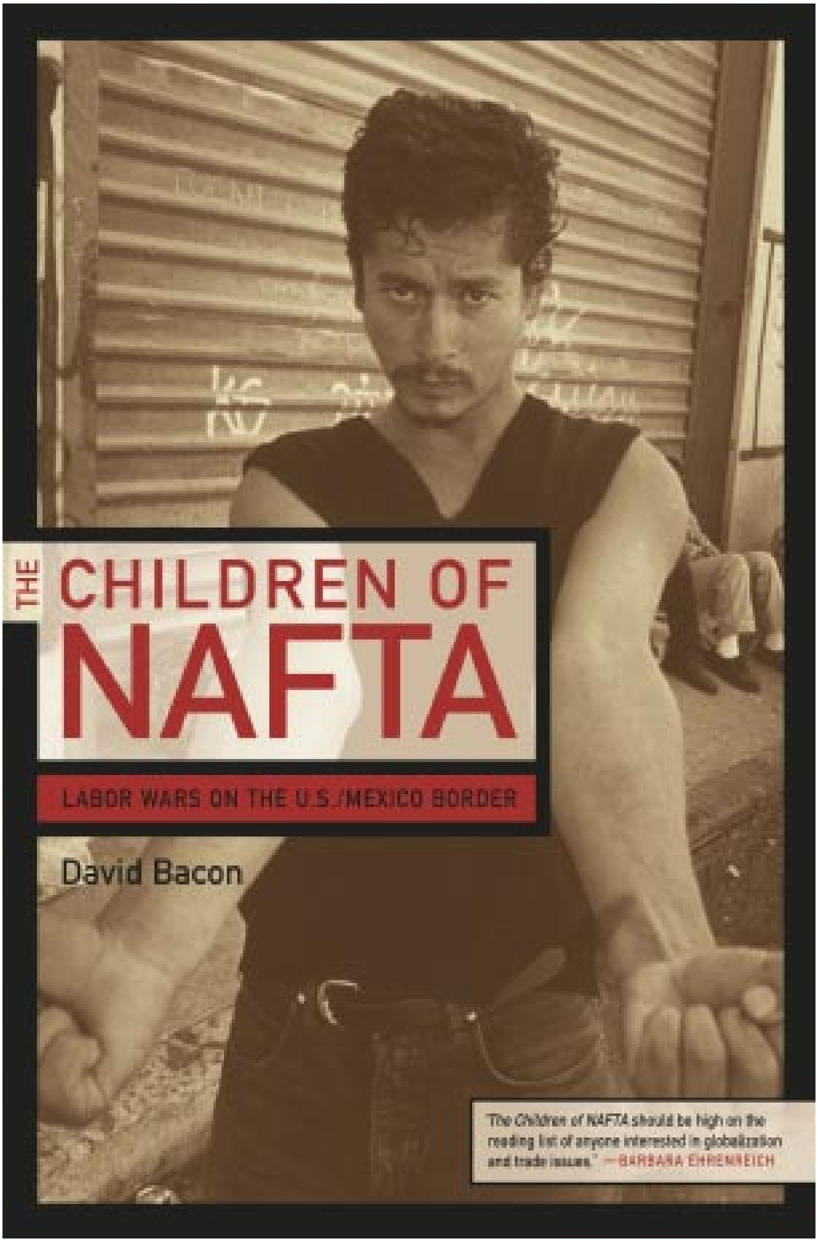
Excerpted from



1

GRAPES AND GREEN ONIONS

THE CASTILLOS LOSE THEIR UNION

NAFTA repeatedly plunged a knife into José Castillo's heart.

He felt its first thrust on almost the same day the treaty took effect. He lost his job.

That New Year's Day, in 1994, the Zapatistas took up arms in southern Mexico, denouncing NAFTA's marginalization of poor Mayan farmers in the Lacandon jungle. Video cameras closed in on their ski masks and ancient rifles, uplinking to satellites a new iconography of the underside of the global economy. Three thousand miles north, on the desert fringe of southern California, Castillo and a thousand other Mexican farmworkers were also being pushed to the social margins. They offered an equally haunting icon of the impact of free trade, but unemployed Mexicans in California have less media appeal. No one from the *Times* or CNN noticed.

NAFTA then inflicted a second wound: its promised benefits failed to materialize. According to U.S. president Bill Clinton and labor secretary Robert Reich, a safety net—including retraining and extended unemployment benefits—was ready to catch the unfortunate few whose out-of-date skills made their jobs expendable. José Castillo and his wife, Ingracia, found this promise to be like the hot wind that blows around their home in the Coachella Valley—elusive, empty, and incapable of sustaining life.

But the third thrust was the cruelest. To understand this, you must know that José and Ingracia are veterans of the union wars that swept the California fields for three decades. They are the ones called *de hueso colorado*—all the way "to the marrow of their bones"— they are Chavistas, followers of César Chávez.

They lost their union.

"I felt like I lost my child." Ingracia's voice aches at the memory of the change that turned their world inside out and threatened the meaning that their struggle for dignity had given to their lives. Their story is part of the real history of NAFTA, about its consequences for working people on both sides of the border.

