Work & Social Justice
The David Bacon Photography Archive at Stanford
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Frontispiece:

Page 2:
A crew of immigrant Mexican farm workers pollinates dates on palm trees in a grove in California’s Coachella Valley. Thermal, California, United States, 1992.

Contents
6 Acknowledgments David Bacon
7 Preface Roberto Trujillo and Benjamin L. Stone
9 Placing the Bacon Archive in Stanford’s Special Collections Benjamin L. Stone
14 Tarps, Tents and Bush: The Worker Art of David Bacon Jose Padilla
17 Introduction Michael A. Keller

PHOTOGRAPHS
20 Farm Workers
30 Immigrant Workers
42 Mexico
54 Migration and the Border
66 Poverty and Social Protest
78 From Davao to Baghdad

DAVID BACON ORAL HISTORY
90 Excerpts from an Interview with David Bacon Meredith Blasingame
Preface

The Stanford Libraries acquired the David Bacon Photography Archive in the winter of 2019. The archive is extensive, encompassing some 200,000 images and including original film negatives, color transparencies, selected prints, and digital files. With a focus on labor and social justice it is one of the Stanford Libraries' largest collections of documentary photography and a primary resource of great value to Stanford's teaching and research programs.

David Bacon has been a social activist his entire adult life. A union organizer for two decades, he began working as an independent photographer and journalist starting in the mid-1980s, documenting the lives and social movements of migrants, farm workers, and communities impacted by globalization. His work spans multiple geographic regions including the United States, Latin America, southeast Asia, Europe, and Iraq, with an emphasis on California and the United States-Mexico border.

Bacon's photographs reveal powerful, often personal images of people on the margins of society. Farm workers bent double in the fields; hotel workers with hands cracked from harsh chemicals reaching into the depths of massive laundry machines; protestors erupting in the streets; migrant workers living under the trees in hillsides outside of San Diego. Overarchingly, he has created a record of contemporary social reality and a photographic history of people, the global economy, and the struggle for human rights.

For close to forty years the Stanford Libraries have actively collected archival materials that chronicle the history of social-change movements in the United States and abroad. They are among the most heavily used materials in the Department of Special Collections and University Archives, regularly consulted by Stanford students, faculty, and outside scholars. Now, they also provide deep and rich context for the images in the David Bacon Photography Archive. Selected images from the archive are available for noncommercial use through the Libraries' SearchWorks online catalog and the online Spotlight exhibit. We invite you to experience the online exhibition at: https://exhibits.stanford.edu/bacon.

There are many people to thank for enabling the acquisition of the David Bacon Archive and making it available for use. We came to meet David Bacon in May 2012 through Ignacio Ornelas Rodriguez, a staff member in the Department of Special Collections at Stanford and a Ph.D. candidate in American History at University of California, Santa Cruz. In the course of his research on the Mexican condition in the United States he had become personally acquainted with David; and it was Ignacio who initially inquired about David's archive finding a home at Stanford and arranged the first meeting with him.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank the following people: Roberto Trujillo, Ben Stone, Ignacio Ornelas Rodriguez, Deardra Fuzzell, Laura Wilsey, Glynn Edwards, and all of the staff at Stanford, and Cynthia Herron, who made it possible for the archive to find a home at Stanford. My mother, who was a librarian for many years, would be proud, and I thank her for teaching me the value of libraries, not just as storehouses of knowledge, but as resources for our efforts to understand our world and change it. I am also grateful to have had the good fortune of working with a collective of like-minded photographers that includes Charisse Domingo, Brooke Anderson, Najib Joe Hakim, Ron Orlando, and many others. I am thankful to those who came before me; I stand on the shoulders of the photographers who saw the world and wanted to change it, as I do, specifically Alexander Rodchenko, Hansel Mieth, and Otto Hagel. I’ve belonged to unions all my life, and I thank especially my sisters and brothers in the one I belong to today, the Pacific Media Workers Guild, and the one that educated me, the United Farm Workers. The editors who have supported and published my work over the years are many, and I thank all of them, especially Sandy Close, Harold Meyerson, and Naomi Schneider. Additionally, my coworkers and friends in Mexico all deserve a lot of credit for teaching me the meaning of our shared commitment to both of our countries. And there are so many friends and compañeros—I thank and acknowledge all you’ve given me. Finally, my beautiful wife, Lillian and daughters, Miel, Yolanda, and Miki supported this work and me as a person through thick and thin, as did my brother, Dan. We’re family; what more can I say?

David Bacon
We are grateful to Michael A. Keller, Stanford University Librarian, Matt Marostica, Associate University Librarian for Public Services and Collection Development, Adin Griego, Curator for Latin American, Iberian & Mexican American Collections, and Peter Blank, Photography Curator, who supported the acquisition proposal.

The exhibition and catalogue are the joint effort of Ben Stone, Roberto Trujillo, Deardra Fuzzell, and Ignacio Ornelas Rodriguez. Many people worked tirelessly to make the online photo galleries available through Stanford SearchWorks and Spotlight including Glynn Edwards, Laura Wilsey, Lucayo Casillas, Laura Nguyen, Christy Smith, Annie Schweikert, Sally DeBauche, Cathy Aster, and Gary Geisler. Elizabeth Rhein skillfully copyedited the text. Deardra Fuzzell managed the production, design, and installation of the exhibition and the catalogue. Pasha Tope artfully co-designed the exhibition catalogue.

David Bacon was involved and consulted throughout the process of image selection, writing, printing, design, and installation work; for this we thank him profusely.

The David Bacon photography archive is our history.

Placing the Bacon Archive in Stanford’s Special Collections

For the past four decades, the Stanford University Libraries have actively collected archival materials that chronicle the history of modern civil rights and social change movements in the United States, most notably the movements for Mexican American civil rights. These collections are among the most heavily used resources in the Department of Special Collections and University Archives. They provide copious research and teaching opportunities and are regularly consulted by Stanford students and faculty, as well as external researchers. Now they also provide a deep and rich context for the images in the David Bacon Photography Archive.

At their core, David Bacon’s photographs reveal powerful images of individuals working, organizing, and demonstrating for social change. Since 1985, Bacon has been a full-time photojournalist, chronicling the lives and struggles of working men, women, and children. His images include powerful depictions of such celebrated labor leaders as Cesar Chavez, Dolores Huerta, Fred Abad, Pete Velasco, Bert Corona, and the Rev. Jesse Jackson, but his most powerful images are of workers themselves: farm workers and hotel workers, laundry workers and factory workers. From Mexico to California, from the apple orchards of Washington State to the oil fields of Iraq, Bacon has captured thousands of vital images of national and international movements over the course of his career, images that augment and complement existing civil rights–related collections at Stanford, and add a significant dimension of labor organizing to the archives. At the same time, Bacon’s photographic aesthetic has also captured a deep sense of the humanity of his subjects as individuals.

Building on a history of activist photography

The synergies between David Bacon’s archive and that of Bob Fitch (1939–2016), which the Stanford Libraries acquired in 2013, are strong and important. Like Bacon, Fitch was an activist photographer who participated in movements of nonviolent protest. Fitch documented an earlier generation of civil rights activists, capturing the rise of Cesar Chavez and the United Farm Workers in California in the late 1960s and 1970s, while Bacon’s images of Chavez and the UFW in the 1980s and 1990s carry the story into a new era. Fitch captured powerful images of protest with the antiwar movement in the late 1960s and the Black Panther Party in the early 1970s. Bacon’s images of protests around immigrant rights, labor rights, poverty and homelessness, and the impacts of globalization capture some of the most important movements for social change in the 1990s and 2000s.
Allied photography, film, and art collections

Bacon’s images expand on themes within the Bob Fitch archive, adding a body of work that is international in scope and intensely focused on labor activism and immigrant rights. Bacon’s focus on workers and social conditions in indigenous Mexican communities, especially the Mixtec and Triqui communities in Oaxaca, also has synergies with The Chiapas Photography Project (CPP, El Proyecto Fotográfico de Chiapas) archive, acquired by the Stanford Libraries in 2018. The CPP was founded by Sister Carlota Duarte in 1992 and provides opportunities for indigenous Maya peoples in Chiapas, Mexico, to use photography to document themselves and their communities from their own perspectives. Additionally, Bacon’s photographs of immigrant workers from Mexico have strong synergies with even older images of Braceros (Mexican men contracted to work in US farm fields in the 1940s, ’50s, and ’60s) found in the Ernesto Galarza Papers and recently explored more fully with the Bracero Legacy Project, led by Ignacio Ornelas Rodriguez, a historian and staff member in the Department of Special Collections who grew up in Salinas, and Daniel Ruanova, a visual artist from Tijuana. Bacon’s images of homelessness and urban poverty in California draw parallels with the work of San Francisco photographer Ira Nowinski, whose archives acquired by Stanford include images of the protests against the International Hotel evictions in the 1970s, as well as collections depicting southeast Asian refugees in San Francisco’s Tenderloin in 1981 and San Francisco’s South of Market Filipino community in 1994.

