THE PEOPLE WENT WALKING
How Rufino Dominguez Revolutionized the Way We Think About Migration

By David Bacon, edited by Luis Escala Rabadan

It is a bitter irony that when it was time to bury Rufino Dominguez, his own community of San Miguel Cuevas initially refused him a place in its pantheon. In the end, the town’s communal leaders relented, but by then it was too late. His body was already on its way from Fresno, California, to its final resting place in Paxtlahuaca, the hometown of his wife Oralia.

It’s hard to imagine that Rufino would not have cared deeply. His commitment to the indigenous culture of the place where he was born, in Oaxaca’s Mixteca region, guided his life’s work. Yet Rufino had long since chosen to serve the larger concerns of the entire migrant exodus from southern Mexico over his own town’s requirements for remaining a comunero in good standing. That choice enabled him to shape the political thinking of an entire generation of migrant activists in Mexico and the U.S. But it came at a high price.

Like many Oaxacan indigenous towns, San Miguel Cuevas has a system of cargos, or community responsibilities, that provide the structure for its economic, social and political life. The obligation of the “tequio” allows the town to require work from its residents. In an era in which many, if not most, of those residents live as migrants thousands of miles away, the rule is strict. If you are chosen, you must return in order to fulfill your responsibilities.

Rufino himself recognized the value of this tradition. “We use the tequio, the concept of collective work to support our community,” he told me in an oral history for the book, Communities Without Borders. “We know one another and can act together. For instance, when a community gathers to build a school, the government doesn’t send workers to gather rocks or sand for construction. People from the community do it. They each take turns, carrying 5 rocks or a bag of sand. The whole town is obligated to help, and if people don’t, there are consequences, like going to jail or getting fined.
“Wherever we go, we go united. It’s a way of saying that I do not speak alone -- we all speak together. Our people in Oaxaca don’t care if we have been here for 10 years. They send us notices telling us, ‘Rufino, you have to return to serve the community as a secretary, to be a council person or a president.’ Mexican law doesn’t recognize that we, living here [in the U.S.], have political rights and obligations. But in our indigenous communities, we do.”

Rufino’s passionate defense of the tequio and the system of cargos was typical of his lifelong campaign to demonstrate to the rest of the world the value of indigenous Oaxacan culture. But this was not his main contribution to the politics of migration.

Rufino Domiguez’ sense of responsibility went beyond the cargos of San Miguel Cuevas. He inherited the political ideas of the Mexican left, and combined them with the indigenous traditions and culture that developed in Oaxaca long before the arrival of Europeans. He analyzed the roots of modern mass forcible migration. He formulated a new way of looking at migrant communities that sees their crucial importance to the political economy of states like Oaxaca, and to the regions to which they travel, both in northern Mexico and the U.S. And he acted, helping to develop organizations reflecting this new social reality - vehicles for migrant communities to attain self-awareness and to fight for power.

1968, the Dirty War and the CIOAC

Rufino’s generation followed that of the veterans of 1968, who were formed politically by the Mexican army’s attack on an increasingly radical student movement, ending in the worst political crime in modern Mexican history. As students gathered in the dusk at Mexico City’s Tlatelolco Plaza, just weeks before the opening of the 1968 Olympics, soldiers opened fire. Hundreds died. Hundreds more were sent to prison.

Four years after the Tlatelolco massacre, in 1972, students and leftwing political groups tried to end the nightmare by marching through the capital’s Centro Historico. Again, activists were carried from the streets covered in blood, attacked by the Halcones, the government’s paramilitary thugs. To maintain control through the 1960s and 70s, the government and the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) organized a wave of repression - the Dirty War. Social movement activists disappeared and were murdered - many whose names are still unknown or unacknowledged.

At the time of the Dirty War the great wave of migration from Oaxaca to the U.S. was still a decade in the future. But already, in central Mexican states like Michoacan, Zacatecas and Jalisco, farmers displaced by poverty had begun a great mass migration. Their home villages in the countryside were stripped of working-age people, leaving just the very young and very old. Political refugees from the Dirty War joined economic migrants on this road to the north. Soon, in Los Angeles, the Bay Area and other concentrations of Mexicans on the west coast, militants in exile gave the growing Chicano movement an infusion of energy and ideology.

This combination was no accident. Leftwing groups in Mexico, especially the Mexican Communist Party (PCM), had begun sending members north, convinced that the expanding Mexican communities in the U.S. could be a natural source of support for the movement back home. In the Los Angeles union locals of the United Electrical Workers, labor leader Humberto Camacho welcomed refugees and gave them jobs as organizers. Political migrants organized other unions among undocumented workers, like the General Brotherhood of Workers, or later, the California Immigrant Workers Association. This powerful combination, which included radicals coming north from Central America’s civil wars, had a profound impact on California, especially on Los Angeles’ politics. Over the next two decades, it transformed the city from the citadel of the open shop to a labor stronghold, and ended Republican Party control.

South of the border, this wave of migrants furnished a workforce as well for Tijuana’s maquiladoras. Soon they began striking to win recognition for independent unions, at Solidev and other factories. Help began flowing back...
Rufino Dominguez, born on April 23, 1965, was only 3 when soldiers shot the students in Mexico City, and a boy during the years of the Dirty War. In many ways, San Miguel Cuevas was still a town at the margin of Mexican society. In the 1960s electricity had yet to reach its homes. In later decades the streets would be paved, the church fixed and other improvements made, all paid for by remittances sent home by San Miguel eños working in the north. But in Rufino’s first years, candles were still the only light at night.

“Before I was born my mother and father would leave to work in Veracruz, in the sugar cane,” he remembered. “People had no cars, so they went walking, as they used to say. I don’t know how far it was, but my dad would count the days it took to get there. Later, when I was born, they got more established in town and didn’t leave.

“We planted corn and beans, and had fruit trees. My father, Primo Dominguez Tapia, was a carpenter, an artist and a curandero, treating people’s illnesses.” Bonnie Bade, a California anthropologist, studied with Primo Dominguez. She recalls “we documented the names and uses of medicinal plants, ancient diagnostic methods and medicinal treatments, and the underlying concepts of illness and health in Mixtec medicine.”

While San Miguel Cuevas had an elementary school, continuing on to high school meant going to the nearest large town, Santiago Juxtlahuaca. Rufino was recruited by a religious order, the Marist brothers, who ran a boarding school based on the ideas of liberation theology and the preferential option for the poor. “They were like the Jesuits,” Rufino explained. “They showed me a lot of things about life, about our communities. That’s where my social consciousness began. They had a beautiful life, but they didn’t get married, and couldn’t organize, something that I was already becoming passionate about. By then I’d learned that if there’s a problem, it is important to organize the people to resolve it. The brothers spoke about the need to stand up for justice, but they would only talk and not actually do it.”

Mexico was filled with political challenges to the ruling PRI in the late 1970s, especially in the rural states of the south - Chiapas, Guerrero and Oaxaca. Sometimes church radicals and leftwing organizers found themselves on the same side. In “Popular Movements in Autocracies: Religion, Repression, and Indigenous,” Guillermo Trejo notes that “Unlike the struggles of the 1960s and 1970s, in which independent rural indigenous communities petitioned for land without institutional assistance from any external actors, in the late 1970s the Catholic Church and the Mexican Communist Party became major promoters and sponsors of rural indigenous movements [leading to] powerful collective movements for land redistribution.”

Although the Dirty War had driven most urban political activity underground, poverty and land hunger in rural communities continued to provoke rebellions, often led by leftwing organizers. From 1965 to 1975 Ramon Danzos Palomino organized land invasions and campaigns to implement land reform through the Independent Central of Farmers. Then, in 1975 he left to start the Independent Central of Agricultural Workers and Farmers (CIOAC). Both organizations were closely tied to the PCM, of which he was also a leader.