Because the Coachella Valley is so far south, only a couple of hours north of Mexico, its grape harvest comes in at the beginning of the season, in late May. By bringing their grapes into supermarkets before anyone else, valley growers always commanded premium prices; during the early 1990s, they were accustomed to receiving twenty dollars or more for a twenty-two-pound box in May. By July, when the harvest moved north to the San Joaquin Valley, the price usually dropped by half.

General Augusto Pinochet was the first to threaten that privileged position. Looking for exports to revive Chile's economy after the 1973 fascist coup, he discovered a winter market in his patron country. Even today, supermarket shelves in the United States are filled with Chilean grapes when the Coachella harvest starts.

But the real blow to the Coachella growers came from Mexico. U.S. ranchers like Delano's Jack Pandol, who began growing grapes in Chile under Pinochet, later began planting in the Sonoran Desert, south of Arizona. The year after NAFTA dropped restrictions on importing Mexican grapes into the United States, 7 million boxes flooded across the border. Coachella Valley's harvest was 10 million boxes that same season, only slightly more than the Mexican imports. And, to make matters worse for Coachella growers, the Mexican harvest starts at the same time. Their profitable position vanished overnight.

Since NAFTA, hardly any new fields of grapes have been planted anywhere in the Coachella Valley. Heaps of dry dead vines, their roots torn from the earth, point at the sun—sentinels of a dying industry.

The Bluestone Farming Company was one of the first to start tearing up its grapes. On January 6, 1994, Bluestone sent a letter to the Castillos and hundreds of other workers, informing them that the company was quitting the business of growing table grapes. By that time, however, the company was only a shell of its former self, a far cry from the days when its huge vineyards, spreading out across the desert, belonged to Lionel Steinberg.

Steinberg's enterprise, the David Freedman Company—or simply Freedman, as workers called it—is legendary in the United Farm Workers Union (UFW). It was one of the world's largest grape growers through the 1960s and 1970s, and it became the early home of the union.

While other grape growers fought the UFW with everything from lawyers to the gloved fists of strikebreakers to bullets, Steinberg was the exception. Perhaps ironically, his different attitude made him a very wealthy man.

By 1970, grape growers in California had been squeezed for five years by the UFW's fight for union recognition and its first grape boycott, a social movement that had become a symbol of economic justice in the minds of millions of people. The boycott had spread across the country, keeping growers' grapes locked up in coolers instead of filling supermarket shelves.

Steinberg broke ranks with the other growers and signed the first contract ending the historic grape strike, which had begun in 1965. Other growers followed suit. But when those same growers signed sweetheart contracts with the Teamsters union in 1973, in an effort to break the UFW, the farmworkers struck again. The renewed boycott once more squeezed off the sales of table grapes.

Steinberg, however, stayed with the UFW. Socially conscious consumers were trained to look for boxes of Freedman grapes, with the

UFW's black eagle stamped prominently on the side. Steinberg sold when no one else could, and he got a higher price.

In 1973, the Castillos were strikers. But a decade earlier, when the union began, they had not been Chavistas. After coming north from Mexico at the beginning of the 1960s, José Castillo became a seasonal laborer. Like most farmworkers of that era, he was unemployed and hungry much of the year. But then he got a job as a year-round permanent employee on the big grape ranch of Mr. Karahadian.

With a dream of stability seeming closer to reality, he went back to Mexicali, a hundred miles south across the border. There, he married Ingracia, a woman from his home state of Jalisco, and then brought her back to the vineyards in the desert. Mr. Karahadian rented a house to them on the company ranch, a privilege commonly granted to permanent employees. And, in return, the Castillos were loyal workers.

"Those were hard times. We never had any breaks," Ingracia says. "I remember that I would bring food to work hidden in my clothes, and I would eat a little when I thought no one was looking. Today there's cold water to drink when we work, but in those days there was nothing. When women wanted to go to the bathroom, we'd just have to go find a place to hide ourselves in the vines. These were all things we had to battle for—time to eat, water to drink, bathrooms. We never had unemployment insurance before. We just had to work and work and work. As soon as one job ended, I had to find another one right away."

In June of 1965, the first grape strike started in Coachella. Filipino workers across the valley walked out, seeking to raise wages from $1.10 an hour to $1.25. When the harvest moved north into the San Joaquin Valley around Delano, the Mexican workers organized by César Chávez and Dolores Huerta agreed to join the fight. The two streams of migrants—the old Filipino *manongs* (a term of respect because of their age), who had been organizing field labor upheavals since the 1920s, and the vast wave of Mexican workers who had been flooding California fields since the 1940s—came together, and the United Farm Workers union was born.

"I remember that I was very afraid," Ingracia recalls. "We were so green then. I'll never forget it. We were working in a field on Fifty-Seventh Avenue, which is just a dirt road. When the organizers first showed up and started talking to us from the road, we went running into the field so that we wouldn't be able to hear what they were saying, about how good the union was. We went running into the vines. We didn't want to have anything to do with the union."

This, of course, made Mr. Karahadian very happy, and he told his workers to run and hide whenever the organizers showed up. But as the strikes ground on, year after year, Karahadian's losses began to temper his enthusiasm for fighting the union.