Many other Stanford collections contain further avenues for symbiotic research, especially in the rich areas of Chicana/o photography, film, and art. These related collections include the papers and photographs of photographer Laura Aguilar, the archive of San Francisco filmmaker and screenwriter Lourdes Portillo, the collection of pioneering artist Ester Hernandez, and the papers of Harry Gamboa Jr., essayist, photographer, director, and performance artist.

The Mexican-American Civil Rights Movement

David Bacon’s decades-long documentation of the movement for Mexican American civil rights, especially his coverage of the United Farm Workers in California, is linked to a very large corpus of archival holdings at Stanford. Besides the Ernesto Galarza Papers, these include the Fred Ross Papers, the Elizabeth “Betita” Sutherland Martinez Papers, the Bert Corona Papers, the Herman Gallegos Papers, the Frank Bardacke Papers, the Mexican American Legal Defense Fund (MALDEF) Papers, the California Rural Legal Assistance (CRLA) Papers, the Centro de Acción Social Autónomo (CASA) Papers, and the National Council of La Raza (NCLR) Records.

Right: On May Day immigrants and their supporters marched through the streets of Oakland. Marchers protested a growing wave of raids and deportations, and efforts by the Federal government to force employers to fire workers for lack of immigration visas. Oakland, California, United States, 2008
Each of these holds a unique place in movement history. Ernesto Galarza, a Mexican American labor activist, professor, poet, and writer, helped to organize California farm workers in the National Farm Labor Union in the 1940s, an important United Farm Workers (UFW) precursor. As founder of the Community Service Organization, Fred Ross was a pioneering organizer who mentored Cesar Chavez and worked closely with the UFW. Betita Martínez served on the national staff of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and championed the UFW. Bert Corona helped to lead and found several key organizations devoted to Mexican American labor and civil rights, including Asociación Nacional México-Americana (ANMA) and the Mexican-American Political Association (MAPA). Herman Gallegos, an activist and community organizer, helped to found the NCLR and led the Community Service Organization in the early 1960s alongside Cesar Chavez. The papers of Frank Bardacke, historian, author, educator, trade unionist, and political activist, contain rich interview content with many UFW leaders and rank and file members.

The MALDEF, CRLA, and NCLR papers comprise the archives of organizations that have long fought for Mexican American civil rights. MALDEF, incorporated in 1967, has evolved into one of the most influential and effective organizations working to protect the civil rights of Mexican Americans and Latinos throughout the United States. Founded in 1966, CRLA is a legal advocacy organization for the rural poor in California, focusing primarily on issues faced by Mexican American migrant workers. Many of the materials in this collection provide additional insight into the legal issues confronted by MALDEF, including bilingual education and the rights of undocumented immigrants. NCLR, originally the Southwest Council of La Raza, was founded in February 1968 as a private, nonprofit, nonpartisan organization established to reduce poverty and discrimination and improve life opportunities for Hispanic Americans primarily in Arizona, California, Colorado, New Mexico, and Texas.

Archives relating to workers’ rights and anti-globalization protests

Synergies between David Bacon’s archive and other Stanford holdings extend beyond the struggle for Mexican American civil rights. In 2018 Stanford began a partnership with veterans of the League of Revolutionary Struggle, a group of African American, Asian American, and Chicana/o activists, along with progressive whites, that fought for immigrant rights, affordable housing, labor organizing, and the student and women’s movements. The partnership has worked to preserve print publications, chiefly the organization’s newspaper Unity/La Unidad, published from 1978 to 1990 in English, Spanish, and Chinese. The Department of Special Collections is also working to preserve photographs and digital archives created by the organization.

Bacon’s extensive documentation of protests against the World Trade Organization draws parallels with the activities of Global Exchange, a San Francisco–based nonprofit organization whose records the Stanford Libraries acquired in 2001. Global Exchange helped to organize the mass protests against the WTO Summit in Seattle in 1997, launched a campaign for fair trade coffee, and has been a leader in a variety of actions against globalization.

The David Bacon Photography Archive brings a rich visual dimension to Stanford’s already strong holdings in archival materials dealing with movements for social change, especially for the rights of Mexican Americans in modern America. Through Bacon’s powerful images, scholars and researchers are sure to discover new and important ways of asking questions of these and subsequent collections.

Benjamin L. Stone
Curator for American and British History
Associate Director, Department of Special Collections
The Stanford University Libraries
Tarps, Tents and Bush: The Worker Art of David Bacon

Founded in 1966 through a grant from the US Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO), California Rural Legal Assistance (CRLA) was the first federally funded rural legal services program as well as the first such statewide program in California. CRLA provides legal services to farm workers, particularly migrant farm workers, and the rural poor in California. José R. Padilla has been the director since 1984. James D. Lorenz Jr. was the founding director of CRLA and organizers Cesar Chavez, Dolores Huerta, and Larry Itliong were members of its founding board. There have now been five other directors: Cruz Reynoso, Martin R. Glick, Richard Baca, Alberto Saldamando, and the current director, José R. Padilla, whose tenure began in 1984.

The first David Bacon photograph I ever saw was of a date palm tree trimmer on a high, dangerous work ladder in a Coachella Valley, California, palm grove. I no longer recall enough detail to fully support the memory, but I remember that it accompanied a Thanksgiving editorial in the San Francisco Chronicle educating readers about the hands that fed the urban consumer. It was when I asked CRLA staff if anyone had assisted Mr. Bacon in the endeavor that I learned that David was already in a CRLA collaboration. Our outreach workers, called Community Workers (cw), accompanied him into the fields they monitored for labor, health, and safety violations. The cw is our key link to the farm worker because a critical part of CRLA legal advocacy is community legal education regarding such subjects as wage theft, sexual harassment, health and safety, the right to clean drinking water, the right to have bathrooms, and the right to receive a minimum wage. The cw is the critical advocate in CRLA’s community education task.

As a writer, David developed a unique method of photojournalism—photographing the subject but not disconnecting from the human story in their living community. For me, it was an image I saw of a child farm worker in the San Diego County fields that captured the essence of why this collaboration was so important. These indigenous workers are self-defined by village, not their Mexican state of Oaxaca, nor the country of Mexico. For example, the places in la Mixteca they called home were Santiago Juxtlahuaca, San Juan Mixtpec, and San Miguel Cuevas. They held cultural events brought from there, like the Guelaguetza, a large summer cultural festival. But in the north San Diego County bush, they bathed with the water from broken mains and ate their meals in makeshift restaurants run by their indigenous compatriots. The open-air restaurant named el Restaurante del Chivo, The Goat’s Restaurant, in the wild chaparral, was even equipped with a table and eating benches.

The formal, more public collaboration with David began in 2006 with his photographic project “Living Under the Trees.” For me, it was a decision that had a strange journalistic origin unrelated to it. It was about a promise I had made to myself, long before—during my undergraduate years at Stanford University in the early 1970s. At the time I was editor of the Stanford Chicano newspaper Chicanismo, and it was difficult when writing stories about Cesar Chavez, Dolores Huerta, and the United Farm Workers movement to accompany the story with contemporaneous farm worker photography. It didn’t exist. So I vowed then to help support the creation of farm worker photography were I ever to have the opportunity to do so. It came with the “Living Under the Trees” project.

That collaboration also came at another convergence. Some years after, we at CRLA were exposed to an even more extreme condition than bush-living—the death of migrants crossing at the border. In 1993, the border farm worker reality of living in the bush first came to CRLA’s attention through media accounts of this life in the northern San Diego County hillsides, with dire descriptions coming from workers themselves. One such living space was named Rancho De Los Diablos, the Devil’s Ranch. At the time, a CRLA attorney assigned to the Coachella office met every Sunday after Mass with indigenous workers and educated them regarding their labor rights. It was those workers who lived in the cardboard shanties, with shack walls made of plywood or metal siding. Or they just lived in “the bush” itself, hidden from the residents of affluent places next door like Del Mar, Oceanside, Leucadia, Vista, Mira Mesa, and Carlsbad. It became CRLA’s introduction to both the indigenous farm worker community and to David Bacon’s photographic art. David was photographing those conditions.

Left: Just arrived from Mexico, a Mixtec farm worker and her son live in a tent near Del Mar, California. There is very little housing for farm workers, especially migrants. Most recent migrants earn very low wages, while rents are high, forcing many to live outdoors. Everything that makes raising children difficult, like bathing, washing their clothes, and preparing and storing food are doubly difficult for a worker living on a hillside. Del Mar, California, United States, 2007.
As I became aware of that extreme migrant life suffered by those indigenous migrant workers, we launched the CRLA Indigenous Program in 1993. As part of CRLA advocacy, we publicized the lethal impacts of a militaristic operation causing the new migration. Named Operation Gatekeeper, it was a federal immigration campaign intended to build fences and walls to keep the migrant working poor from entering the US through the San Diego-Tijuana border. That operation forced the migrants into the eastern margins of the region, exposed to mountain cold and desert heat. At the twenty-fifth anniversary of Gatekeeper, advocates reported that “more than 8,000 human remains [had] been found, while more than 5,500 people [had] disappeared…” The federal immigration operation also had increased surveillance and inspection at the border, coupled with the building of new walls at certain entry points.