The CIOAC had an indigenous character from the beginning. In Chiapas it was organized by a Tojolab’al farmer from the Plan de Ayala Ejido, Margarito Ruiz Hernandez. Antonio Hernandez Cruz, a CIOAC activist in Chiapas, says in Trejo’s book that “the construction of Tojolab’al autonomy ... can be traced back to different forms found in the 1970s, be they unions of ejidos or the CIOAC.”

Rural organizing on the left included the recruitment of teachers. Historically, going back to the Revolution of 1910-
In 1980 the PCM won its first election victories - the municipal presidencies of the small towns of Alcozauca de Guerrero in Guerrero state, and Tlacolulita and Magdalena Ocotlan in Oaxaca. The following year the Coalition of Workers, Farmers and Students of the Isthmus (COCEI) won control of the municipal government of Juchitan de Zaragoza, one of Oaxaca’s most important cities. By then, the PCM had organizationally merged with its partners in the Coalition of the Left, and formed a new party, the United Socialist Party of Mexico (PSUM). In the new Juchitan city council, the PSUM held two of the seats.

COCEI’s victory electrified Mexico’s left. The new government ran literacy programs for a town in which 80% of the people couldn’t read, purged corrupt police, fixed roads and the municipal market, and built new health clinics. “In those years COCEI was very strong in Oaxaca,” Rivera Salgado recalls. “Here Rufino began trying to adapt the traditional radical ideas of the Mexican left, including the ideas of Marx, to the struggles of indigenous people.

“COCEI itself held its meetings in Zapoteco, although they didn’t yet have a word in Zapoteco for class struggle. People were so proud of who they were. At this time PSUM was becoming a legal party, and Rufino was part of that. But because of the strike he’d lost his fellowship and couldn’t survive without it. He went back to his community, and began to fight to get rid of the cacique [town boss].”

That cacique was Gregorio Platon, the Deputy for Communal Property in San Miguel Cuevas. That position gave him control over communal town lands, and enabled him to fine town residents who’d had to leave to look for work elsewhere - as much as 15,000 pesos. “Those who didn’t pay were put in jail or were threatened with being kicked out of the town,” Rufino remembered. “He burned five homes, and killed three people, including a friend. That’s why I did something, because it hurt me. After two years we were able to get him out of there.”

On October 30, 1983, Rufino and his fellow activists organized an occupation of the town hall, but were then confronted by Platon and his supporters, carrying guns. They were forced into the building, where they were tortured for four hours. Rufino’s father gathered the town’s residents and they marched on the town hall. “We were rescued by the town - otherwise we wouldn’t be alive today,” Rufino recalled. “That’s where my struggle really began.”

Living in Oaxaca was still dangerous, however, and Rufino had just gotten married. With his new wife he took the road north, first to Sinaloa, where thousands of Oaxacan migrants made up the workforce on giant plantations growing tomatoes and strawberries for the U.S. market. The PSUM and CIOAC had already sent organizers there to fight to change the worst conditions in Mexican agriculture.

The export farms of Sinaloa and Baja California were, and are, plantations - giant fields on the scale of the industrial agriculture of California’s San Joaquin and Salinas Valleys. Export plantations were a product of the turn in Mexico’s economic development program in the years after Tlatelolco.
In the early 1970s a generation of technocrats in the PRI began reducing the state sector and reversing the nationalist direction of Mexico’s economy. Beginning with the Border Industrialization Program of 1964, the barriers to foreign investment were taken down in a series of economic “reforms.” Foreign-owned factories - maquiladoras - were originally allowed to operate near the border, using a low-paid workforce to produce for the U.S. market. Eventually the geographic restrictions were eliminated, and maquiladoras spread throughout Mexico.

Mexico’s increasing foreign debt to U.S. and European banks became a lever to enforce a neoliberal development model. Instead of an economy producing for consumers in Mexico, whose jobs and income might enable them to buy what was produced, the economy instead encouraged foreign investment in enterprises producing for foreign (especially U.S.) markets. That gave the Mexican government a stake in keeping wages low enough to attract investment and to keep Mexican products cheap in the U.S.

The consequences for indigenous people in southern Mexico were enormous. Any commitment by the government to maintaining high farm prices was gradually reversed (and later abandoned altogether with the North American Free Trade Agreement.) Once people could no longer sell what they grew for a price that paid the cost of growing it, they needed to seek alternatives to farming in their home communities. That meant migration. As people were displaced by economic crisis, a mobile low-wage workforce mushroomed.

The giant farms developed in the 1970s in Sinaloa, Sonora and Baja California were like maquiladoras, producing for foreign markets, and needing the same cheap labor. But they were located in low population areas. Growers, often partnerships between Mexican landowners and U.S. investors, required a workforce far more numerous than the local population.

The relatively small migration of the era when Rufino’s father went walking to Veracruz was transformed. Recruiters throughout Oaxacan villages filled trains and busses with thousands of people who could no longer make a living. “The living conditions in Mexico were at their worst moment,” Rufino recalled. “That is why during that time many families came with their wives, even their children. This was never seen before.”

Jorge and Margarita Giron left Santa Maria Tindu in Oaxaca to work in Sinaloa in the late 1970s. “We lived in labor camps made of steel sheets,” Jorge remembered. “During the hot season it was unbearable. The roof was flimsy and when it rained everything got wet. We would put everything up on a table to avoid having things swept away by the water, which would even take bowls and pans with it. In the morning we would huddle around the foreman and he would give us buckets for the tomato harvest. When they were irrigating, we took off our shoes and went into the fields barefoot, even if it was freezing. Going in like that made...
us sick, but there were no rubber boots. We worked from sunup to sundown. Candlelight was our only form of light. The towns and cities were far away. We could only go there on Sundays, so the camps provided everything. There was a store that gave us food on credit. On Saturday we would get paid and pay our debt.

His wife Margarita recalled that in the fields “when you had to relieve yourself, you went in public because there were no bathrooms. You would go behind a tree or tall grass and squat. People would bathe upstream while downstream others would wash their clothes, and even drink the water. That’s why many came down with diarrhea and vomiting. Others drowned in the river because it was very deep. The walls in the camp were made of cardboard, and you could see other families through the holes. In the camps you couldn’t be picky.”

In the early 80s students came out to the camps from the University of Sinaloa in Culiacan. CIOAC sent organizers from Oaxaca, like Benito Garcia, a Mixteco from San Juan Mixtepec. Together they organized strikes. “When the students came we would leave the fields and stop working,” Jorge Giron remembered. “Then the police would come and take away the students. We wanted workers’ rights, better salaries and jobs, better housing, running water, and transportation to and from work. Eventually the bosses began to cut the workday to eight hours, and when they needed a couple of extra hours they paid double. Before, if we worked ten or eleven hours, we were paid the minimum. After that movement, things got better.”

Rufino met the CIOAC organizers, especially Benito Garcia. “I saw a lot of discrimination towards indigenous people,” he remembered. “The bosses would shout at them, ‘you donkey, put your back into it!’ I began to organize the people from my town that were working there. They asked me to set up a meeting to talk about what had happened [with Gregorio Platon] in San Miguel Cuevas, and what I had done. Then we decided to set up an organization outside of the political parties, the Organization of Exploited and Oppressed People (OPEO), with help from CIOAC. Benito helped us come up with a symbol for the organization and got our flyer printed, and we supported the marches and strikes he organized. I worked very closely with him.”