José remembers: "In 1970, Karahadian couldn't sell his grapes because of the boycott. One morning, very early, he came out and told us he wanted to talk to us. We were all at the labor camp. At that time, we were all still very against the union, because we were with him. We always believed whatever the boss told us. 'Don't sign anything. I'm with you. You're with me.'

"But when the boycott beat him, he said, 'I don't want to go broke. I'm going to sign with Chávez. You have four days. If you don't sign within those four days, you'll be out of here.' From that time onward, we saw how he had used us, and we never believed him again. First he'd hidden us inside his vines, and then he'd just made us a meal on a plate on the table."

In the three years that followed, the Castillos and the other grape workers in the valley realized that the union organizers had been right: the union was good for the workers. They might have been drawn in by the growers' involuntary defeat, but once they learned how to make the union work, they discovered that their contracts provided benefits, job security, and a newfound freedom from discrimination.

Despite the UFW's tumultuous history of strikes and boycotts, most grape workers had only those three years of UFW contracts by which to judge the union. Yet it was enough to win their loyalty for the two decades of struggle that were to come.

When the UFW grape contracts expired in 1973, "one night, Mr. Karahadian signed with the Teamsters," Castillo explains. "The next morning, he told us, '*Señores*, I'm with the Teamsters now, and for me it's the better choice. You have four days to sign up.' But this time, a worker at the ranch named Hilario stood up, and he said to Karahadian, 'If you've made what's the best choice for you, well, we have too.' And he pulled a great big union flag out from under his shirt, and that's how the strike started there. And so Karahadian threw us off his property, into the street."

The Castillos took their children to stay with José's mother in Mexicali. Ingracia and her sister pulled their crew out on strike, in a scene made famous in the UFW's film *Fighting for Our Lives.* By the time the strike reached Delano in midsummer, it was one of the largest farmworker strikes in U.S. history. The Teamsters union, still two decades away from reform under Ron Carey, furnished goons who beat up strikers on the picket lines. In rural, grower-dominated counties, the sheriffs either looked on approvingly or arrested strikers and carted them off to jail. Ingracia still remembers vividly a priest telling her that her own arrest was an act of conscience and that God was on the side of the poor.

But when Juan de la Cruz and Nagi Daifullah were gunned down on the picket line, César Chávez called off the strike. The union sent some of the strikers to reorganize the grape boycott in cities across the United States and Canada, but most went back to the fields to find work, having spent months on the picket lines. And they discovered the unpleasant reality of the blacklist.

For grape workers like the Castillos, Freedman was the only company where the union still had the right to dispatch workers to the job—and it was the only company that would hire them. For twenty-one years, that right kept them employed—José as a permanent worker, Ingracia as a seasonal one—and provided stability for their family. It helped them buy a house in a pleasant neighborhood in Coachella. Their children went to college, a rare achievement for farmworkers.

It was the blacklist that made Freedman the vibrant heart of the union.

The workers at Freedman, despite their many skirmishes with Steinberg over work rules and grievances, looked at the company almost as if it were their own. “All the people who had the consciousness that the union was a good thing were concentrated there,” José asserts. “And with that consciousness, Freedman was very well organized. Lots of workers would tell us it was the best place to be. It had the best benefits, and it had job security. In other companies, if you weren’t working, you were afraid to even leave the house to go on an errand, because they might call you to give you work. In Freedman, we knew when we were going in to work and when we would leave. We didn’t have to please anyone today to get work tomorrow.”

When Governor Jerry Brown signed California’s Agricultural Labor Relations Act in 1975, the vote at Freedman to decide whether or not workers wanted the union was a celebration, whereas at most other companies it was like a war. More than nine hundred workers voted for the UFW at Freedman. Only fourteen voted against it.

As the years passed, Steinberg’s son, Billy, left farming and went to Hollywood to become a songwriter. Lionel finally sold most of the ranch to new investors, including Prudential Insurance, who renamed it Bluestone Farming Company.

When Bluestone closed, the Freedman workers applied for benefits under the NAFTA-related Trade Adjustment Assistance (TAA) program. A bone thrown to workers during the debate over the treaty, NAFTA-TAA extends unemployment benefits and pays for retraining for workers who can demonstrate that NAFTA cost them their jobs.

Hundreds of workers at Bluestone depended on getting seasonal work every year thinning and picking grapes and pruning, tying, and girdling the vines. But the California Employment Development Department (EDD) ruled that, out of the entire workforce, only forty-three people were eligible for benefits—everyone except the permanent year-round workers was disqualified. José got a little extra money as a result, but not much.

EDD's rationale was that the company's layoff notice was dated January 7, a few days before the seasonal crews would have been called to begin pruning vines. Because they were on layoff and not yet actively working at the time of the notice, EDD held that they didn't qualify. Ingracia and hundreds of other workers received no benefit at all from NAFTA-TAA, although no one—not EDD, the U.S. Labor Department, or even the company itself—disputes that Mexican grape imports allowed under NAFTA caused the company to close.