In this binational migration of the past forty years, David Bacon became the photographer and chronicler of that human journey. His images of tent and open country, bush life are captured so starkly by his camera and told in the stories he heard from the people he photographed. But in that larger history of American migrations, David's artistic and journalistic contribution—not unlike Dorothea Lange's—was and remains simply the most recent version of the American immigrant story.

The CRLA Records at Stanford

The archival records of California Rural Legal Assistance at Stanford contain administrative files, litigation files, and special program and subject files, dating from the founding of the organization in 1966 through circa 2000. Materials in the collection document CRLA’s ongoing work to provide legal aid to farmworkers and the rural poor in California. The CRLA records are available for research in the Department of Special Collections and University Archives at Stanford Libraries.

Jose R. Padilla
Director
California Rural Legal Assistance

Introduction

David Bacon’s life has moved through the stages of childhood as a son of a printer and union leader in New York City to becoming a printer, then a factory worker who became a union organizer in parallel, eventually becoming a documentary photographer, a photojournalist, focusing on workers, their environments, and their struggles for better pay, working conditions, and living conditions. Mr. Bacon is now a planter of seeds, of ideas, in the ongoing resistance to inhumane working and living conditions for those who make possible the comfortable, well-fed lives most of us live in American metropolises and their exurbs. The photographs in the David Bacon archive and particularly those selected for this catalogue testify to the working conditions of laborers, who without much education have had to move where there are jobs in order to support their families. Agricultural workers, hotel workers, and indigenous farmers in Mexico over the last sixty years have learned to resist ruthless exploitation and to insist on better working and living conditions. In that resistance is the essential human yearning, hope for a better life and better lives in coming generations.

Much of David Bacon’s work considers those in the great agricultural enterprises of California, comprehending the rural farmers in Mexico, themselves considered mere peasants in their own country, subject to takeovers by agribusinesses and threatened by corrupt governments and criminal elements uninterested in the indigenous peoples’ needs and concerns. Bacon’s work in Iraq and the Philippines, the former among oil field laborers and the latter among workers in banana plantations, illuminates the desperate, physically dangerous nature of their lives, made better by the communal aspects of their experiences. In each of these encounters, David Bacon points out the journey of working people in unrelenting and often damaging working and living conditions to becoming social advocacy people attempting to alter those circumstances through collective social action. Bacon has been a catalyst and leader in forming unions to confront management, corporations, and governments with evidence and testimony meant to redress the balance between those who felt themselves to be without voices and those with a stake in the very industries that needed their labor in order to be successful in the usual corporate senses. Bacon is also an author, drawing meaning from the lives of laborers and leaders of their resistance movements in order to understand the way these workers and their families think about their circumstances and the often unseen influences on their lives. Much of his work considers the forces promoting or leading to immigration by people very close to the soil. How their lives and their families are torn asunder as migrant workers, moving from one ripening crop to the next ripening crop, with decisions on which heads of lettuce to pick and which strawberries to leave while bent over and moving fast to meet quotas until the end of the day and some repose in crowded and primitive living conditions. This is back- and spirit-breaking work that
cannot be automated, though there is pressure for such workers to be treated almost as automatons. Again, Bacon demonstrates the spirit of hope among these workers and their communities in their resistance to exploitation.

All of Bacon’s work implores those who see it, read it, and try to assimilate it into their own view, one might say sheltered view, to seek to imagine what these workers are thinking, how they got to this sort of situation, and what their lives are, and to become more sympathetic to their desires to improve their lives on the basis of their contributions at the near bottom of the social hierarchies of work and workers across the world.

The David Bacon Archive joins other archival collections in the Department of Special Collections such as the Mexican American Legal Defense Fund (MALDEF) Papers, the California Rural Legal Assistance Papers, and the National Council of La Raza Papers, as well as several photographic collections documenting social movements, including the Bob Fitch Photography Archive and the Laura Aguilar Papers. The Stanford Libraries’ general collections have extensive holdings in the published literature concerning these movements, and our government-documents collections of both US federal and state documents as well as international holdings, along with these archival collections, are providing numerous opportunities for research and teaching at Stanford as well as serving as repositories of the histories of these movements.

We are proud that David Bacon chose the Stanford Libraries as the home, the perpetual steward preserving and providing access, for his life’s work. We are thankful, too.

Michael A. Keller
University Librarian
June 2020

P H O T O G R A P H S

by Ignacio Ornelas Rodriguez and David Bacon

The hands of Manuel Ortiz show a life of work. He came to the United States from Mexico as a bracero (contract farm worker) in the late 1950s and early 1960s, and later spent decades as a farm worker in California and Washington. Now 85 years old and no longer able to work in the fields, he survives by collecting cans and bottles from trash cans to recycle.

Farm Workers

"I want people who are looking at these photographs to understand what it feels like to do this work. Many of these jobs are physically very demanding and so I want to show that; what the physical requirement is of working, for instance, bent over. I tried picking strawberries myself and I lasted two weeks. That was it. I couldn’t do it because I couldn’t bend over and endure the pain all day every day and come back every morning for more."

—David Bacon

Since the 1980s, David Bacon has been photographing the daily lives of farm workers in California, Washington State, and Mexico. He has worked closely with organizations that have advocated for farm workers over the decades, such as the United Farm Workers (UFW), California Rural Legal Assistance (CRLA), and Familias Unidas por la Justicia, whose members are almost entirely indigenous Mexican farm workers. Bacon captures the arduous labor of agricultural field work and the ongoing struggle between workers and large agribusiness corporations over working conditions, wages, and benefits.

Left: Leonardo Gomez has just seconds to decide which head of lettuce is ready to harvest, and to cut and bag it. Lettuce harvesters, or lechugeros, repeat this motion hundreds of times a day, bent over double and almost running through the field. They are highly respected among farm workers and earn relatively higher wages. His employer, Ocean Mist Farms, is one of the largest lettuce growers in the world. Coachella Valley, California, United States, 2017.
Above:
These farm workers pick strawberries, bent over double all day. A paper ticket keeps track of how many boxes a worker picks.

Foremen in the strawberry fields begin their day by assigning workers to the rows with the most berries ready for harvest. The workers’ earnings are based on an hourly wage supplemented by a per-box bonus. Watsonville, California, United States, 1996.

Right Top:
Salomon Sarita Sanchez picks strawberries in a crew of Mixtec migrants from Oaxaca. Strawberry employers and harvest crew supervisors recruit workers through extended family networks among indigenous people. Strawberry-picking wages are very low, and there is a great pressure on pickers to work fast. Nipomo, California, United States, 2007.

The lives of most farm workers are governed by the growing seasons. Their bodies must be in superior physical condition and endurance is essential in order to keep up with the fast pace of work. Accidents are common, tools used in the fields are sharp, and the repetitive work often causes injuries; many farm workers eventually go on long-term disability. Workers are tested daily by the climate, enduring rain, extreme cold, and heat. Housing is often challenging or nonexistent for these workers and their families and for those who are in the United States under the H-2A guest-worker program there are many restrictions upon their lives.

Right:
Farm workers show support for their union, the United Farm Workers, at Klein Management Company (now Gourmet Trading). Workers at the company harvest blueberries. After the company cut their wages, they stopped work, and then voted for the union in an election supervised by California’s Agricultural Labor Relations Board. Most workers are indigenous Mixtec and Zapotec migrants from Oaxaca, Mexico. McFarland California, United States, 2016.
Filipino Americans have a long history of labor organizing in the United States, dating back to the 1930s. Fred Abad (left) and Pete Velasco, original members of the Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee (AWOC), were part of the first generation of Filipino migrants known as manongs who were farm workers. In retirement, they live at Agbayani Village, the retirement home built by UFW and student activists for the manongs. Delano, California, United States, 1994.

Above:

Farm workers pull weeds in a field of organic potatoes. By mid-afternoon the temperature can reach over 100 degrees Fahrenheit in California’s Central Valley. Workers wear layers of clothes as insulation against the heat. In 2008 a young pregnant farm worker, María Isabel Vásquez Jiménez, died of heat stroke while working in similar conditions in a Stockton, California vineyard. The United Farm Workers union lobbies legislators in federal and state governments to enforce the provision of shaded areas and regular work breaks for hydrating. Arvin, California, United States, 2010.