Velasco says that in OPEO Rufino was combining two ways of looking at the people he was organizing. “They were oppressed because they were indigenous, and they were exploited as workers,” she says. “He didn’t call it a political front or coalition of other organizations, but an organization of people themselves.”

It was unique and new in other ways as well. Indigenous migrants ran OPEO according to rules and principles they themselves adopted. It had no paid staff - not in Mexico, nor later in the U.S. Its purpose was to fight against injustices perpetrated against people as migrants, in the areas where they were working and living, as well as to deal with the problems back in San Miguel Cuevas.

It was new also in the sense of what it was not. While it was part of the left, and worked with leftwing organizations, it was not the creation of a leftwing political party. And while it organized workers to fight, even to strike for better wages.

Isabel Zaragoza and her infant daughter Lagoberta, and Marcial Sayas Flores, a disabled farmworker, live in labor camps in Vicente Guerrero, in the San Quintin Valley.
and conditions, it was not a union.

“In his thinking we see the combination of three big ideas,” adds Rivera Salgado. “From the Maristas he got the ideas of liberation theology and the preferential option for the poor. You can see their influence in the way Rufino believed you have to dedicate your life to your ideals. In the traditional left he found a class-based way of looking at exploitation, and the need for organized social resistance to it. And from his own community he took the ideas of identity, obligations and responsibility, and the collective way of making decisions.”

Rufino dated his turn to questions of indigenous identity to his experiences in Sinaloa and Baja California. “During that time when I first began, I didn’t know what being Mixteco was,” he explained in his oral history for Communities Without Borders. “I didn’t know why they were calling me Mixteco. I didn’t know how to appreciate what I was, what I spoke, or what I had. I didn’t know what it was to be indigenous. When I went to high school in Juxtlahuaca, away from the town where I’d grown up, the girls would laugh and I felt embarrassed. I thought, ‘I’m going to stop speaking Mixteco because they laugh at me. I’m going to stop walking next to my mother because she dresses in traditional clothes.’ Many of us stopped speaking our language and denied being indigenous. It wasn’t our fault. It was the racism from the mestizos and the lack of education.

“We began to understand this in Sinaloa, and when I arrived in Baja California, we continued because they’d call us Oaxaquitos or Oaxacos or Indians. They’d tell us we were ignorant, and I realized that they were making me feel different. During that time I felt scared. There wasn’t much talk then about an indigenous movement. We were very isolated. We weren’t in the news; we didn’t exist during that time. In addition, [during our strikes] we were accused of being involved with the FMLN of El Salvador, manipulated by the commanders of Central America. The bosses said we were foreigners. We’d tell them, ‘How can we be foreigners if we’re from Oaxaca, in our own country?’

“Now I speak my language in front of people, and I don’t feel embarrassed. I am a human being like everyone else. I know my identity and I’m proud of it. I know I am Mixteco or a ‘Nusami’ as we say in our language, and that all of us are important. I appreciate who I am. If someone calls me Native or Oaxquito or Oaxaco I respond, ‘Don’t say that, I am Oaxaqueño and a human being - just like you.’”

Later in 1984 Rufino crossed the Gulf of California to the San Quintin valley on the Baja California peninsula. There he found conditions that were just as bad. “So I sent Benito a letter to come because there were so many problems. And he came.”

According to human rights activist Victor Clark (in “De Jornaleros a Colonos,” by Laura Velasco, Christian Zlolsniski and Marie Laure-Coubes), the Mexican newspaper Zeta published reports of people living outside under trees or making their own shacks out of pallets or other discarded materials from the ranches. After complaints to the state government, growers built the first labor camps, but according to PSUM leader Blas Manriquez, “the foremen and supervisors with guns in their hands don’t let anyone in who appears to be an outsider, thinking they’re agitators.” Repression and violence got so bad that in 1987 CIOAC appealed to the governor to disarm the guards.

Natalia Bautista, who fell in love with Benito and later married him, remembers that her father used his house for the meetings because they all came from San Juan Mixtepec. “They had organized workers in various camps, painting signs, making banners and planning a grand march. Lots of people came from Ensenada and Tijuana over to the house. Now as an adult, I realize the majority were from the PSUM.

“On the day of the march nobody worked. The strike was huge and spread through Vicente Guerrero [a town in the San Quintin valley]. In the labor camps they agreed that nobody would show up for work, and if someone did, they would throw tomatoes at them until they stopped working. They were asking for a salary increase, better treatment from the foremen, a set lunch period and buckets that weren’t so heavy. The strike won higher wages and transportation for the workers. Up to then, workers were brought to work in large tomato containers. After the strike they were transported in buses.

“The political party established itself with the workers after the strike, and worked in support of the union. If there was a work stoppage, the party was there to help. Leaders would speak to the workers about struggles around the world. They spoke of changing the system and establishing a new and different government. I imagined a marvelous place. I guess we’re still waiting for that.”

In California, Indigenous Migrants and Farm Workers Begin to Organize

CIOAC survived in San Quintin until the early 2000s, fighting more as the years went by for land on which migrants from Oaxaca could build houses and settle permanently. Benito Garcia was eventually expelled, however, and from the PSUM as well. Rufino organized OPEO, and helped CIOAC in San Quintin, through 1984. Then he left with his wife for the other side of the border. By then his first son, Lenin, had been born in San Quintin.

“I got married in 1983, although I didn’t want to,” he remembered later. “I wanted to devote my life completely to organizing. We need to organize and it demands a great deal, but if you have a family you can’t dedicate yourself completely to this commitment. Once I got married, I had to come to the U.S. because it wasn’t fair to ask my father to keep supporting me and my wife. So I got married and decided to seek my future here.”

Once he arrived in Selma, California, he found that people from San Miguel living there had also heard about his fight to free the town from its cacique, and the strikes in Sinaloa and Baja California. “I felt like I was in my hometown,” he remembered. “People paid off my coyote [the
smuggler who helped him cross the border, and asked me to continue my work here. I didn’t even know how to drive, or where the sun rises and where it sets. But we began.

“In 1985 we formed a local committee of people from San Miguel Cuevas. We worked on setting up a clinic back home, as well as playing fields and rebuilding the church. But we were also interested in building up awareness about our need to organize to defend our human and labor rights here. In 1986 I went to Livingston, because it was the center of Oaxacan migrants in Madera County. I started another committee, and began working not just with people from San Miguel Cuevas, but from other towns as well, like Teotitlan del Valle. We set up more committees of the OPEO in Madera and Fresno.”

In many ways, conditions in California were not so different from those in Sinaloa and San Quintin. “Everyone was a farm worker, and we did a lot about the working conditions. I know them well, because I worked in the fields picking grapes and tomatoes, and working with the hoe. I participated in various strikes in the tomatoes to demand improvements in 1986, 87 and 88. They’d fire me, and then they wouldn’t want to give me any work because they were afraid I’d organize more strikes. I don’t remember how many I participated in, in the tomatoes, and pruning grapes. We were able to force the labor contractors to pay more, but then we’d be blacklisted.

“I worked in the fields until 1991, and then in a turkey farm for a few more years. It was a life of slavery, with no weekends or days off. We worked seven days a week.”

OPEO fought the discrimination against indigenous migrants as much as it did their exploitation at work. “We started one of our first projects in 1986 because many people went to jail because they couldn’t speak Spanish or English. We started an organization of indigenous interpreters, and fought for the legal right in the United States for each person to have translation in court in their primary language. We won this in the U.S., and it’s still something we don’t have in our native country. In Mexico they judge you in Spanish, and they punish you in Spanish. You don’t even know what you did wrong.”

