to work is protected or do not bring them. Everything necessary should be done to protect the workers and if this is not done there will be more deaths and more injustices.

I come today with one demand. I am being sent by many farm workers and all the members of Familias Unidas por la Justicia who know what it is like to work with dignity and justice and the demand is that you take thoughtful and sustainable action over farm labor contractors like Dan Fazio and WAFLA that recruit agricultural labor including H-2A and to address every possible action taken that affects farm workers. Rest assured we will continue to remind you of this over the next legislative session. We have a lot of work to do and today I invite you to join our cause to create a real change to benefit farm workers and small family farmers in the state of Washington.

Thank You