Left:

César Chávez pickets at the grape boycott outside a Safeway grocery store. The boycott campaign organized by the United Farm Workers (UFW) union asked the public not to shop at grocers that purchased non-union grapes, like Safeway in the United States and Canada. The campaign helped make consumers aware of the pesticides used on fruits and vegetables. San Francisco, California, United States, 1989.
Rosalinda Guillen, farm worker organizer and director of Community to Community (C2C), in a march to protest the H2-A guest worker program and commemorate the death of farm worker Honesto Silva Ibarra from dehydration two years earlier. Guillen began organizing farm workers in the 1980s in Washington State, and later started C2C, which advocates for labor rights, humane immigration reform, cooperatives, and services like healthcare. Bellingham, Washington, United States, 2019.

Dolores Huerta is exhausted after completing the 343-mile march retracing the United Farm Workers’ historic 1966 march from Delano, California to the state capitol in Sacramento. More than 17,000 supporters marched to the capitol to recommit their support of the UFW one year after the death of union leader Cesar Chavez, and to show that Chavez’s death would not affect its continued organizing of farm workers. Sacramento, California, United States, 1994.

Workers on strike against D’Arrigo Bros. Co., a large lettuce grower, stop a bus carrying strikebreakers early in the morning, and urge the workers to join them. Workers began organizing a union at the company in the early 1970s but were not able to convince the company to sign a union contract until 2008. Chualar, California, United States, 1998.

Outside a labor camp in Skagit County, Washington, the children of strikers who formed the new union Familias Unidas por la Justicia set up their own picket line on a fence at the gate. Their sign reads “Justicia Para Todos”—Justice for Everyone. The children were doing what they saw their parents doing, but they understood clearly the meaning of their sign and the reasons for the strike. Burlington, Washington, United States, 2013.
Immigrant Workers

We need to look at our communities and ask ourselves whether we want to move forward toward a society and a world in which people are, relatively speaking, equal in terms of their rights and in terms of their social status—or move backward to an era which reminds me of the era before the civil rights movement in which a huge section of our population had significantly fewer political, social, and economic rights.

—David Bacon

Economic prosperity in Silicon Valley and San Francisco has created high demand for real estate and a short supply of housing. This has caused rents to skyrocket and displaced much of the working-class population. Lower-income workers, many of whom are immigrants, have been forced to move away from city centers and commute long distances for work. Many families live jammed together in order to pay rent, and many people lose housing entirely. Yet immigrant workers are essential to the American economy. Based on 2018 US Census data, the Center for Migration Studies (CMS) estimates that 19.8 million immigrants work in “essential critical infrastructure” categories. These workers meet the health, infrastructure, manufacturing, service, food, safety, and other needs of all Americans. Since the 1990s, David Bacon has been photographing this demographic.

Unions such as UNITE HERE Local 2 have fought back. In San Francisco this union has organized hundreds of workers and led multiple successful strikes against some of the largest corporate hotel chains in the country, winning wage increases to meet the rising cost of living in California. Other attempts at organization have been less successful, as evidenced by the Cal Spas strike in the 1990s in Pomona, California. More than 200 workers went on strike for a month in protest of unfair labor practices by Cal Spas and ultimately lost their jobs. David Bacon’s photographs document the success of mass actions that win, and the high cost workers pay when attempts at organization and job strikes fail.
In one of the first rebellions of immigrant workers in the Los Angeles area, hundreds walk off the job at the huge Cal Spas factory, which makes spas and hot tubs. Most of the workers were undocumented people who were paid very low wages. One sign read “Respeto a Nuestros Derechos”—Respect our Rights. The strike started after a leader of the workers was beaten outside the factory.

Above: Pomona, California, United States, 1993.

A Cal Spas worker reacts to the vote to end the strike after weeks of fighting as hard as they could. The strikers had offered to return to work, but the company would not take them back. They had no resources to continue picketing, so the union held a meeting to decide what to do. After much discussion, workers voted to end the strike. It was a very bitter decision.

Right: Pomona, California, United States, 1993.
In a scene reminiscent of a century ago, a laundry worker almost disappears into an industrial washer while loading hotel tablecloths at California Linen Services. Laundry workers have to navigate dangerous work-related hazards including heavy machinery, excessive noise and heat, wet and slippery floors, toxic chemicals, and contaminated laundry. Oakland, California, United States, 1992.

A laundry worker sorts tablecloths from huge laundry bags at California Linen Services. Most laundry workers are women, immigrants, and people of color, working in jobs that are often dangerous and poorly paid. As more immigrants enter these jobs, it is frequently union organizers who educate workers about the long-term effects that the work can have on the body. Oakland, California, United States, 1992.
Lucy Wong, a housekeeper at the St. Francis Hotel and an active leader of UNITE HERE Local 2, makes up a bed. The strike and lockout that had just ended won a reduction in the number of rooms she and other San Francisco hotel housekeepers had to clean per day. Workers clean an average of 15 rooms a day, according to limits negotiated in the union contract. San Francisco, California, United States, 2007.

The hands of a housekeeper reveal the heavy toll on the bodies of the women who make the beds and clean the rooms. This photograph is one of a series that was taken during union negotiations, when the workload of housekeepers had increased because of the introduction of huge, heavy mattresses. To convince hotel managers to lower the number of rooms a housekeeper had to clean each day, these photographs were taken and then put on the bargaining table, to show the physical cost that workers were paying. San Francisco, California, United States, 1998.
Left:
Reverend Jesse Jackson rallies with locked-out and striking San Francisco hotel workers in Union Square. Jackson has been a strong supporter of the labor movement for decades, including immigrant workers. He visited Cesar Chavez and the United Farm Workers during major labor strikes and fasts, and supported the Teamsters Union in Watsonville, California during the 1985–87 strike of canner workers led by immigrant Mexican women. San Francisco, California, United States, 2004.

Right Top:
Viola and two other hotel workers talk about how to vote and mark their ballots in the strike vote at the beginning of the 2004 contract campaign by the UNITE HERE Local 2 union. Hotel workers voted on September 14, 2004 to strike over cuts in healthcare benefits, inadequate raises, and their demand for a 2006 contract expiration date. The union struck four major hotels on September 28; ten others then locked out their workers. San Francisco, California, United States, 2004.

Right Bottom:
At a prayer service during the lockout outside the Grand Hyatt Hotel, Aniceta and other hotel workers put their anger into writing on their picket-line signs. Workers saw the offered raise of five cents an hour as an insult. For years immigrant workers had been able to pave a path into the middle class with hospitality industry jobs. But the skyrocketing cost of Bay Area living and housing was making this more difficult. San Francisco, California, United States, 2004.

Pages 42-43:
Jessica Etheridge, a long-time UNITE HERE Local 2 member and advocate of LGBTQ rights, is searched in the middle of Fourth Street outside the Marriott Marquis Hotel as she and others are arrested in an act of civil disobedience during the Marriott strike. Her T-shirt represents the union’s “One Job Should Be Enough” campaign. San Francisco, California, United States, 2018.
Mexico

The reason why a lot of the photographs I take in Mexico kind of mix up the politics and the communities and families all together is because this is the way that I was encountering them. And this is also the way that I was getting my education about Mexico. I think that, in some ways, what I was able to do in the photographs and in the words is to present back here to the United States a picture of what was going on in Mexico that I think was truer and more accurate than what we were seeing in the media here.

—David Bacon

Mexico has faced multiple economic challenges, and remains a country of striking economic disparity. During the revolutionary era, from approximately 1911 through 1928, agrarian reforms were intended to uplift and modernize a vast rural and illiterate country. Over the subsequent decades, peso devaluations and international agreements like the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) of 1994 made it easier for capital to cross international borders and harder for small businesses and family farms to prosper.

Left:
Members of Mexico City’s bus drivers’ union, Sindicato Único de Trabajadores de Autotransportes Urbanos de Pasajeros Ruta 100 (SUTAUR-100), rally in the Zócalo, Mexico City’s central plaza. In April 1995, the government had declared the city bus company, Ruta-100, bankrupt and imprisoned eleven bus drivers and their lawyer—the union’s leaders. The union, the de facto controller of Ruta-100, had provided generously for its workers and the city residents. For the next year, while protests marches clogged Mexico City’s streets, intense negotiations resulted in a liquidation agreement. Ruta-100 ceased to exist, and the protests stopped. Mexico City, Mexico, 1996.
Above:
A musician walks with the crowd to the Zócalo to watch the inauguration of Mexico’s new president, Andrés Manuel López Obrador. López Obrador was a progressive mayor of Mexico City and ran for president many times before his 2018 election. “The government will no longer facilitate looting, and will no longer be a committee in the service of a rapacious minority,” he told the crowd. “We will put aside the neoliberal hypocrisy. Those born poor will not be condemned to die poor.” Mexico City, Mexico, 2018.