Language discrimination against indigenous migrants reflects a deeper structural racism. The number of migrants from Oaxaca in California, especially in rural areas, began to rise sharply in the early 1980s. By 2008 demographer Rick Mines found that 120,000 migrant farm workers in California had come from indigenous communities in Mexico - Mixtecos, Triquis, Purepechas and others. Together with family members, they accounted for slightly less than 170,000 people. The percentage of farmworkers coming from Oaxaca and southern Mexico grew by four times in less than twenty years, from 7% in 1991, to over 20% in 2008.

In new centers of indigenous population, Triquis, who’d migrated from the same region of the Mixteca that Rufino had left, founded Nuevo San Juan Copala in Baja California. They became the majority of the residents of Greenfield, in California’s Salinas Valley. Purepechas from Michoacan populated huge dilapidated trailer parks in the Coachella Valley, and were packed into garages and tiny apartments in Oxnard.

A third of those workers reported to Mines they were earning below the minimum wage. The median income for a mestizo farmworker family in 2008 was $22,500 - hardly a livable wage. But the income for an indigenous farm worker family was $13,750. In part, the difference reflects the lack of legal immigration status for most indigenous migrants. While 53% of all farm workers are undocumented, according to the Department of Labor, the wave of indigenous migration came after the cutoff date (January 1, 1982) for the immigration amnesty in the 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act. When that cutoff date was chosen, it couldn’t have escaped notice by the Act’s authors that Mexico had suffered the “peso shock”
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later in 1982. The subsequent devaluation of the peso aggravated the existing economic crisis in the countryside, and led to the migration of thousands of desperate families, who crossed the border too late for the amnesty.

Low wages in the fields have brutal consequences. In northern San Diego County, many strawberry pickers sleep out of doors on hillsides and in ravines. Each year the county sheriff clears out some of their encampments, but by next season workers have built others. As Romulo Muñoz Vasquez, living on a San Diego hillside, explained: “We’re outsiders. If we were natives here, then we’d probably have a home to live in. But we don’t make enough to pay rent. There isn’t enough money to pay rent, food, transportation and still have money left to send to Mexico. I figured any spot under a tree would do.” And San Diego is not the only California county where workers live under trees or in their cars at harvest time.

Despite their poverty, workers in the U.S. earn three of four times what they do in Mexico, Velasco points out. But the cost of living north of the border is higher too. Migrants quickly begin measuring their earnings, as Muñoz Vasquez did, not in comparison to what they earned in Mexico, but to what it takes to live in the U.S. They can see themselves on the bottom compared also to the standard of living in the U.S. world surrounding them, sometimes falling below the legal minimum.

Even after a decade of activity, “the conditions haven’t changed at all,” Rufino concluded in the mid-90s. “The growers don’t obey the state and federal labor laws. They don’t pay the minimum wage, and sometimes workers are robbed of their wages entirely. People work on piece rate, where they get paid according to what they do. If they pay a dollar a bucket, and I pick 20 buckets in eight hours, they still just pay me $20, even though the law says I’m guaranteed the minimum wage, which (in 1996) would be $34.”

Rufino’s activity brought him into contact with other organizations of indigenous migrants, who were produced by the same flow of displaced people and painful political turmoil that was part of the migrant experience. Some, like Arturo Pimentel, were also militants, and shared with Benito Garcia and Rufino himself a political history on the left and in the PSUM. Rufino’s work organizing OPEO connected him with other indigenous organizers like Filemon Lopez in the Asociación Cívica de Benito Juárez, organized in Fresno in 1986. Sergio Mendez, Alcimiro Morales, and others had organized migrants from Tlacotepec, first as the Comité Cívico Popular Tlacotepeño (closely tied to the PCM, according to Rivera Salgado), and then in the Comité Cívico Popular Mixteco in Vista. They had longstanding ties with the left across the border in Baja California.

Rufino got to know the Organización Regional de Oaxaca (ORO), started in 1988 in Los Angeles, where over 70,000 Zapotec migrants were concentrated. There ORO began organizing the Guelaguetza dance festival in Normandie Park, reproducing the festival in Oaxaca that every year showcases the dances of the state’s indigenous communities. By 1992 The ORO Guelaguetza featured 16 dances from all seven regions of Oaxaca, and for the first time in the U.S., the famous Danza de la Pluma. A decade later at least seven other Guelaguetza festivals had been organized in farm worker towns throughout California.

Laura Velasco argues that “the organizing traditions of these activists came together, which made it possible to mix the tactics and ideas of indigenous rural community organizing, the urban peoples’ movements and the class vision of the leftwing parties of the 80s, especially the PSUM. A new organizing space opened with the experience they’d gained in the fields of California. The conditions of work and displacement created the possibility for new alliances between peoples and ethnic groups.”

Velasco says that many of those organizations and their leaders participated in the first campaigns of Mexican workers to organize in the fields. Jorge and Margarita Giron pruning grapevines near Fresno.
political parties on the U.S. side of the border. In 1988 Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas, a former governor of Michoacán who’d broken with the PRI, became the presidential candidate of the National Democratic Front. Earlier the PSUM had merged with another leftwing party to form the Mexican Socialist Party, and initially fielded its own presidential candidate, Héctor Castillo. When it appeared that Cárdenas could beat the PRI, however, Castillo’s candidacy was withdrawn and they backed Cárdenas instead.

Cárdenas won, by all non-PRI accounts, but the government nevertheless declared the PRI’s Carlos Salinas de Gortari the victor after a fraudulent vote count. Afterwards the PSUM/Mexican Socialist Party merged with Cárdenas supporters who’d broken from the PRI, and formed the Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD). In the process, however, the original socialist ideology of the PCM and PSUM was gradually jettisoned. The PRD eventually became the governing party of Mexico City and several other Mexican states.

In Los Angeles, the four migrant organizations came together on October 5, 1991 and formed the Binational Mixteco/Zapoteco Front. “It then took off in 1992,” Rufino recalled, “when the governing bodies of the world were celebrating the famous 500 years of the discovering of the Americas. They said that Christopher Columbus was welcomed as a grand hero who brought good things. They wouldn’t talk about the massacres or the genocide in our villages. All the indigenous organizations on the American continent protested against this celebration.

“We wanted to tell a different story — that our people were stripped of our culture. They imposed a different God on us, and told us that nature wasn’t worth anything. In reality nature gives us life. Our purpose was to dismantle the old stereotypes, to march, to protest. Afterwards we thought, why not keep organizing for human rights, labor rights, housing, and education?”

Academics began taking note of this growing wave of activism. David Runsten, Carol Zabin and Michael Kearney at the University of California made one of the first surveys of indigenous farm workers in California, showing that settlements in the U.S. were linked to hometowns in Oaxaca, and to other settlements in Baja California. In 1992 Don Villarejo and the California Institute for Rural Studies published a report criticizing California Rural Legal Assistance, the legal aid organization for the state’s farm workers, for not paying attention to this demographic change.

Jose Padilla, CRLA’s director, and Claudia Smith, a CRLA attorney in San Diego, organized a conference to talk about the challenge of providing legal services to farm workers in Mixteco, Triqui and other indigenous languages. Most of the activists urging CRLA to respond, including Rufino, Pimentel, Morales and others, came from the organizations that had formed the Frente Mixteco/Zapoteco. “I knew right away that we needed to hire Rufino, to ensure that we had a strong connection to the leadership of this movement,” says Padilla.

Eventually other Frente members also went to work for CRLA as community outreach workers. Rufino was the first. It was his first step out of the fields, and gave him the opportunity to do political and labor rights work full time. In one of their first battles, Rufino and CRLA fought Chevron Corporation over a toxic dump beneath a trailer park inhabited by families from San Miguel Cuevas, and forced the company to pay several million dollars to resettle them.

