



Title: The Story of Natalia Bautista

Author: David Bacon

Source: Journal of Transborder Studies - Research and Practice Summer 2014

The Story of Natalia Bautista
Santa Maria, CA, 7/22/12

Natalia Bautista was born in a Mixteco family that had migrated to north Mexico to work as far laborers. She became involved in the strikes that changed the conditions for workers in Baja California in the 1980s, and today lives in Santa Maria, where she is a community organizer. She told the story of those strikes to David Bacon.

Well I am from Oaxaca. I have always stated that because my mother is from Santiago Tiña and my father is from Rancho Diego Mixtepec. But my parents left Oaxaca in the 70's. They moved to Veracruz to work in the sugar cane fields and that is where I was born.

My parents are farm workers. They left their hometown due to economic problems, just like everyone else. They first moved to Veracruz, and from there they moved to Sinaloa and stayed there for a while. They then left to Sonora and eventually came to Baja California Norte. When we arrived I was already six years old. That is where I have my first memories of growing up and seeing my parents work. I remember my father working at a ranch by the name of Rancho Caña. That is where we grew up.

We first arrived in a little town named Vicente Guerrero. My father rented a small house from a family from Jalisco. He worked in the fields just outside the neighborhood. My father then met the owner of the ranch and asked if we could live there. I don't know the details, but that's where we ended up. My father built a small house out of cardboard and covered it with plastic.

We stayed in that house for four years, as long as my father worked on that ranch. We wouldn't have left if my father hadn't been fired. I remember him coming home telling us we had to leave. My father, my brother and other workers then refused to get out until they were compensated. That is the first time I remember hearing that workers had rights and could organize.

Those topics weren't covered in school. In fact, I didn't attend school very much. I only went up to third grade. I remember not passing first grade on two occasions because I didn't speak Spanish. Learning the alphabet was difficult for me. It was something completely foreign from what we spoke at home. My parents were Mixteco, so we only spoke our language. I began working when I was eight, picking brussels sprouts with my aunt and mother.

My father was fired after having organized the other workers. I don't recall if it was my father or brother who first realized they had to organize. I remember them traveling to Ensenada to seek support. I would listen to them talk and I remember they said they'd met with a woman named Norma, from an organization that would support their efforts. They held their meetings and completed the paperwork to ask for compensation. The company finally paid them and my father and brother pooled their money to purchase a

small plot of land. That is where we grew up, in the Benito Juarez neighborhood. The majority of those receiving compensation moved there. My brother still lives there.

As a kid, you just like being in the mix when adults are talking. When you're young, you try to become involved in adult conversations, and it was interesting to me. I remember my father and brother organizing. That's when I learned that workers had rights, and you couldn't simply let them go and treat them like animals. When my father told us that he had been compensated and we were moving, I remember thinking, "Wow, this works and it's a right." I walked away thinking that we were humans. The people who moved with us were like-minded folks, with similar ideas and goals.

Later they all came together to fight for electricity and running water. I learned you had to keep fighting and organizing in order to improve your living conditions. When we first moved, we had to walk long distance for clean water. We would carry our clothing to wash it at the water source. Everyone began to talk about the need for electricity and water. Soon after, folks from Sinaloa who were familiar with organizing came to help. They encouraged us to also think about our rights as farm workers.

The organizers who came were from CIOAC [the Confederacion Independente de Obreros Agricolas y Campesinos – the Independent Confederation of Farm Workers and Farmers] -- the Garcia brothers, Benito and Fernando. My father knew them because their parents were also from San Juan Mixtepec. My father offered our house as a place to meet. By then, they had already organized workers in various camps. It seemed to happen so fast -- by the time I realized it, they were already painting signs, making banners and talking about a grand march. It was very exciting.

This happened around 1985. I was young, probably 13 or 14 years old. I really don't know how to explain it, but the next thing I knew there were lots of people from Ensenada and Tijuana coming over to the house. Now that I analyze it as an adult, I realize the majority were from the Mexican Socialist Party. I met a lot of them. They came to offer support and help in any way they could. They supported the workers in various ways, but it was basically a conversation of ideas. I contributed by serving food and coffee.