EDD will not discuss the case, but its claim of confidentiality seems an odd objection. The EDD office does virtually nothing to let workers know that the program even exists. The workers laid off from Bluestone had to discover it for themselves, and they subsequently took on the burden of collecting money and buying radio time to ask potentially eligible workers to come forward and apply through the union.

In Coachella, José Castillo was unemployed for a year after being laid off. He applied at all the other grape companies but never got a call. He finally found work at a golf course.

Ingracia was hired, with a number of other Chavistas from Bluestone, by Bagdasarian, a big nonunion grape grower. But when the supervisor of their crew found out that they were all ex-Freedman workers, their jobs suddenly disappeared.

According to Gus Romero, the UFW representative in the valley at the time, "The safety net just wasn't there to catch them."

In fact, EDD seemed much more interested in holding down the number of claims, to avoid embarrassing California governor Pete Wilson. The governor, of course, had claimed that NAFTA would produce hundreds of thousands of jobs, although his administration's own statistics were proving the opposite.

Wilson wasn't the only public official facing embarrassment. Many congressional representatives, including some liberal Democrats, had been wooed and won by the same job promises. While the agreement was being debated, corporate executives of companies belonging to USA•NAFTA, the business coalition formed to back the agreement, walked the halls of Congress, wearing red, white, and blue neckties. They made extravagant claims that U.S. exports to Mexico would add 100,000 jobs in its first year alone. Yet even these boosters could document only 535 U.S. jobs actually created by the agreement in 1994, a figure also cited in "NAFTA's First Year: Lessons for the Hemisphere," a December 1994 report edited by Sarah Anderson et al., sponsored by the Alliance for Responsible Trade, the Citizens Trade Campaign, and the Trade Research Consortium.

Except for NAFTA's boosters, everyone else also documents a hemorrhaging of jobs. In the first year of the treaty, the U.S. Department of Labor received claims for NAFTA-TAA from 34,799 workers, including those from Bluestone. In only the first five months of 1995, another 34,000 applied. These applications had to be certified both by the U.S. Department of Labor and by state unemployment offices. Like EDD, the Department of Labor had a vested interest in keeping the numbers of certified claims low, since President Clinton had also promised thousands of new jobs in order to get the treaty through Congress.

In California, 3,457 workers applied for NAFTA-TAA in the year and a half after the treaty went into effect. This number is very low, in the opinion of many employment experts, because most workers who lose their jobs are not aware of the program. The unemployment office and employers themselves do little to publicize it. Unless workers have a union, few are knowledgeable enough to apply. Further, the applications of people like the seasonal workers at Bluestone simply aren't counted.

Nevertheless, of the 3,457 laid-off California workers who did apply during that period, only 914 were certified by the U.S. Department of Labor.

California's experience was echoed in Kingstree, South Carolina, when Baxter International laid off 830 workers after sending their jobs out of the country. The Department of Labor certified the claims of 120 of those workers, agreeing that their jobs had gone to Mexico. But it asserted that the rest of the jobs had gone to Asia, and it therefore rejected the claims of 610 workers.

In Eatonstown, New Jersey, fifty workers at Allied Signal lost their jobs in March 1994. When they applied for NAFTA-TAA, they were also rejected, even though some of them had actually been sent to train their counterparts at the company's plant in Monterrey, Mexico, and Mexican managers had been trained in New Jersey. Allied Signal workers had reason to be bitter. The CEO of their company, Lawrence Bossidy, was the chair of USA•NAFTA. While NAFTA was being debated on the floor of Congress, Bossidy had directly denied, on television, any intention of moving Allied Signal jobs south.

The production of many well-known manufactured items shifted to Mexico in 1994. The list includes KeyTronic computer keyboards (277 jobs lost in Washington), Matsushita televisions (295 jobs in Illinois), Nintendo games (136 jobs in Washington), Oxford shirts (435 jobs in Georgia), Sara Lee sweatshirts (245 jobs in Georgia), Woolrich sportswear (500 jobs in Pennsylvania and Colorado), and Zenith televisions (430 jobs in Missouri). California companies certified by the U.S. Department of Labor for NAFTA-related layoffs include Formglas, Canon Business Machines, Xentek, Baltimore Aircoil, A&W Brands, ITT Cannon, Kyocera International, American Metal Products, Plantronics, Bluestone, Hughes Aircraft, and Amphenol.

And one other—Boscovich Farms.

South of Riverside, in Perris, the workers at Boscovich had to fight their way into the NAFTA-TAA program. No one keeps count of all the farmworkers who have, for whatever reason, lost their jobs. But only Bluestone and Boscovich workers applied for NAFTA-TAA—because they had an organization to help them. At Bluestone, workers had the UFW. Boscovich farmworkers never had a union. But they did have the Hermandad Mexicana Nacional, the Mexican National Brotherhood, a grassroots community organization that fights for civil rights and social services.

Over the years, some of the 170 Boscovich workers who cultivated and picked green onions in the Perris Valley had participated in community campaigns organized by the Hermandad. The biggest had been the fight with the city council to rename the town library after César Chávez.

On January 17, 1995, all the Boscovich workers received letters saying that the company was ending its operations in Perris and was laying them off. They knew that the Hermandad office was the place to go.