Rufino also tried to negotiate a cooperative relationship with the United Farm Workers in the same period, but with much less success. “We recognized that the UFW is a strong union representing agricultural workers. They in turn recognized us as an organization that tries to gain rights for indigenous migrants. Even within the UFW, though, some people said that indigenous people were ‘rompehuelgistas’ [strikebreakers] or ‘esquiroles’ [scabs]. In ‘84 there was a strike in Merced, and we were called these names. But the people from the union only spoke to us in Spanish. They didn’t understand that our people only spoke Mixteco or Zapoteco, so many times, because of the language barrier, we couldn’t understand each other. This treatment doesn’t live up to the political ideals of the union. They should welcome indigenous people, and be more open-minded. In reality, although we felt the union didn’t take us seriously, that campaign was historic because the union finally recognized us in a formal way.”

After the relationship foundered, the UFW mounted a long campaign in the late 1990s to organize strawberry workers in Watsonville, a large percentage of whom are from Oaxaca. There the union suffered from its lack of a more organic connection to indigenous communities. At the same time, Mixteco leader Jesus Estrada and a handful of others organized a strike of strawberry workers in Santa Maria. Those leaders were blacklisted, and no permanent organization emerged from that struggle. But in later years the UFW did develop a different relationship with indigenous workers. It fought immigration raids against the Triqui community in Greenfield, and hired Mixteco and Triqui community leaders there as organizers, even veterans of the teachers’ movement. Rufino and other leaders of the Frente Mixteco/Zapoteco, and the organization that grew out of it, continued to support strikes by Oaxacan workers in San Quintin and Washington State, although they didn’t organize them themselves.

The Birth and Growth of the Frente Indígena de Organizaciones Binacionales

In a conference in Tijuana in 1994 the Frente Mixteco/Zapoteco expanded to include people from other Oaxacan indigenous groups, such as Triquís and Chatinos, and renamed itself the Binational Indigenous Oaxacan Front (FIOB). “Three things made this possible,” Velasco says, “the implementation of the North American Free Trade Agreement, the Zapatista uprising with its demand for indigenous autonomy, and the imposition of Operation Guardian/Gatekeeper on the border in San Diego County.”

The Zapatista uprising on January 1, 1994, had a profound impact on indigenous Mexicans in the U.S. “The rise of
the Zapatista army made it easier for the rise of many indigenous organizations in Mexico and in the whole continent - I would say the world,” Rufino said. “When the Zapatistas rose, the war lasted 8 days. We organized right away - here in California, in Oaxaca and Baja California - with hunger strikes, denouncing the government. When the Zapatistas were detained or their lives were threatened we picketed consulates in Fresno and Los Angeles to pressure the Mexican government. These simultaneous actions helped us realize that when there’s movement in Oaxaca there’s got to be movement in the U.S. also. We put that lesson to use later on, when our own leaders were attacked.

“The Zapatistas helped the mestizos to civilize themselves a little bit. They became more humane, recognizing that indigenous people are human. Afterwards we began to make advances in Mexico in rescuing our languages, and getting laws making it illegal to discriminate against indigenous people. Even outside the framework of the San Andres Accords, we have been able to propose a reform to the law protecting our right to indigenous culture. We are trying to create an institution of the indigenous languages of all of Mexico, not just Mixteco or Zapateco, but for the Purepecha, the Triqui, and the Tarahumara and Mayo people in Sonora, which would create written materials such as dictionaries, books and stories. In addition to Spanish, we want Mixteco, Zapoteco, Tarahumara and other languages taught in the schools, including to mestizos if they live in that region.”

The Zapatistas chose to start their uprising on January 1, 1994, because it was the day the North American Free Trade Agreement went into effect. They warned that the treaty, and the neoliberal development model it was reinforcing, would spell disaster for indigenous communities in Mexico. In the countryside, government policy favored large landholders producing for export, over small ones producing for a national market. That especially affected indigenous communities, which often hold land in common, as well as agricultural communities based on the ejidos established by earlier agrarian reform.

Oaxaca suffered more than most. It is one of the poorest states in Mexico, where the government category of extreme poverty encompasses 75 percent of its 3.4 million residents, according to Servicios Para una Educación Alternativa A.C. (EDUCA). A 2005 study by Ana Margarita Alvarado Juarez published by the Institute for Sociological Investigation of the Autonomous University Benito Juarez of Oaxaca, called “Migration and Poverty in Oaxaca,” says Oaxaca consistently falls far below the national average for every measure of poverty and lack of development.

She cites data by the National Council of Population (CONAPO), that while nationally 9.4% of Mexico’s people are illiterate, in Oaxaca 21.5% are. Nationally 28.4% of students don’t finish elementary school, but in Oaxaca 45.5%, almost half, never complete it. Nationally 4.8% of Mexicans live with no electricity, 11.2% live in homes with no running water, and 14.8 percent walk on dirt floors. In Oaxaca, the numbers are more than double – 12.5%, 26.9% and 41.6% respectively. Only in Chiapas, Mexico’s poorest state, do children get less schooling then Oaxaca’s average of 6.9 years per person.

Displacement of people from Oaxacan communities tracks the growth in poverty. In 1990 the net out migration from Oaxaca was 527,272 (people leaving minus people arriving or returning). In 2000 that number grew to 662,704. In the five years between 2000 and 2005, despite a high birthrate, Oaxaca’s population only grew 0.39%. Eighteen percent of its people have left for other parts of Mexico and the U.S. Oaxacan migration was part of a much larger movement of people. In 1990 4.5 million Mexican migrants lived in the U.S. By 2008 that number had mushroomed to 12.7 million - a little less than 10% of Mexico’s entire population.

“There are no jobs, and NAFTA made the price of
corn so low that it’s not economically possible to plant a crop anymore,” Rufino charged in an interview in 2004. “We come to the U.S. to work because we can’t get a price for our product at home. There’s no alternative. We know the reasons we have to leave. Over 5000 of us have died trying to cross the border in the last decade.”

As Velasco points out, the rising death toll on the border, and the impact of increasing immigration enforcement, including the construction of prisons (“detention centers”) for deportees, had a big impact on indigenous migrants, because of their widespread lack of status. That produced a sense of urgency among the organizations that came together to form the FIOB.

While it sought to build a base of indigenous members from Oaxaca, the FIOB was not a hometown association. In fact, OPEO itself disbanded. “If we have a committee just of people from San Miguel Cuevas, we can’t organize or go beyond it. In the organization of the FIOB, though, all of the communities are working together, to create consciousness, to educate, to orient, and all of the rest. That is the biggest difference,” Rufino explained.

And from the beginning, the FIOB consciously saw itself as a binational organization, and its members as people belonging to binational communities that span the border. Its presence grew, and subsequently several indigenous organizations from the states of Guerrero and Michoacan joined, resulting in a change of its name to the Indigenous Front of Binational Organizations in 2005. At the same time, almost as soon as it started in California, it began to organize back in Oaxaca itself, as well as in Oaxacan communities in Baja California. It set up a structure of local committees that belong to state organizations. Every three years, the FIOB chapters elect delegates to a binational assembly, who choose a binational governing committee, and a binational coordinator responsible to it.

Those triennial assemblies are held in Mexico. In part, this is a practical matter. Indigenous farmers can’t easily come up with the money to travel as delegates to meetings in the U.S. Even if they could, getting visas would be virtually impossible. U.S. consulates suspect that poor Oaxacans trying to visit California are just looking for a way to cross the border to stay and work. Consequently, the FIOB’s Mexican assemblies always draw far more delegates from Mexico than from the U.S. While the leaders of the FIOB in the 1990s came from the migrant organizations and movement in the U.S., its growth in Oaxaca has slowly been shifting the organization’s center of gravity, and its political activity, to the south.