Finally the day of the march arrived. We all participated and nobody worked. The strike was very impressive. It was huge and spread through the entire Vicente Guerrero neighborhood. There were different labor camps involved. It began with the workers from Rancho del Mar and then a neighboring ranch. They agreed that nobody would show up for work, and if someone did, they would throw tomatoes at them until they stopped working. Most elected to participate in the march, so I didn't see anyone pelted with tomatoes with my own eyes. You had to participate because it was for your rights. All the workers from the different companies met in the middle to form a large group.

In those times, they were asking for a salary increase and better working conditions. They also asked for better treatment from the foremen, a set lunch period and for buckets that weren't so heavy. The most important request was for a salary increase. Back then

they were asking for 1,500 pesos. That was before the devaluation of the peso. The strike won higher wages and transportation for the workers. They were first transported in the large tomato containers, but after the strike they were transported in buses.

The CIOAC organization set up shop there permanently as a labor union. They fought for labor rights of farm workers. And the union received support from the political party leaders. The political party established itself with the workers after the strike. It became a partnership, where workers felt they could be part of the union that helped protect their rights, and also affiliate themselves with the party.

In those days, I think both the union and political party were fundamental. The party wasn't there solely for your vote. It was a party that worked in support of the workers and the union. If there was a work stoppage having to do with labor, the party was there to help. Party leaders were intimately involved. You have a right to organize, but you need a labor group to back up your ideas.

When they met with large groups of workers, they spoke more about labor rights. At the organization level, then they talked more about ideas. Party leaders would speak to the workers about the government system and talked about struggles around the world, like the labor struggles in Russia and Nicaragua. I remember being in awe after hearing them speak. I felt that they understood what was happening in the world, and that my ideas were important. I was very impressed. Party leaders spoke of changing the system and establishing a new and different government. I imagined a marvelous place, but we're still waiting for that.

The CIOAC activists that helped organize came up from Sinaloa, Sonora and San Quentin. But they were originally from Mixtepec in Oaxaca. In Oaxaca people have had their own struggles. Two years ago I accompanied my father to Oaxaca and asked him how the town's school was built. He said it was a community struggle. After so many people started migrating, they encountered a different world with different rules and structure. I think that is where the idea of change came about. Benito and Fernando say that idea began in Sinaloa. They worked in the fields and experienced what all workers faced. They met people involved in the party with the same ideas, who were already trying to mobilize workers. That is how they became involved in the movement in Sinaloa, and eventually in Baja California.

After the strike I got married. I fell in love with the movement, the ideology and everything else. Two years after meeting him, I married Benito. He continued his participation in the party. I still held on to the dream of a large labor union that was able to improve the lives and working conditions of workers. Fernando and I still have that dream, but he did the hard work. He was one of the most influential people of that time and movement. He gets little recognition, but he did all the work. He would give his life for the movement, and is the one who wouldn't sleep so that he could reach the most isolated camps. He kept the idea of organizing the workers alive and would constantly remind them that they had rights. The brothers split up after a few years because Fernando returned to Sinaloa and Benito stayed in Baja.

I supported my partner, whether it was a march, meeting, campaign or the presidential campaign of Cuauhtémoc Cardenas. That was the first time we thought we were going to have real change in this country. It wasn't going to be total change, but a real movement forward. He was our hope, because all of the groups aligned with him. We really thought we were going to do it. My children and I helped spread his message. We tried. We won. We actually won. But those in power didn't permit the change. The people still resist and want a different government.

Award-winning photojournalist and author, David Bacon has spent twenty years as a labor organizer and immigrant rights activist. He has been a reporter and documentary photographer for eighteen years, shooting for many national publications, and has exhibited his work internationally. He is the author of "The Right to Stay Home: How US Policy Drives Mexican Migration" (Beacon Press, Sept. 2013). He works as an associate editor at Pacific News Service and hosts a weekly radio show on labor, immigration, and the global economy on KPFA-FM.