In the local newspaper, Phil Boscovich, vice president of Boscovich Farms, blamed the water district, claiming that it was taking back land for the Domenigoni Valley Reservoir, land that had been leased by the company. The district, according to Boscovich, wouldn't guarantee a continued flow of water to irrigate the land that was left.

Workers knew, however, that Boscovich, with offices in Oxnard, California, also farmed in Arizona and in the Sonoran Desert below the border. "We got really suspicious," recalls Luz María Ayala, who directs the Hermandad's Perris office, "when we saw irrigation pumps being taken out at night and driven away on trucks."

In 1993, Ayala had traveled to Washington, D.C., with a delegation led by legendary civil rights leader Bert Corona, to lobby against NAFTA. She understood the effect the treaty would have and anticipated that she would see its results in her own community. She didn't have to wait long.

Ayala, her husband, Antonio (a fellow Hermandad coordinator), and Jesús González, a retired Boscovich worker, decided to follow the trucks. Their search led them to San Luis Río Colorado, a small farmworker town at the eastern edge of the Mexicali Valley, just across the border from Arizona's Gila River Valley. There, they found onion packing sheds—and workers who told them about Boscovich's operations. Armed with that information, Ayala went to the U.S. Department of Labor. Eventually, Boscovich personnel manager John Bautista admitted that the lost production had gone to Mexico, and the Department of Labor agreed.

Even then, the Boscovich workers had to fight against the EDD office in nearby Hemet, which they say mistreated them. "EDD never told anyone about TAA," Ayala says. "They think that because farmworkers are immigrants from Mexico, we have no right to unemployment [benefits]. If we hadn't fought for TAA, if we hadn't made our own investigation, we would have received nothing."

But Ayala explains that the fight was about more than TAA. "We're trying to wake people up, to make them more conscious, so there'll be a change. We're Mexicans and immigrants, but we live here now. We have to take care of this country. No one else is doing it."

CHILDREN IN THE FIELDS

From a distance, Muranaka Farms' green onion field, in the heart of the Mexicali Valley, looks almost festive. Dozens of large colored sheets are strung between pieces of iron rebar, providing shelter from the sun and rippling in the morning breeze. The soft conversations of hundreds of people, sitting in the rows next to great piles of scallions, fill the air. The vegetable's pungent scent is everywhere.

Small toddlers wander among the seated workers, some of the children nursing on baby bottles and others, their faces smeared with dirt, chewing on the onions. A few sleep in the rows or in little makeshift beds of blankets in the vegetable bins.

A closer look reveals that the toddlers are not the only children in this field. As the morning sun illuminates the faces of the workers, it reveals dozens of young girls and boys. By rough count, perhaps a quarter of the workers here are anywhere from six or seven years old to fifteen or sixteen. The crew foreman, who doesn't want to reveal his name, says it's normal for his three-hundred-person crew to be made up of families, including many kids. He says they work for Muranaka Farms.

The year is 1996. NAFTA has been in effect for more than a year.

This field is where Muranaka transferred its onion harvest, after shutting down its operation near Oxnard and Coachella. The surrounding valley here is dotted with other farms, also runaways from southern California.

Gema López Limón moves slowly down the rows. She has a slight limp, which makes her steps careful and deliberate. She is a stranger to the families seated here in the dirt, but she's obviously not a very threatening one.

She stops next to María, a child who is working alongside her mother, and talks to her softly. María is twelve years old. "My grandmother told me this year that we didn't have enough money for me to go to school," she explains. "At first, I stayed home to take care of my little sister, but it was boring, and sometimes I was scared being by ourselves all day. So I came to work here. We need the money."

López takes careful note of what María says. López is a well-known investigator of child labor in Mexico, a professor in the school of education at the Autonomous University of Baja California in Mexicali. She has an easy way with children. They talk to her as if she is a relative, or someone who has just come over from the next field.

López moves on down the row.

Honorina Ruiz is six years old. She sits in front of a pile of green onions in the same field. She notices López coming toward her, but she keeps working, grabbing onions from the top of her pile to make a bunch. In a little gesture of self-consciousness, she pulls her sweater away from her face.

Her hands are very quick. She lines up eight or nine onions, straightening out their roots and tails. Then she knocks the dirt off, puts a rubber band around them, and adds the bunch to those already in the box beside her. She's too shy to say more than her name, but she's obviously proud to be able to perform a task at which her brother Rigoberto, at thirteen, working near her, already excels.

López talks to Honorina's mother for a few minutes and then moves on again.

In another onion field about a mile away, López finds another crew. Here Lorena, also twelve, works in an even larger group of five hundred people. She's here with her sisters Lupe and Cynthia; her mother, María; and her little brother Agustín, who at four years old is too young to work. Lorena says she's been coming to the fields every year for seven years, beginning at the same age as Honorina. "I finished first grade in primary school," she tells López, "but then I left." Her mother adds that she tried to send Lorena back to school, "but what I can earn here by myself isn't enough for us to live on, so she had to come help us."

According to foreman Samuel Cerna, this field, in Ejido San Quintan, is being farmed by Mario Cota. Cerna explains that Cota farms only in the Mexicali Valley but has work for the crew for seven months of the year. All the onions are packed in ice and sent to California and Great Britain. Although Cota would not be interviewed, the secretary in his office reports that he contracts with three U.S. growers and that he denies that children work in his fields.