Being accountable to decisions by its base communities is not just rhetoric. The FIOB’s first director, Juan Martinez, who’d been the coordinator of the Asociacion Civica Benito Juarez, was removed because he organized a conference in Oaxaca without agreement from other leaders, and to make it worse, invited the governor of Oaxaca to participate. FIOB’s second director, Arturo Pimentel, was expelled for running for office in Oaxaca while refusing to give up his position as the FIOB binational coordinator (required by the bylaws) and for misappropriating the organization’s funds. Rufino was the FIOB’s third binational coordinator, from 2001 to 2008, and was followed by Gaspar Rivera Salgado. All were leaders of the FIOB and its predecessor organizations in California.

In 2011 Rivera Salgado stepped down, and his successor, Bernardo Ramirez, lived in the heart of the Mixteca region of Oaxaca. Ramirez worked five seasons in the fields of the United States, an experience shared with most FIOB delegates. His election, however, signaled that the organization’s center of gravity was moving more firmly into Mexico. Ramirez was followed by Romualdo Juan Gutierrez Cortez, the FIOB’s current binational coordinator, a teacher and former leader of the state’s teachers union.

From the beginning, one of the biggest problems the FIOB organizers faced was the participation of women. According to FIOB activist Irma Luna, “the subject of domestic violence is taboo in the Oaxaqueño community, but it happens often. “Many women are used to taking abuse. Divorce and separation are not options and they feel they have to stay in that environment,” Luna charges. She comes from San Miguel
Cuevas, like Rufino, although she was born when her parents were working in Sinaloa. Rufino recruited her when she and her husband moved to Fresno, and encouraged her to resist losing her ability to speak Mixteco. Luna followed Rufino in going to work for CRLA, and he asked her to organize a FIOB program to stop domestic violence.

“After I began to work in the domestic violence team, I noticed that when I spoke about it, people would slowly leave the room,” she recalled in Communities Without Borders. “Others would ask why I was telling women to call the police on their husbands. When I would go to the radio station to talk about my project, listeners called to ask why I was giving this information to the women. It is a problem that goes back to Mexico, but there is a lot of pressure in the United States too. Immigration only adds to the domestic violence problem. But now there is more support in towns in Oaxaca for women to report their husbands, and many women send their husbands to jail after receiving a brutal beating.

“Now I am a community worker and help people working in farm labor. When they don’t have portable bathrooms, or if their employer refuses to pay them their wages, I go the worksite and investigate. I knew I wasn’t going to be a woman that would just stay at home and have about ten children and wait to see what life imposed on me.”

Oralia Maceda showed up in California in 1998, when she was 22, planning to stay a month. She’d worked in the FIOB office in Oaxaca, but complained that she had to ask permission from its director, Arturo Pimentel, before she could do anything. Gaspar Rivera Salgado brought her into the Fresno office where she met Rufino. “Rufino asked me if I was interested in working with women, and I agreed,” she recalled. “At first there were few women involved in FIOB. Rufino asked me to share my experiences in Oaxaca, and we started going to different cities – Fresno, Selma, Santa Maria, and Santa Rosa. He was always doing something and he never got tired. It motivated me to see him going.”

Rufino saw that Maceda had organizing skills, and tried to help her develop them. “In Oaxaca you are not allowed to go to the agency [local government office] and sit with the presidents, because you are a woman,” she charges. “Another issue was my age. I would advise older women how to care for their children and they would get upset. But thanks to Rufino’s support, in California I was able to do this work. As Mixteca women we created a calendar that showed our stories, and then we created a memory book. We tried to create a youth group. We organized a meeting in a ranch, and 20 young people participated. But sometimes only 2 or 3 people would show up for meetings I organized. When things went wrong I’d ask Rufino why he didn’t say anything first. He told me that if I have an idea I should go ahead with it, and if it went wrong I would learn from it, instead of him just telling me how to do things.

“Today, women sometimes participate more than men. Their biggest obstacle is the lack of time. They have to work in the fields, and take care of their families. They don’t have childcare. I believe men have to be more conscious of women’s needs, so they can participate. But right now there is room for women and their ideas to develop.”

Odilia Romero, who anchored FIOB in Los Angeles, was elected the first woman as binational coordinator at the March 2018 assembly in Huajuapan, Oaxaca. Romero and Rufino worked closely together from the organization’s first years. Brought by her parents from San Bartolome Zoogocho, she witnessed as a child the town’s depopulation - the formative experience of thousands of Oaxacan migrants. “In the 80s there were about a thousand people there,” she remembers. “Then we started leaving to the city of Oaxaca, and then to the U.S., until only 88 were people left. All of a sudden on a Thursday, for instance, people would leave, and us children were left behind.”

Maylei Blackwell. Associate Professor of Chicana & Chicano Studies and Gender Studies at UCLA, says Romero has a “rebellious spirit that has characterized her since childhood.” Blackwell recorded her oral history, in which Romero says, “my rebellion helps me to hope that a better society is possible.”

Before meeting Rufino Romero read an article he’d written about the FIOB. “It talked about how it started, and that some of its leaders were fired for corruption and negative actions towards the members,” she remembers. “I was very touched because I found what I was looking for. An organization that speaks of its triumphs and barriers is worthy of admiration.” Rufino encouraged her to join, and then to organize.

“We are not going to have Barbie positions here,” Romero declares. “The Frente is one of the few organizations that truly gives us space to talk about gender, with the intention of going from talk into action, so that women have a real role ... We have to take up some of the good things of the indigenous peoples, of an egalitarian society, and implement it as an indigenous organization, but also talk about the things we do not like. One of the things we do not like is to exclude women.”

Laura Velasco worked with Romero and another woman in FIOB leadership, Centolia Maldonado, an activist in Oaxaca who developed the evidence that led to the expulsion of Arturo Pimentel. Maldonado herself was eventually expelled amid accusations of sexism among FIOB leaders (an accusation that Romero also made). Velasco says she’s still angry about it, “but Rufino always treated women in the organization with friendship and respect. He and Gaspar were among the few in a conflict clearly about sex who were ethical and sympathetic towards Maldonado. Both she and Romero were very important in Rufino’s development as a leader, and in the development of FIOB’s gender policy.”

The FIOB also organized its members in the U.S. to advocate for immigration reform. In its 2005 binational assembly the FIOB passed a resolution condemning guest worker programs. That set it apart from many migrant rights organizations in the U.S. at the time, many of whom were willing to accept new programs (supposedly with greater rights for migrants), in exchange for legalization for the undocumented. While Mexico’s government was also calling for the negotiation of a new bracero program, Rufino charged that “migrants
need the right to work, but these workers don’t have labor rights or benefits. It’s like slavery.’

Gaspar Rivera Salgado, who guided the development of FIOB’s immigration program, connected migrant rights with the right to not migrate. “Both rights are part of the same solution,” he explained. “We have to change the debate from one in which immigration is presented as a problem to a debate over rights. The real problem is exploitation.” The FIOB position also emphasized language rights for migrant communities and respect for their indigenous culture.

Organizing for immigrant rights was more than taking a political position; it was part of building the FIOB’s membership base. In the early 2000s, Lorenzo Oropeza, a FIOB activist who also worked for CRLA, organized a chapter among a group of Triqui farm workers living out of doors in the reeds beside the Russian River in Sonoma County. Fausto Lopez, the group’s leader, explained, “I joined the FIOB because Lorenzo speaks my native language. He is Mixteco and we are Triqui, but he works with all Oaxaqueños. Since we’re from the same state we’re all the same. Then our local group elected me to represent them. I traveled to various parts of California with Lorenzo and met with other leaders. A lot of us farm workers don’t know our rights, and the FIOB teaches us. We also work for amnesty for immigrants, because so many of us cross the border illegally and so many die in the process.”