Right:
Granaderos, or security police, in face and body shields watch a rally of Mexico City’s bus drivers’ union (SUTAUR-100), before breaking it up and driving the union members out. Mexico City, Mexico, 1996.

The outgrowth of globalization has been a wide-ranging and long process. The Zócalo or main square in Mexico City—the cosmopolitan center of the country, home to multiple industries and a fast-paced urban landscape—has long provided a location for civic and political organizing. During the 1990s and 2000s Mexico witnessed multiple presidential campaigns that were highly contested. The privatization of the municipal bus system resulted in hundreds of drivers rallying in the Zócalo in a bid to save their union benefits and jobs. Since the 1990s, David Bacon has been photographing the impact of globalization in Mexico, including the mass migration from Mexico to the United States, largely comprising indigenous people from Mexico’s poorest regions, as well as tumultuous presidential campaigns, privatization of government businesses and services, and labor disputes between small farmers and corporate agribusiness.
Above:
Fuasto Limón organized farmers in the valley to resist the expansion of Granjas Carroll de Mexico, pig farms partly owned by the United States-based Smithfield Corporation. The H1N1 swine flu started in this valley. When Smithfield announced that they were expanding, Limón was a leader of the protest group Pueblos Unidos. Limón says, “The people got together, and we wouldn’t let them build it. We sat-in and blocked the highway.” Perote Valley, Veracruz, Mexico, 2011.

Right Top:
Sra. Maldonado, a Mixteca woman living in a community where most people have left for the United States, cooks in the traditional way, over charcoal and wood. Agua Fría is a mixed community, where people speak Mixteca, Triqui, and Nahuatl, all indigenous languages. After the passage of NAFTA, many people from Oaxaca towns like this one migrated to the United States, where they found jobs as farm workers. Elders continued to do hard labor in their communities and often had to care for young grandchildren who stayed behind when parents migrated.
Agua Fría, Oaxaca, Mexico, 2003

Right Bottom:
Zacarías Salazar plows his corn field with a wooden plow. Since the North American Free Trade Agreement of 1994 (NAFTA) went into effect, American companies exported corn at much cheaper prices than the cost of production in Mexico, making it difficult for farmers like Salazar to compete in the market. It is almost impossible for Salazar to grow and sell corn in Mexico any longer, and his crop is now mostly for the sustenance of his family.
Santiago de Juxtlahuaca, Oaxaca, Mexico, 2008.
Above:
The nopal, or prickly pear, is a staple food in Mexico. Nopal is eaten either boiled in water or raw, often for breakfast, in a taco with beans, or on its own. The tuna, the brightly colored knobby part of the cactus, is enjoyed as a fruit or dessert. The nopal is a symbol of nationalism in Mexico, and the national flag shows an eagle consuming a snake while perched on a nopal. Santiago de Juztlahuaca, Oaxaca, Mexico, 2008.

Right:
Indigenous Nahua farmers, or small farmers, erect a planton, or encampment, and demonstrate every day on the Reforma in downtown Mexico City. They live on the city streets as a form of protest over their displacement from their lands, a prime reason for the migration of people to the United States. The farmers come from the “Four Hundred Towns,” a rural area in Veracruz. Mexico City, Mexico, 2008.
Above:
A former bracero is honored by the Oaxacan Institute for Attention to Migrants and its director, Rufino Dominguez, during a celebration of the International Day of the Migrant, December 18. Under the Bracero Program (1942–64) Mexican men contracted to work in farm fields in the United States. A portion of their wages was deducted to ensure their return to Mexico, but most was never paid. At the event, the braceros received a small amount of money in recognition of their lost wages. Oaxaca de Juárez, Oaxaca, Mexico, 2011.

Left Top:
Growers and vendors sell produce and other products on Sundays, Juxtlahuaca’s market day. The Mixteca region of Oaxaca is one of the poorest areas in Mexico. Indigenous Mixtec, Triqui, and other people from this region make up a large percentage of the migrants who have left to work in the United States. Santiago de Juxtlahuaca, Oaxaca, Mexico, 2008.

Left Bottom:
Indigenous Triqui families march through Oaxaca city to protest a wave of killing in their home community, San Juan Copala. They carry crosses with the names of people who were killed. Triqui protestors had attempted to create an autonomous town but were expelled by paramilitary gangs tied to Oaxaca’s former governor. The marchers were calling on the current governor, Gabino Cue Monteagudo, to guarantee their safety and to arrest those responsible for the killings. Oaxaca de Juárez, Oaxaca, Mexico, 2011.

Pages 56–57:
Two indigenous children beg on the street in Oaxaca just before Christmas, a girl playing accordion and a boy with a begging bowl, as well-dressed people pass by. After the passage of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in 1994, thousands fled to work in the United States. Many children were left with relatives; those without family to take care of them had to live on the streets. Oaxaca de Juárez, Oaxaca, Mexico, 2011.
Migrants and the Border

The US/Mexico border itself is a region that has its own social movements. It has its own history and its own logic. We need to see it as a place in and of itself and not just as a way station from one place to another. In the US media that’s kind of the way it’s presented to us, as the thing that people cross. Or don’t cross... I got educated by the people of the border, especially in the social movements there... I’ve spent almost 30 years documenting communities along the border and I’m trying to show what needs to be changed. What needs to be changed in the eyes of those people who are trying to change it. And then the reality of it.

—David Bacon

The United States depends on Mexican labor. Mexicans come to the border region and enter the United States to serve as agricultural workers and produce food for the United States market. Many enter the United States under the H2-A guest worker visa program or cross without documentation. Crossing illegally was not treated as a serious crime until the 2000s, when people began to be arrested and held for long periods of time for being in the country without legal immigration status.

David Bacon’s photography captures the displacement of people from their native Mexican communities, mostly rural indigenous people who entered the migratory corridor from Mexico to the United States. Rural Mexican communities have attempted to sustain farm life, but are unable to compete with multinational corporations dumping agricultural products like corn. Migrants come to the border or the United States to find work in the “Fields of the North,” only to find low wages and exploitive conditions. Unable to secure affordable housing, many farm workers resort to living in tents “under the trees” and forming communities of protest that attempt to occupy land.
Left Top: On May Day immigrants and their supporters march through the streets of Kennett Square, a small town in southeastern Pennsylvania where thousands of immigrant workers labor in sheds growing mushrooms. Signs read “Support Immigrant Rights,” “We are Workers, Not Criminals,” and “Workers Rights = Human Rights for All.” Some supporters wore T-shirts that read “No Human Being is Illegal.” The CATA Farmworkers Support Committee organized the march to shine light on workers’ rights and immigration. Many marchers came from the area’s only unionized shed, Kaolin Farms (now South Mill). Kennett Square, Pennsylvania, United States, 2007.

Left Bottom: Indigenous Triqui workers wait for news of negotiations between their strike leaders and the Mexican government. Thousands of San Quintín Valley farm workers participated in this work stoppage. Many were beaten and shot by the police. The strike won a small raise in farm worker minimum wages. Shortly thereafter, workers organized and won legal status for the National Independent Democratic Farm Workers Union (Sindicato Independiente Nacional Demócrata de Jornaleros Agrícolas, or SINDJA). San Quintín, Baja California, Mexico, 2015.

Above: A man is deported back into Mexico at the border gate. After NAFTA passed, in 1994, many rural agricultural workers in Mexico fled to the United States to find work in the fields. On October 1, 1994, US President Bill Clinton’s administration launched Operation Gatekeeper, which stepped up enforcement in urban parts of the border, leading to growing numbers of deportations. Neither Operation Gatekeeper nor increased interior enforcement stopped undocumented people from crossing the border in remote areas, increasing the number of migrant deaths from thirst and heat prostration in the desert. Mexicali, Baja California, Mexico, 1996.
Right Top:
A young girl outside the West County Detention Facility where her father, an undocumented immigrant, has been detained for three months. US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) signed contracts with many counties to hold people who are facing possible deportation. Their children often suffer from high levels of anxiety and depression because of the separation, and the fear that their parents will be deported. Richmond, California, United States, 2018.

Right Bottom:
People of faith and immigrants protest and call for family members to be released from the West County Detention Facility, where undocumented immigrants have been incarcerated before being deported. When the Contra Costa County sheriff announced he was canceling the federal contract under which the West County Detention Facility housed immigration detainees, protestors called for the detainees to be released to their families. They feared that the detainees would be transferred to facilities too far away for visits. Richmond, California, United States, 2018.