That this denial is not very convincing is in large part a result of the work done by López and a small core of human rights activists over the past five years. In her tours of the fields, López is often accompanied by another well-known opponent of child labor, Federico García Estrada, who in 1996 was the human rights prosecutor for the state of Baja California. Other Mexican states have human rights commissions. But in Baja California, human rights violations have the status of offenses, meriting a separate prosecutor's office.

García and the lawyers and other personnel who work with him have won broad popular support for that office. It hasn't made this tall, lanky lawyer very popular with the conservative National Action Party (PAN, Partido de Acción Nacional), which governs Baja California. But the support he has garnered among the people has made him a voice to be respected.

Together, López, García, and their *compañeros* are trying to mobilize public pressure on the Mexican government to enforce its own child protection laws.

Child labor is not legal in Mexico, any more than it is in the United States. Article 123 of the Mexican Constitution proclaims that children under the age of fourteen may not work and limits the work time of those between the ages of fourteen and sixteen to six hours a day. Article 22 of the Federal Labor Law also prohibits the employment of children younger than fourteen and permits those between fourteen and sixteen to work only by special permission, if they have already completed their mandatory education.

But according to López, child labor is growing, as a result of the country's successive economic crises and the rise in export-oriented agriculture. Joint ventures between Mexican and U.S. growers, producing for the U.S., European, and Japanese markets, "are achieving greater competitiveness at the cost of children working in the fields," she observes. "We're creating a workforce without education, condemned to the lowest wages and to periods of great unemployment."

Although no official statistics are collected on the number of these working children, the Mexican government's Secretariat of Labor and Social Forecasting estimates that eight hundred thousand children under the age of fourteen work in different sectors of the economy. Based on the 1990 census, the Secretariat of Public Education guesses that more than 2.5 million children between the ages of six and fourteen do not attend school.

According to López and García, three thousand children work in the green onion harvest in the Mexicali Valley. Beginning in October and running through June, the season coincides with the school year and has a dramatic impact on school attendance. While the population of the valley grows—the city of Mexicali itself now boasts more than six hundred thousand inhabitants—the number of children in rural schools decreases almost every year.

The Alfredo A. Uchurtu primary school draws its students from Ejido Veracruz II, in the heart of the green onion district. Teacher Pedro González Hernández is another seasoned veteran of the fight to keep children out of the fields. It's a fight they're not winning, he says. Of the 252 students who registered at Uchurtu in September 1996, more than 40 were no longer coming to school at all by the end of the season.

González talks while seated at his desk in front of a room full of second graders. As he cuts decorations out of red construction paper for the classroom, he punctuates his points with jabs of the scissors. "Attendance began to fall in 1987, when the school had 363 children," he recalls. "That's the year we had the first economic collapse."

In rural Mexico, the word *maestro*, or teacher, is more than a job title. It's a sign of the respect conveyed by rural communities, which view teachers as leaders and spokespersons. For the best teachers, like González, the title is a badge of social activism. Schools are resources communities must fight for. Teachers, who are some of the lowest-paid workers in Mexico, typically use part of their salaries to buy supplies like notebooks and pencils. They are also the people who collect whatever statistics exist on rural communities, especially concerning children.

Of the sixteen boys in Uchurtu's sixth grade, seven come to class only two or three times a week, as do three of the eleven girls. "For these children, we've tried to devise a kind of study they can do at home," González says. "It will never be as good as actually attending class, but at least it's some alternative."

Even in May, the temperature in the Mexicali Valley climbs to 100 degrees, and the afternoon heat radiates up from Uchurtu's playground. A few trees provide shade for the school's ten low-slung buildings, which look a little like the portable classrooms often seen in the United States. Some of the buildings aren't used anymore because of declining enrollment, and nighttime vandalism of the empty structures created a problem for the school. But the community found a family to live in one of the unused buildings, and the problem disappeared. González believes that keeping the school's appearance from deteriorating helps to maintain the morale of the students and makes the school more attractive to them.

Teachers in Baja California have tried other ways to keep children in school. They convinced the state government to offer stipends of 118 pesos a month, plus food coupons, to rural children who would otherwise have to work. Twenty-five kids at Uchurtu get the *beca*, and all of them are still in class. But there aren't enough stipends, and rumors persist that children of government functionaries take some of them. The schools were slated to begin serving breakfast to the children, but the program has been held up by red tape.

"We have to admit," González concedes, "that not only can't they come, but that often they don't want to. With all the problems they've had in keeping up, when they do come, they face a lot of blame."

Presiliano Martínez, a rural teacher at the Escuela Aquiles Serdán in neighboring Colonia Elias, cautions that "if you scold the children for the times when they don't come to school, then they just don't come back at all." But Martínez doesn't agree with González about formulating curricula for part-time attendees. "They must come every day," he asserts. He seems less an activist and more a man trying to hold on to the educational values and principles of his own youth.