The Right to Stay Home

The FIOB, especially those leaders like Sergio Mendez who were veterans of the strikes and social movements of San Quintin, built chapters in Tijuana, Ensenada and the San Quintin Valley. After Pimentel’s expulsion, however, his supporters left, taking many members from the Baja chapters. Then in 2001 Julio Sandoval, a Triqui migrant from Yosoyuxi, Oaxaca, was imprisoned for leading a land occupation in Cañon Bue navista, an hour south of the U.S. border. He spent two years in the Federal prison in Ensenada. His supporters came to the FIOB binational assembly that year for help. After his release he was an active participant in the assemblies in 2005 and 2008.

Beatriz Chavez and Julio Cesar Alonzo were the two organizers for CIOAC in San Quintin at the end of the 1990s. Chavez led land occupations also, among Triqui and Mixteco farm workers. Like Sandoval was sent to the Ensenada prison. Her health was destroyed by her incarceration, however, and she died not long after her release. Despite the repression, however, the FIOB chapters were reorganized, and when farm workers in San Quintin again went on strike in 2015 the FIOB members were active participants.

When the FIOB began to organize in Oaxaca itself, “we began with various productive projects such as the planting of the Chinese pomegranate, the forajero cactus, and strawberries,” Rufino explained, “so that families of migrants in the U.S. would have an income to survive.” Those efforts grew into five separate offices in the state, and a membership base larger than that in the U.S. in more than 70 towns. In 1999, the Frente entered into an alliance with the PRD and elected Gutierrez Cortez to the state Chamber of Deputies in District 21. “For the first time we beat the caciques,” Rufino declared proudly.

Following his term in the state Chamber of Deputies, Gutierrez was imprisoned by then-Governor Jose Murat, until a binational campaign, with demonstrations organized by the FIOB at Mexican consulates throughout California, won his release. While the spurious charges against him were quickly dropped, his real crime was insisting on a new path of economic development that would raise rural living standards, and on the political right to organize independently for that
goal. “Before my arrest I thought we had a decent justice system,” he said. “Then I saw that the people in jail weren’t the rich or well educated, but the poor and those who work hard for a living.”

Gutierrez was a teacher in Tecomaxtlahuaca, a town in the FIOB’s main base region in the Mixteca. He and other teachers in the FIOB have been leaders in the state teachers union, Section 22 of the CNTE. In June 2006 a strike by Section 22 led to a months-long uprising, led by the Popular Alliance of People’s Organizations (APPO). FIOB leaders, along with other teachers, helped organize the protests. The APPO sought to remove the state’s governor, Ulises Ruiz, and make a basic change in development and economic policy. Ezequiel Rosales, who led the union during the strike and insurrection of 2006, later became the FIOB’s Oaxaca state coordinator. The experience of Oaxaca-based activists led to discussions of a new way to look at it.

“Migration is a necessity, not a choice,” explained Gutierrez. “There is no work here. You can’t tell a child to study to be a doctor if there is no work for doctors in Mexico. It is a very daunting task for a Mexican teacher to convince students to get an education and stay in the country. It is disheartening to see a student go through many hardships to get an education here and become a professional, and then later in the United States do manual labor. Sometimes those with an education are working side by side with others who do not even know how to read.” He described the bitter feeling of talking to students whose family members were making more money at a blue collar job in the U.S. than he made as the teacher trying to convince them of the value of education.

As the FIOB organized its June 2008 binational assembly, dozens of farmers left their fields, and women weavers their looms, to debate the right to stay home instead of being forced to leave Oaxaca to survive. In the community center of Santiago Juxtlahuaca, two hundred Mixtec, Zapotec and Triqui farmers, and a delegation of their relatives working in the U.S., made impassioned speeches, their hot arguments echoing from the cinderblock walls of the cavernous hall. People repeated one phrase over and over: el derecho de no migrar – the right to not migrate.

Asserting this right challenges not just the inequality and exploitation facing migrants, but the reasons why people have to migrate to begin with. Indigenous communities were pointing to the need for social change to deal with displacement and the root causes of migration. It was this need that drove the uprising in Oaxaca in 2006.

“We need development that makes migration a choice rather than a necessity -- the right to not migrate,” said Gaspar Rivera Salgado. “We will find the answer to migration in our communities of origin. To make the right to not migrate concrete, we need to organize the forces in our communities, and combine them with the resources and experiences we’ve accumulated in 16 years of cross-border organizing. Migration is part of globalization, an aspect of state policies that expel people. Creating an alternative to that requires political power. There’s no way to avoid that.”

Repression of the 2006 uprising by Oaxaca’s state government led teachers in Section 22, as well as the FIOB, the PRD and many civil society organizations in Oaxaca, to organize to get rid of the PRI. In the election of 2010, Gabino Cue Monteagudo, the former mayor of Oaxaca city, was elected governor by an unwieldy alliance between the PRD on the left, and the National Action Party on the right.

Following the election, Governor Cue held a meeting with FIOB leaders from both Oaxaca and California, in which they proposed measures to implement the right to not migrate. “We are going to create a Oaxaca in which migration isn’t the fated destiny of our rural and urban population,” he
promised. FIOB’s binational coordinator at the time, Gaspar Rivera Salgado, responded that “FIOB has struggled for twenty years for the rights of migrants, and now we want to fight for the right to not migrate, to change people’s actual living conditions so that migration isn’t their only alternative.”

Cue appointed Rufino Dominguez to head an office charged with defending the interests of migrants, the Instituto Oaxaqueño de Atencion al Migrante (the Oaxacan Institute for Attention to Migrants, IOAM). And when FIOB held its next binational assembly in 2011 in Oaxaca city, the gathering was opened by speeches from Rufino and other officials in the new state administration.

“Rufino was always more skeptical of electoral party politics than many of us, and thought that the political process corrupts people,” Rivera Salgado remembers. “We really had to twist his arm to get him to agree to accept Cue’s offer. We chose him because we knew he wouldn’t get corrupted. It was part of the policy he’d agreed to, and he had to walk the walk. In the end he embraced the challenge, and said he wouldn’t run away from it. But he always regretted the decision, and it turned into a very bitter experience for him.”

At Oaxaca’s 2011 celebration of the International Day of the Migrant on December 16, Rufino honored the first of Oaxaca’s migrant workers to travel to the United States as braceros, from 1942 to 1964, and the women who cared for the families they left behind. Around the balconies of the interior courtyard of the Palacio del Gobierno, the ornate colonial state capitol building, he’d hung photographs showing the lives of current migrants from Oaxaca, working as farm laborers in California. Later he exhibited the photographs in many of the main towns sending migrants into the U.S.

“We want to show young people the reality of work in the north, so that they won’t have illusions that life is easy there. While migration is their right, and we’ll fight for their rights as migrants, we want them to think of having a future here. Our starting point is to understand the need for economic development,” Rufino told the former braceros and other community leaders, “because the reason for migration is the lack of work and opportunity in people’s communities of origin. If we don’t attack the roots of migration, it will continue to grow. We have to attack economic development, and respect for the human rights of migrants as they come and go.”

Featuring former braceros in the celebration illustrated one element of IOAM’s list of its accomplishments in its first year. Some 4,470 Oaxacans worked in the U.S. during the bracero period, and were very old. The Cue administration gave 10,000 pesos (about $800) to each worker, or to their surviving family members. The gesture sought to compensate to a small degree for the fact that braceros had money deducted from their wages while working in the U.S., which then disappeared once they returned to Mexico.