Pages 60-61:
Carolina Cespedes, Carlos Alcaide, and Teodolo Torres traveled from Santa Monica Cobezada in Puebla, Mexico to visit with family members who are on the other side of the border wall. Meetings like this take place every Sunday at the Parque de Amistad, or Friendship Park, in Playas de Tijuana, the neighborhood of Tijuana where the border wall runs into the Pacific Ocean. Tijuana, Baja California, Mexico, 2017.
Esther Marillo and her children were among the first families who occupied land in the hills surrounding Cañón Buenavista on May Day, 2000. "The police surrounded us," she remembered. "They said they were going to burn the houses we built, but twenty of us stayed up and watched all night. We had our children inside, and we were afraid of what might happen to them. But we were all calm, and wouldn't move, so there were no physical confrontations. Now there are about five hundred houses. But for a long time, the police kept coming every night to scare us." Cañón Buenavista, Baja California, Mexico, 2002.

A migrant peers over the fence between Mexico and the United States, trying to find a moment when the US Border Patrol may not be watching so that he can go through the hole under it and cross. In Mesoamerican traditions, one Nahual legend says that when people go to the underworld, they are guided by a dog. Tijuana, Baja California, Mexico, 1996.

On the outskirts of Tecate, an old section of the United States-Mexico border wall suddenly stops, and a well-worn path crosses the border through the brush. It was not until 1924, when the US Border Patrol was established, that entrance to the United States was regulated. In the 1970s, during the Nixon administration, this wall was constructed using helicopter landing pads left over from the Vietnam War. Tecate, California, United States, 2017.

Strike leaders Juan Hernandez, Fermín Salazar, Fidel Sanchez, and Bonifacio Martinez at the press conference announcing wage increases for farm workers that had been negotiated with the Mexican government. When strikers saw that the wage increases were very small, they began organizing SINDJA, an independent union for farm workers. San Quintín, Baja California, Mexico, 2015.
Above:
Mari, her mother, and her sister in their house, which unlike many others in their barrio has a concrete floor. During the 1930s Great Depression era similar photographs were made in the United States of migrant families living in poverty—children with no shoes, a dirt floor, no photographs, and no picture frames or children’s work on the walls.
Mexicali Valley, Baja California, Mexico, 1996.

Above:
Honorina Ruiz, 6 years old, along with brothers Rigoberto, 12, and Juan Antonio, 3, work with their mother Esperanza Ruiz in a field farmed by Muranaka Farms, a United States grower. Honorina sits in front of a pile of green onions and grabs them from the top to make a bunch, lining up eight or nine onions, straightening out their roots and tails. She then knocks the dirt off, ties them with a rubber band, and adds the bunch to those already in the box beside her.
Mexicali Valley, Baja California, Mexico, 1996.
Poverty and Social Protest

It’s part of the reality of working-class existence in our country, it is the experience for many, many people of being hungry and of living on the street and being unhoused, at least in some part of their life. We had a saying when I was a union organizer—and I think it’s still true and a lot of people say it—and that is, “we’re only one paycheck away from living on the streets” which I think is true for an enormous number of people. The purpose of documenting this is also to show what people do about it. The social struggles and social movements they organize not just to affect their own personal situation, but to change the world for social justice.

—David Bacon

The growth of globalization in the American economy during the 1990s and 2000s has led to vast communities of protest and of the unhoused across the United States. Corporations in the United States have outsourced millions of jobs, and industries previously protected by labor unions have shut down operations and moved manufacturing plants to developing countries such as China, India, Mexico, and the Philippines. These economic changes decimated and eliminated living-wage jobs as well as social support networks. In combination with the exponential increase in the cost of living over the past 30 years, this situation has led to a dramatic spike in the unhoused population in the United States.

Left: During the mostly peaceful protest against the World Trade Organization (WTO) meeting, police arrested demonstrators sitting and lying on the street to block intersections. The protest intensified when police officers shot rubber bullets and tear gas to break up civil disobedience demonstrations. Seattle, Washington, United States, 1999.

Right: On November 30, 1999 a coalition of labor union members, indigenous peoples, environmentalists, international NGOs, and students marched in protest against the impact of globalization around the world during the World Trade Organization (WTO) meeting in Seattle. The march was so large that the end could not be seen, even from the roof of a tall building. Seattle, Washington, United States, 1999.
Above:
As the crowds of anti-WTO demonstrators grew into the thousands, people sat down in the intersections of the downtown district, where the WTO meeting was taking place. Carrying signs with such slogans as “Don’t let Corporations VETO Our Laws / Say NO to the WTO” they brought all traffic to a halt and participants in the WTO meeting could not get into the hall. After five days the meeting was suspended. Seattle, Washington, United States, 1999.

Right Top:
National union leaders from the AFL-CIO lead a march of labor union members to protest the WTO meeting. AFL-CIO vice-president Linda Chavez-Thompson is flanked on her right by George Becker, president of the United Steel Workers, and on her left by AFL-CIO president John Sweeney, James Hoffa, president of the International Brotherhood of Teamsters, and Jay Mazur, president of the Union of Needletrades, Industrial and Textile Employees. Seattle, Washington, United States, 1999.

Right Center:

Right Bottom:
Anti-WTO demonstrators bring downtown traffic to a halt by lying down in key intersections, chaining their arms together inside metal pipes to make it difficult and time-consuming for the police to cut them apart and arrest them. Supporters surround those chained together. Seattle, Washington, United States, 1999.

David Bacon’s photography captures America’s changing economy through images of protest, displacement, and homelessness. One of the largest anti-globalization protests in the United States was the massive mobilization of protestors that surrounded the 1999 Ministerial Conference of the World Trade Organization (WTO) in Seattle, Washington. From November 30 through December 3 of that year, approximately 40,000 protestors representing local, national, and international organizations surrounded the convention center while the police made massive arrests, shutting down the meeting early. Bacon documents both the impact of poverty, the organizing going on against evictions and among unhoused people themselves, and broader protests, like those in Seattle, against the economic changes that make poverty so universal.
Above: Tents of unhoused people on Los Angeles’ Skid Row. The Skid Row population has ranged from 2,500 to a high of 11,000. The centralized downtown neighborhood was initially assigned in the 1970s to contain the unhoused population in one location. Minimal services for the unhoused population were set up, including food and clothing. Los Angeles, California, United States, 2014.

Left Top: An unhoused woman sleeps on a bus bench while an unhoused man stands watch over her. The aftermath of the 2008 Great Recession affected the city of Oakland in multiple ways. Foreclosures in working-class communities skyrocketed and many landlords resorted to price gouging, charging extremely high rents in the aftermath of the foreclosure crisis. Oakland, California, United States, 2014.

Left Bottom: Ebony Brown (left) and Bill Davidson, a veteran, were living in a shelter they built in an empty lot under the freeway. Vinny Pannizzo, a religious activist, brought them food every night from his van on his rounds to serve unhoused people living on the streets in Oakland and Berkeley. Berkeley, California, United States, 2016.

Pages 71-3:
General TC calls himself “The People’s General” and lives on the sidewalk on Los Angeles’ Skid Row. As an activist with the Los Angeles Community Action Network, he maintains a literature table and provides donated clothes for the unhoused. Los Angeles, California, United States, 2014.
Left: Community activists in the Alliance of Californians for Community Empowerment (ACCE) join the family of Armando Ramos and Fernanda Cardenas on the steps of the Alameda County courthouse to try to stop the auction of their foreclosed home by the mortgage company Ocwen Financial. Their mortgage had an adjustable rate, and when it went up, Ramos and Cardenas could no longer make the payments. Ocwen then had an auctioneer auction off the home on the courthouse steps in the face of the protesters. Oakland, California, United States, 2009.

Above: Tosha and James Alberty and Tosha’s brother speak to supporters in front of the home from which they, four children, and two grandchildren were evicted. The Home Defenders campaign of the Alliance of Californians for Community Empowerment (ACCE) had successfully prevented prior eviction efforts after foreclosure by First Franklin Mortgage Services. But sheriff’s deputies surprised the family, put them out, boarded over the windows, and padlocked the gate, with no warning. Oakland, California, United States, 2009.
The unhoused camp in front of the Berkeley Civic Center. Unhoused community activists moved their camp there after being forced by police to disband their camp in front of the agency that served unhoused people. The sign reads “This is What Poverty Looks Like,” and writing with chalk on the sidewalk reads “Welcome to Poverty Flats.” Berkeley housing is among the most expensive in the nation. Berkeley, California, United States, 2016.

Left Bottom:
Michelle Lot is a unhoused woman living in the camp outside the Berkeley Post Office. The camp was originally established to protest the sale of the Main Post Office building and was organized by First They Came for the Homeless, an unhoused people’s activist group. Berkeley, California, United States, 2015.

Left Top:
Wade Williams, an unhoused man, sleeps on this bus-shelter bench, while an advertisement on the wall of the shelter urges him to “get unfreaked out about foreclosure”—a testament to how frequent foreclosures and the loss of homes had become. Communities of color were especially devastated by high foreclosure rates from predatory lenders, who preyed on clients with promises that were not sustainable. Berkeley, California, United States, 2016.