Martínez's school once had a teacher for each of six grades. Now there are only three teachers. Aquiles Serdán is older than Uchurtu and has a large, ornate adobe building with the name proudly emblazoned above the door. But the building is unused, and the actual classrooms are smaller, cinder block boxes.

At a countryside crossroads in Colonia Madero, a third school sits in the corner of a ploughed field. The furrows come up to the edge of the two small buildings. This school has been abandoned entirely. "The people went away, looking for work, and the school was left without children. At last, the teacher had only two left, and they closed it," a neighbor told López.

"We realize that what drives the children into the fields is that the wages their parents receive [aren't] enough to support the family," González comments bitterly. "We're not dreaming we can end this. But we have to do something."

The companies pay 80 or 81 centavos (11 cents U.S. in 1996) for a dozen bunches of onions. For an adult, this can amount to 50 pesos on a good day. A young child might produce twenty or thirty dozen bunches—half the total produced by an adult.

Workers in the fields report that the growers don't raise the piece rate from year to year, despite big price increases for groceries. In January 1995, the price of a gallon of milk was 7 pesos. It rose to 15 pesos a year later, and to 17.50 in 1997. A gallon of milk that year cost almost half a day's wages for an adult. In 1995, the price of a chicken went from 4 to 10 pesos. A kilo (two pounds) of beans used to cost 3.50 pesos; in 1997, it cost 9.

At the height of the season, families sometimes stay out in the fields until dark, just to earn enough to eat. "We start work," Lorena says, "at five-thirty in the morning, and we work at least until four." Adults and children work the same hours. There is no overtime pay, except for work on Sunday. When children start out working with their families, they work under a parent's employee number. But by the age of twelve or thirteen, according to López, children usually have their own number and are paid separately.

The Mexicali Valley extends south from the southern borders of California and Arizona. It is the southern end of the same valley that rises to the San Gorgonio Pass, 50 miles north of Coachella and 150 miles north of Mexico. It's all an irrigated desert; without the water of the Colorado River, there would be no farms on either side of the border.

Despite the cloth shelters in the fields, the temperature gets brutally hot during the day in the late spring, and in the winter it can go down to freezing. In the Muranaka and Cota fields, one portable bathroom was provided for the whole crew. A metal drum on wheels held drinking water.

Conditions for workers in the Mexicali Valley resemble those suffered by farmworkers in California before the era of the United Farm Workers, as the Castillos describe. This makes the valley a magnet for California growers.

Boscovich Farms, with headquarters in Oxnard, is only one of a number of U.S. row crop producers who now have operations in Mexico. Growers from Salinas and Watsonville who also farm green onions in the Mexicali Valley include Fresh Choice, Frank Capurro, VegaMix, and Nunes Farms. Arizona-based Phoenix Vegetable Growers has moved across the border, as has Muranaka, which also comes from Oxnard.

According to Juan Pablo Hernández Díaz, president of the Agricultural Association of Vegetable Producers of the Mexicali Valley (Asociación Agricola de Productares de Hortalizas del Valle de Mexicali), most U.S. growers contract with a local Mexican grower, providing chemicals and loans, agreeing to distribute and sell the boxes of green onions at the wholesale market price. A few U.S. companies, Hernández says, run their own Mexican operations or have formed joint ventures with Mexican growers.

Carisa Wright of Muranaka Farms explains that the company farms on both sides of the border, mostly on its own, but sometimes by contract. In Mexico, it has operations in the Mexicali Valley, in Sonoita in Sonora, and in Maneadero, farther down the Baja peninsula. The company's vegetables, which include green onions, spinach, radishes, cilantro, parsley, kale, leeks, and beets, are processed in the packing sheds of the Empacadora Toluca in the heart of the green onion district.

Wright describes Muranaka's operations in Mexico as profitable and expanding. She declined to provide figures, but Mexican observers calculate that gross receipts to a grower from a hectare of green onions may reach 25,500 pesos (3,600 dollars in 1996). Some ten thousand hectares of the Mexicali Valley are planted in green onions, which can be planted and harvested twice a year. Sometimes the onions alternate with another vegetable, such as radishes. "Most of our operations are labor intensive, so we do save money on labor costs by comparison with the U.S.," Wright admits.

Muranaka management would not answer questions directly about their use of child labor. A letter from the company states that "as far as we know, our growers comply in the fullest with Mexican federal and state labor laws to the best of their abilities" and that, therefore, workers "are over the minimum legal working age."

At Fresh Choice, Greg Flood explains that the company doesn't consider itself responsible for the employment practices of the Mexican growers with whom it contracts, although he asserts that both his company and its Mexican partner obey all Mexican laws. He travels to the Mexicali Valley at least ten times a year. He has seen very young children, of nursing age, with their parents in the fields, which he attributes to the lack of child care. To him, the situation is similar to that of a hardware store owner who brings a son or daughter to work in the store.

Tom Nunes of the Nunes Company, a large vegetable grower in Salinas, uses the same Mexican contractor as Fresh Choice. The Mexican grower grows and packs the green onions in ice and sends them to the Nunes coolers in Salinas and Yuma. Nunes sells the onions at market prices and then deducts the cost of seeds, cartons, loading, and customs duties, as well as a charge for selling the onions, which he estimates at about a penny per bunch. What's left belongs to the Mexican grower.