Rufino headed a state agency in a government in which the left was weak, and as a result the IOAM was always starved for funds. Nevertheless it invested 1.6 million pesos in a program to help women to get more training in developing new styles for artisan products, and worked on a program for housing improvement in communities with high rates of emigration. IOAM and teachers in Section 22 cooperated with activist teachers from California’s Sacramento State University and the Davis campus of the University of California; together they trained teachers of migrant education to work in New York, California and Michigan among Oaxacan students.

Rufino and Romualdo Juan Gutierrez Cortez, appointed as his deputy, worked on the problems faced by migrants crossing into the U.S., as well as Central American migrants passing through Oaxaca itself. In Ciudad Ixtepec it helped create a Grupo Beta police team responsible for investigating and halting the widespread robberies and rapes suffered by Central American migrants. And facing the high rate of deportations from the U.S. (about 1 million during the first 2.5 years of the Obama administration), IOAM helped to repatriate 22,454 Oaxacan deportees during its first six months of operation.

Rufino signed an agreement in January 2012 with the United Food and Commercial Workers Union, to cooperate in protecting the labor rights of Oaxacans working in Canada as guest workers. “We have to make sure they understand their rights and how to enforce them,” he declared. The agreement promised friction, however, with the consulates appointed by Mexico’s federal government. They were, and are, notorious for discouraging guest workers in Canada and the U.S. from making complaints about violations of labor rights, or demanding wages and unions that would make them less attractive to employers.

At the same time, however, Cue began to pressure Rufino and the IOAM to support the recruitment of guest workers in Oaxaca. Cue believed that encouraging recruitment would be politically popular, and that the remittances sent home by those workers would help economic development. While the FIOB had historically opposed those programs, Rufino had to support the government’s policy if he intended to keep his appointment. “I think he was also tired of documenting the deaths on the border,” Velasco recalled. “He began
accepting the argument that guest worker programs would provide a safer way for people to do what they were going to do anyway - cross the border. And he was feeling more and more that he had no power to change the basic situation. In his tours through Oaxaca he saw clearly that migration was beating down communities. When he fought against guest worker programs in the FIOB he was fighting for the long term rights and sustainability of those communities. But later, in the IOAM, he was just trying to deal with the immediate crisis.”

Rufino endured harsh criticism and attacks during his period as IOAM director, which undermined any feelings of accomplishment he otherwise might have had. “When a militant activist becomes part of the government there’s a kind of isolation from the base and a lot of criticism.” Velasco says. “It’s very different from what happens when the left takes power. Somehow he was able to navigate alone, with few resources.” In the end, though, his position became untenable.

At the beginning of Cue’s administration, the teachers had negotiated the governor’s support for their progressive education reform program. The Program for the Transformation of Education in Oaxaca concentrated on respecting indigenous culture and forging alliances between teachers, students, parents, and their communities. Teachers also wanted better conditions. “A typical teacher earns about 2200 pesos every two weeks [about $220],” according to Jaime Medina, a reporter for Oaxaca’s daily Noticias. “From that they have to purchase chalk, pencils and other school supplies for the children.”

Cue also promised not to implement the draconian corporate education reform demanded by the PAN, and then the PRI administrations in Mexico City. Those reforms included mandatory testing of teachers and students, and terminations of teachers. It sought to eliminate the power of teacher unions in states like Oaxaca, and to eventually abolish the normales - the radical teacher training schools. Still fresh in people’s memory was the disappearance, and probable murder, of 43 students at the “normal” training school in Ayotzinapa two years earlier.

As the Federal pressure mounted, Cue caved in and agreed to implement the Federal reforms. In the spring of 2016 teachers struck across Mexico to try to stop them. On Sunday, June 19, 2016, demonstrators blocked a highway in Nochixtlan, not far from Oaxaca’s capital, after the Federal government arrested leaders of Section 22. Heavily armed police then fired on teachers, students, parents and supporters. Nine people were killed, and many more were wounded. Nochixtlan became a symbol throughout Mexico of the teachers’ resistance to corporate education reform, and in Oaxaca, of the Cue administration’s betrayal of teachers and the movement that put him in office. Three days after the massacre, Rufino resigned and went back to California.

Returning was a heavy blow personally. In the late 1990s Rufino and his first wife, who had four children together, were divorced. “I got divorced because I was away from them too much,” he said later. “I dedicated more of my time to the community, to meetings, than to my family. After 15 years of being married, we had to separate. My wife and family thought that because I preferred this work it was obvious that I didn’t love them, that it was irresponsible for me not to give them the time that they deserved or needed. But it was hard for me to see so many problems and not do anything about them. I wanted to make a difference. So it was very difficult for me to say no. Divorce is still not too common in our community, but more people get divorced now. With time it will be something more normal, I think.”

Oralia Maceda fell in love with Rufino as they worked together in Fresno, and eventually they were married and had two children. When Rufino was appointed the director of the IOAM, Maceda had to sacrifice her work and the chance to use her considerable organizing skills to move to Oaxaca. Nevertheless, they bought a house near the airport, where they lived during his work for IOAM. After leaving Oaxaca, they returned to Fresno. Rufino went to work for the FIOB’s fundraising arm, the Binational Center for Indigenous Oaxacan Development, trying to reorganize its office in Greenfield, in the Salinas Valley. He soon discovered that he had a brain tumor, and after struggling with doctors and hospitals for a year, he died on November 11, 2017.

In bringing his body back for burial in her hometown of Paxtlaahuca, an hour from Juxtlahuaca, Maceda completed an odyssey that had begun for her two decades earlier, when her brother asked her to go to a FIOB workshop on human rights. “They talked about the Agreement of San Andres, the autonomy of indigenous people and why we needed to support the Zapatistas,” she remembered. “I wondered why in school no one had told me about this. So I started to think. I am still upset that no one told me before that I was an indigenous person, or taught me the language. As a child, when I would say a word in Mixteco, my grandpa would get mad and say that word is only used by Indians. My mom was not allowed to speak in Mixteco. When I got involved with FIOB I realized that I was indigenous too.”

Rufino’s Contribution

Migrant scholar Jorge Hernandez, at the Benito Juarez Autonomous University of Oaxaca, traces the evolution of Rufino’s ideas in a 2005 article for the Oaxacan magazine, En Marcha. “His ideological journey can be seen in a curious detail of his family life - the names of his children,” Hernandez writes. “The oldest is Lenin, and the next is Ivan, born at a time when Rufino was beginning his political life. Although he doesn’t call himself a Marxist-Leninist, it was in organizations with those ideas that he began his political development. The third is named Ruben, in honor of Ruben Jaramillo [a leader of the Mexican Revolution and movements for land reform, who organized a guerilla struggle against the government of the 1950s], born when Rufino was part of the popular struggles. His daughter, Tonyndeye, has a Mixtec name, which speaks to Rufino’s concern for the defense of migrants and indigenous identity. Only his fourth son, Esteban, was
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Note on names and sources:

I follow the normal convention with all the names, referring to people by their last name, except in the case of Rufino himself. In part this is to separate him from his father at the beginning, but also because it gives a feeling of familiarity rather than distance, which seems appropriate to me.

The sources for almost all the quotes are from my own interviews with the people quoted, conducted over the last 17 years. A few are from other, written sources, which are noted in the text itself. I note that one of the main interviews with Rufino took place when I did a first attempt at an oral history, in the summer of 2002. In that case I note in the text that it was for a book, Communities Without Borders, published in 2006. Other interviews, like that of Irma Luna and Oralia Maceda, were made in the same period. There are many others that would add detail new perspectives to this history, some of which were published in that book and in The Right to Stay Home.