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From Davao to Baghdad

I am interested in documenting the lives of workers. I’m trying to see through the camera and the photographs what it’s like to be a small farmer, what it’s like to work on a banana plantation, what war feels like to the people in Iraq. In some cases, that’s wrapped up in the history of organizing unions to fight U.S. corporations... The last time I went to the Philippines, in 2019, I saw that their cooperative movement had become very strong, something that has been able to change people’s lives.

The Iraq photographs had that kind of intentionality to them, too, which I don’t think made them any less true or any less an accurate documentation of the reality in Iraq. We exhibited these photographs in US union halls so that working people, especially oil workers, could see people in Iraq as people in unions like them. And think about relationship besides the relationship of war ... Regardless of what I am documenting it has its own logic and its own story. And I am helping to tell that story with photographs.

—David Bacon

David Bacon has traveled the world documenting the courage of people struggling for social and economic justice. In the Philippines, the banana industry is a major economic engine. The work is difficult, pay is low, and working conditions are often dangerous. The workers started out as plantation workers on these plantations that were developed as a product of colonialism and then eventually fought for laws that implemented agrarian reform. They set up cooperatives and became the owners of the land, but the going was rough in the beginning.

The Iraq war started on March 20, 2003. David Bacon’s images capture life during the United States occupation of Iraq as citizens attempt to make a living in the war’s aftermath. Although the war was fought for control of oil, Bacon is unique in documenting the lives of the workers who actually produce the oil wealth. His photographs show families scrambling through the detritus of violence, workers attempting to revitalize their country’s unions and fight for labor rights, as well as the dire conditions during the occupation.

Left: In the packing shed of the DARbCO cooperative, workers cut, wash, and box bananas for export. After land reforms were instituted in the Philippines, farm workers became owners of the plantations where they worked, and transformed their older militant unions into cooperatives. Panabo City, Philippines, 2019.

Right: Hassun Juma’a Awad, president of the Iraqi Federation of Oil Workers. After the removal of Saddam Hussein’s government in 2003 he led a strike in the oil fields and refineries to protest unpaid wages and the threatened privatization of the oil industry, and fought against poor working conditions at the Southern Oil Company, where he had been employed for thirty years. Basra, Iraq, 2005.
Workers on an oil-drilling rig in the South Rumaila oil field outside of Basra, in southern Iraq. Workers in Iraq’s oil industry have organized one of the country’s strongest unions and tried to prevent the industry’s privatization by United States and British occupying forces. Oil workers face multiple dangers in the workplace, including violence by armed groups, transportation accidents traveling to and from the work site, fires, and explosions. Basra, Iraq, 2005.

Ibrahim Arabi, leader of the union at the Basra Oil Refinery, at home in Basra. A picture of Islamic cleric Muqtada al Sadr is on the door. The oil ministry in Iraq blacklisted Arabi for labor organizing, and for protesting the privatization of Iraq’s oil industry. Leaders like Arabi felt that the oil belonged to the people of Iraq, while occupation authorities sought to sell much of it to multinational corporations. Basra, Iraq, 2005.

Workers eat together on an oil-drilling rig in the South Rumaila oil field outside of Basra, in southern Iraq. Workers in Iraq’s oil industry organized one of the country’s strongest unions. They face extreme temperatures that regularly reach over 110 degrees Fahrenheit during the summers. They also faced the danger of attack by both Saddam Hussein’s former secret police, who targeted union organizers, and the occupying militaries. Basra, Iraq, 2005.

Residential buildings are surrounded by the wreckage of war—tank treads and turrets and depleted uranium munitions, which expose residents to radiation. The local population has suffered higher rates of childhood leukemia, breast cancer, and birth defects as a result. Basra, Iraq, 2005.

Union leader Falah Al Mow and leather-goods factory workers argue with the plant manager (far left) about their union rights. Alliances were built among unions to end the former prohibition of unions among public workers, including state-owned enterprises like this leather factory. Iraq has a long history of union organizing. Baghdad, Iraq, 2003.

Hashmeya Al Saadawi, president of the General Union of Electricity Workers and Technicians in Basra, is the first woman to lead a national trade union in Iraq’s history. She also heads the Basra Federation of Trade Unions. During the United States occupation of Iraq, public sector workers organized unions even though it was illegal. It was not until 2016 that Iraq legalized the right to form unions, bargain collectively, and strike. Basra, Iraq, 2005.
The gas flare at the Al Daura refinery is visible from all over Baghdad. The city’s residents watch it carefully as a sign that the refinery, a key installation in Iraq’s economy, is up and running. Oil refinery workers deal with daily work hazards and possible explosions, and flammable and toxic gases. Workers and neighboring communities are also exposed to heavily polluted air that can cause long-term illness. Baghdad, Iraq, 2003.

Refinery workers at the Al Daura refinery receive motor oil as compensation for low pay. This boy’s father gives it to his son to sell to passing cars on the highway outside the refinery. Because of food shortages and high rates of unemployment, resulting from the war, the Iraqi population created small-scale underground networks of trade including gas, basic food items, alcohol, and cigarettes. Baghdad, Iraq, 2003.

These workers in this leather goods factory are deaf and mute. Since the early 1950s, they were given preference for certain jobs in factories like this. After the start of the conflict in early 2003, Iraq witnessed higher numbers of workers with disabilities due to the bombings. Many suffered hearing loss and other disabilities that made it even harder to find regular employment. Baghdad, Iraq, 2003.

Benedicto Hijara, 15 years old, ties the trunks of banana plants to supporting wires above, working on the Soyapa Farms banana plantation. Families often cannot afford to pay for their children’s school tuition or uniforms, and the children supplement family income by working. Labor unions educate parents about the importance of keeping their children in school, but large corporations do not pay enough for families to survive without the labor of their children. San Jose Campostela, Mindanao, Philippines, 1998.
Above:
Strikers at night at the edge of their plantation. Their sign calls for Dole Corporation to recognize and bargain with their association of cooperatives, the Panabo Banana Producers Association. Before organizing the cooperatives, workers were employed by Dole at hourly salaries, and their union had won them paid medical care, retirement pensions, vacations, and sick pay. Afterward, Dole paid so little for their bananas that their income dropped, and they lost their earlier benefits. Panabo City, Philippines, 1998.

Left:
Workers harvest bananas in the field of the Dapco Agrarian Reform Beneficiaries Cooperative (DARbCO). Ian Subayno catches a bunch of bananas on his shoulder as it is cut from the tree and carries it to the “cableway” where it is then hung from a hook and then pulled to the packing shed. Some bunches can weigh up to 88 pounds. Panabo City, Philippines, 2019.

Bottom:
Felix Bacalso could not afford to keep his children in school when he and thousands of other workers at the Checkered Farm banana plantation went on strike against the Dole Corporation in December 1997. After workers created barricades to stop the work, over 500 police officers and soldiers attacked them. Panabo City, Philippines, 1998.
Left:
Benjamin Libron, 15, gathers bananas that were discarded for minor imperfections. He piles them up, and then throws them onto a truck for transport to local markets or Manila. Children like Benjamin provide a vital part of their family’s income. Some attend school and work before or after school on the plantation. Benjamin dropped out of school altogether because his income was needed by his family. San Jose Campostela, Mindanao, Philippines, 1998.

Right:
Jane Algoso, 11, cuts dead fronds from the trunks of banana plants on the Soyupa Farms banana plantation. Young children working on the banana plantations are exposed to toxic chemicals, sharp tools such as machetes, and other work hazards, while they often labor in heavy rain and mud. San Jose Campostela, Mindanao, Philippines, 1998.
A Conversation with David Bacon, Photographer and Activist

This interview was originally published in The Guardsman, the City College of San Francisco’s campus newspaper, on February 1, 2019, and conducted by Meredith Blasingame. These excerpts from Blasingame’s interview with David Bacon, as well as the brief biography of Bacon that appears inside the back cover of this catalogue are reprinted with permission. The transcript has been edited and clarified.

How did you get into photography?

I was into photography as a teenager, but my camera got stolen and life moved on. Then in the mid 1980s, when I was working as a union organizer, I picked up a camera again to take pictures of the strikes we would organize. That beginning was a utilitarian way to publicize strikes and give prints to people on the picket line to take home to their families and show they were standing up. Then I began to realize the photographs themselves had a meaning beyond what I was using them for, in that they were a documentation of the changing demographics of the workforce, especially in factories in the East Bay.

So, I started taking pictures and writing short articles, and it took over my life. It became more important. I took classes in the photography program at Laney College in Oakland, while I also worked as an organizer. That was a little crazy because organizers don’t have a lot of free time. But I began to see I really liked doing the work and it was important. I looked at it as another form of organizing. Organizing people is really all about changing the way people think. Organizers do it by holding house meetings or talking to people at work. If you do the kind of work I do, you’re really still trying to change the way people think, but you’re doing it through different means—sort of on a broader scale but also less directly.