Asked whether he would consider charging an extra penny a bunch to his customers, in order to raise the wages paid to field workers, Nunes responds that "a penny is what we charge for selling them. There's no incentive for us to do that." He adds that he can't tell his Mexican partner how to run his business.

"There are no green onions grown now in the U.S. in the winter, because they can't compete with the price of those grown in Mexico," Nunes says. "I wouldn't go over there if this competition didn't exist. It was a problem before NAFTA to some extent, but what's really causing this is the devaluation of the peso. What people are [earning in Mexico] is nothing. The power of the market is stronger than all of us."

Hernández, the president of the producers association, agrees that devaluation was a shot in the arm for the Mexican industry, which he says was in danger of disappearing. In 1996, he estimated, the green onion harvest in the Mexicali Valley had a wholesale value of $50 million—about 12 million cartons selling for three to five dollars apiece, with the Mexican growers receiving one to two dollars for each box.

Hernández considers the crop a boon to the valley's residents, claiming that it has provided nearly year-round employment since growers began planting green onions in 1966. Before that, workers were employed only during the cotton harvest, which provided jobs for a few months in the summer. In the off-season, they had to leave the valley and migrate to follow other crops. At the beginning of the 1990s, however, the cotton harvest failed. Families began to migrate again, and Hernández says that families began going hungry again, too.

To Hernández, the problem of child labor stems from the lack of child care. "We could prohibit parents from bringing their children to the fields," he says, "but then we'd have a bigger problem. Kids would be left by themselves."

He admits, however, that Mexico's worsening economic crisis left parents feeling that there was no future for their children. "If there are no jobs for educated people," he asks, "or what an educated person can earn is less than what a family earns in the fields, what kind of future is there? When parents see engineers selling tacos for a living, why should they invest money they don't have anyway in sending their kids to school?"

"What makes our country attractive to U.S. growers," López responds, "are low wages. We're told that if we make our country attractive enough for foreign investment, transnational corporations will come here to invest in greater productivity. Supposedly, that will lift us out of poverty. But does it? That investment produces wealth we never see. Meanwhile, we're stuck with miserable economic conditions."

Mexicali Valley agriculture, dependent on exports and the U.S. market, is a showcase for this economic policy, called structural adjustment, which is promoted by the Mexican and U.S. governments and the International Monetary Fund. The policy uses depressed wages to attract investment. To keep wages low, the government finds subsidies, López says. Some are indirect, such as meals for rural children and the stipends that keep them in school. But the government also directly subsidizes some costs for growers, such as the expense of water for irrigation, which is much cheaper in Mexicali than it is just across the border in the Imperial Valley.

"What we need," López concludes, "is to produce food first for people to eat in Mexico, where people are actually hungry. No one eats these green onions here. If we have extra capacity to produce food after feeding ourselves, we can export the rest to the U.S. or anywhere else. These foreign companies bring jobs here to the fields. But what kind of jobs are they? They're jobs with no future."

Rural teacher González argues that structural adjustment also means that Mexicans lose control over the rules of their own society. "Our laws say one thing, for instance, about child labor, but the reality is another, and everyone knows it. The companies may create jobs, but they [should] pay [higher wages] so it doesn't have these consequences for children."

The analysis developed by López, González, García, and activists on the border is not simply rhetoric. They demand solutions. In March

1996, López went to Mexico City, bringing her accusations before the second International Independent Tribunal Against Child Labor. She brought children from the fields with her, to make sure that the human face of child labor wasn't lost.

"Trade agreements like NAFTA promised protections for workers," López testified. "But they don't prohibit child labor—they regulate it."

The tribunal brought witnesses from eighteen countries to the huge auditorium of Mexico's largest hospital, the social security health complex located in the capital. The explosive testimony of children made headlines in Mexico City newspapers and sparked earnest television commentaries. It was a high point, after years of documenting the hardships in the green onion fields.

The tribunal concluded that the economic forces responsible for the growth of child labor in Mexico had had the same effect in many countries. The number of working children globally has climbed to more than 150 million. In a document issued after three days of formal hearings, tribunal judges called for the ratification of the International Labour Organization's Convention 138, which outlaws labor by children of mandatory school age.

One of the principal organizers of the tribunal noted that international support for the convention was weakening under the impact of the marketplace. María Estela Ríos González, then president of Mexico's National Association of Democratic Lawyers, leveled accusations of hypocrisy at supporters of the free market. "They oppose every kind of regulation on business, especially where the labor of children is involved," she declared.

To weaken the International Labour Organization's blanket prohibition of child labor, the United Nations formulated another convention in 1989. Convention 32 leaves it up to each government to determine the age at which child labor is permitted and to regulate the circumstances under which children work. Many countries that refused to ratify Convention 138 have adopted the U.N. approach.

"Instead of saying that we should recognize that child labor exists, and therefore regulate it, I believe it should be eliminated," Ríos says.

"We cannot substitute the labor of countless children for the inadequate income of their parents. For all the history of humanity, adults have been the protectors and nurturers of children. Now we have children nurturing and protecting the adults. We are robbing them of their own future."