I’m not a landscape photographer, so I usually photograph people. One of the things I’m looking for is emotion; a feeling of intimacy, a feeling of closeness. I take a lot of photos with a wide-angle lens—getting really close so you can see the person big in the frame, but you can also see the context. That’s sort of a classic environmental portraiture technique. Still photographs are a slice in time; they’re different before and different afterwards. You’re just going to pick out that one moment. You’re always looking for moments and trying to predict what’s going to happen and where you want to be. I’ve been doing this for a long time, and it gets to the place where I’m not really thinking about it. Some of it feels below the level of consciousness; I’m in the zone. You have to trust yourself and develop your instinct, and timing is a very important part of it. Watching people and seeing what’s going on with them, I’m always looking for people expressing something in the way they’re moving or the expression on their face.

[You have said that] from your perspective, photos and writing individually are not as strong as they are together. How do they work best together?

It works in two or three different ways. The classic way is—for example, my latest book is basically photos and oral histories. Even the captions on the photos are sometimes extended quotes from someone in the picture. We’re listening to voices and looking at the images and the combination is giving us a much richer idea of that part of the world and the people in it—what they think, what they have to say, what they look like. You’re getting a deeper understanding. So that’s one way of doing it.

There’s another way. I do a lot of writing. For example, I covered a meeting between a farm workers union in Baja California and one in Washington State. I wrote about the things they found they had in common with each other—which was a lot. The article was illustrated by photographs of some of the people quoted in the article, or who the article talked about. The photos are used to illustrate the story.

Generally speaking, especially now, I don’t think I will actually sell an article without pictures. If you want an article from me, you have to run the pictures. I don’t have to fight so much anymore because [editors] know this is what I do and they like it.

Above: Farmworkers, members of the United Farm Workers, march through the streets of Salinas after going on strike against D’Arrigo Bros. Co., demanding a contract. Workers began organizing a union at the company in the early 1970s but were not able to convince the company to sign a union contract until 2008. Salinas, California, United States, 1998.
Occasionally I’ll do what I call photo essays. They’re really basically a string of photographs together. Newspapers, magazines, and websites are run by editors who are word people. They will almost never run a selection of photographs made up of just the photographs, or photos with captions. They’ll want a story, even if it’s a brief one. So, I’ll give them the story. But they’re really pieces that are carried by the photographs. So that’s another way of doing it.

In some journalism schools, young photographers are taught that the photograph must be iconic, meaning that it has to stand by itself regardless of the context, with no explanation. I find this a kind of problematic idea. Especially in documentary work, context is very important. You can change the meaning of a photo by changing the context in which someone is looking at it. Words and images react with each other to produce politics. So when they talk about the iconic image, journalism schools are trying to pull the politics out of journalism.

Think of the famous photo of a young girl running naked down a road with smoke rising from the burning village behind her. You can understand that picture without knowing it’s the Vietnam War. I think most people will understand that it’s war. But if you understand which war, and if you understand who bombed the village, the photograph becomes much more political. The reason it helped end the Vietnam War was not just because it was a generic photograph of a young girl fleeing a burning village, but because it symbolized the horror of that particular war, that our bombers were bombing that village and that the young girl was fleeing the napalm into the arms, ironically, of the US soldiers who were participating in it.

You were a factory worker at one point. Is that how you first got involved in union organizing?

Yes and no. I needed a job. I had kids and a family, and I needed an income. In the ‘60s and ‘70s radical movement a lot of people thought workers were going to be the engine for social change. It was important to be in the factory; it was important to be where workers were to help people organize. So pretty much as soon as I started going to work, I started trying to organize unions. I got fired from a printing shop in San Francisco for doing that, as well as from other jobs, including from National Semiconductor in Silicon Valley.

After I got fired and blacklisted in Silicon Valley in the 1970s, working for unions made sense. It seemed like important work, helping to build the union. I did that for a long time, about twenty years. The first union I worked for was the United Farm Workers (UFW). I think it was partly because I wanted to understand. I grew up in Oakland and didn’t know anything about farm workers or Mexicans or Spanish. The UFW taught me about all those things. It was a real education for me.

I just did a big project documenting the Marriott hotel strike in the San Francisco Bay Area, all the way from March of 2018 when they were first thinking about it to the end of the strike. I try to document what happens to us as working people; what our lives are like, but with a perspective of seeing us as actors, as social actors.

When I say what happens to “us” as workers, I’m talking about workers as a whole, in general. But obviously, some working people are at more of a disadvantage than others. Some people are more conscious than others. Some people do something about it and other people don’t. I mean—how many workers are there in the United States? We are not just a majority of the population, we are like 80 or 85 percent of the people who live in this country. So obviously, there’s an enormous, huge, variety. That’s one of the things that makes this fascinating.

We’re not just victims of bad circumstances. We are also capable of changing them, and in fact I think that’s the process that’s really the most interesting—the combination where you see the world that people are living in, and how people respond to it, and then what they do. That’s kind of my approach to writing and photography both; that’s what I’m doing.

What makes people do something about [their circumstances]? Out of all those people, only a small number proactively work for change.

Generally speaking, people need to be pushed. Usually. Not always. In my generation, a lot of people got swept up in the civil rights movement, in the antiracist movement, and went into workplaces to help organize workers. That was a product of people’s political understanding, but it’s not the way most people wind up becoming part of social movements in this country.

Usually, people are responding to a crisis in their lives or a general feeling of frustration or dissatisfaction. Looking for answers. That is widespread in this country. Most people, actually, are frustrated and angry and looking for answers. But we are taught to be distrustful of politics, cynical, and susceptible to quick answers, without trying to understand how the system works. One of the obstacles organizers have to overcome is to help people understand how the system here works. A Trump-type answer—“build the wall”—is not a good answer. However, for people to understand why that’s not a good answer they have to understand why people are coming here to begin with.

So, it’s a process. I think it’s a combination of the pressure on people and their feelings of anger and frustration about it and also things that set off sparks in people’s minds and help them think more deeply about their situation. And that can be a lot of things. It can be reading books, or some organizer knocks on your door, or reading about Bernie Sanders in the newspaper and saying, “God, that makes sense to me.” But it’s a combination of the impact of ideas and the base of circumstances. It’s not to say that comfortable people don’t struggle, because they do. But I think the big motivating force for change in this country comes out of social and economic crisis.

For example, the antiracist movement had a lot to do with the draft. Young people had to think about whether or not they wanted to go, and what the [Vietnam] war was about. And the civil rights movement had to do with the unbearable conditions for African American people in a lot of parts of the South, plus this rising idea that we’re
not going to take it anymore and we don’t have to. You can trace it to people coming home from World War II, to having seen something of the world. You can trace it to radical organizations in the South, that agitated over all those years against lynching and for civil rights. Those seeds got planted and finally they grew. So I think that’s how social change takes place.

So what’s my part in it? I used to be on the organizer side and now I’m on the idea-planting side. But really, they’re so closely related it’s hard to tell them apart sometimes.

For migrant workers who are undocumented, is there a disincentive to organize due to the risks associated with their undocumented status, or have you seen instances of undocumented workers organizing?

I’m an activist, a journalist, or an activist documentarian. One of the places where that activism happens is in the immigrant rights movement. I’ve been an immigrant rights activist for a long time. The first people who taught me about it were farm workers. One of the things I could see was, as you said, not having papers makes it riskier to go out on strike or join a union. But it doesn’t stop people. In fact, most of the people who belong to the United Farm Workers union [have always been] undocumented. It’s not to say there aren’t conflicts between people who have papers and those who don’t. But I could see people were willing to struggle.

My work as an organizer was almost always talking with immigrants and people of color, and a lot of it talking with people who had no papers in foundries and factories. That was mostly who we were organizing. So it wasn’t just learning that people could do it, but trying to figure out as an organizer, with those workers, how they could defend themselves against the risk you’re talking about. What can you do if your boss threatens to call the migra on you? What can you do if the migra actually show up at the factory where you’re working? Very practical questions like that also lead to a certain level of political immigrant rights activism.

Do you see any changes occurring as a result of the politics with respect to immigration here in the US?

There have been lots of changes. I could talk for hours about the terrible things that Trump has done. On the other hand, people spontaneously went out to the airports when he issued the first anti-Muslim order and shut them down. In San Francisco they got five people out of detention—I haven’t seen that before.

People are upset, angry, trying to organize in different ways. It’s one of the reasons that I was taking pictures at the Local 2 (Marriott) strike. I would have been there anyway, but it was really interesting and a morale booster that this happened right in the middle of all this Trump shit. Here they do a strike against the largest hotel chain in the world and they win! You know, life is not just full of terrible news.

Above:
Hotel workers celebrate the successful end of their strike against Marriott Hotels. Their t-shirts and scarves represent the UNITE HERE Local 2 union’s “One Job Should Be Enough” campaign.
San Francisco, California, United States, 2018.