



Building Worker Power and Climate Resilience in California's Wine Country

A Case Study of North Bay
Jobs with Justice

October 2026

Introduction

For the last twenty years, Unbound Philanthropy has been investing in leaders and organizations to build a vibrant, welcoming society and just immigration system, as part of a pluralist and inclusive democracy. As an immigration funder, we recognize that immigration and the lives of immigrants in the United States don't exist in a vacuum. The climate crisis is reshaping where we live, how we move, how we work, and how we think about the future. Rising inequality and the concentration of wealth and power is transforming our economy and our democracy.

The challenges of our time are deeply interconnected, and so too are the solutions. Unbound believes that building worker power is a critical strategy to confront these intersecting and compounding crises and to transform systems. We can lift standards and build solidarity across all working people, recognizing that immigrant workers and immigration can contribute to shared prosperity for all. This is a case study of one organization that is building worker power in the face of massive changes to our climate, economy, and immigration system.



North Bay Jobs with Justice organizes immigrant and Indigenous farmworkers in California's wine industry to improve working conditions in an industry deeply impacted by climate change, while also developing pathways to safe and dignified jobs that restore the land and mitigate wildfire risk.

Context

Sonoma County, California, where North Bay Jobs with Justice is based, is one of the world's most significant wine growing regions, with over 400 wineries. The industry is fueled by a largely immigrant workforce. For decades, farmworkers in the wine industry have had to navigate low wages and poor working conditions. These conditions have worsened as the impacts of climate change escalate.

Sonoma County is on the frontlines of climate-change fueled disasters and ongoing impacts, including extreme heat, frequent droughts, flooding, and some of the worst wildfires in the state over the past decade. Farmworkers in the county face the impossible choice of protecting their health versus maintaining their livelihoods. Farmworkers experience heightened heat-related risks — farmworkers are 35 times more likely to die due to heat-related causes than all other occupations combined. Climate impacts like extreme heat are putting new economic pressures on vineyards, as is a drop in demand with changing consumer preferences. Both of these forces are threatening

the viability of many winemakers. According to [*The New York Times*](#), winemakers in California produced less wine in 2025 than at any point in the last quarter century, and, nationwide, wine sales are at their lowest level in more than two decades. This downturn in the wine industry has resulted in significant layoffs and reduction of work opportunities for farmworkers.

Finally, an increase in mechanization of farmworkers' jobs along with policy changes intended to drive down the wages of immigrant workers are also impacting farmworkers. The Economic Policy Institute estimates that a recent federal rule change that cut the wages of workers on seasonal H-2A visas would reduce U.S. farmworkers' total annual wages by about \$3 billion—up to 9% of their total wages. As of August 25, 2026, a federal court has invalidated the rule, finding that the cuts adversely affect the wages and working conditions of American workers. Farmworker advocates are monitoring what may happen next in the litigation.

North Bay

Jobs with Justice

North Bay Jobs with Justice (NBJWJ) leads a grassroots coalition of over 30 community and labor organizations, including Teamsters 665, UNITE HERE, Centro Laboral de Graton, 350 Sonoma, and teachers' unions. NBJWJ serves as a hub for people to engage in shared skills development training together. People learn the nuts and bolts of organizing, such as how to develop a membership base and establish relationships; how to identify worker and community leaders; and how to drive turnout to important campaign actions.

Building leadership is at the heart of NBJWJ's model. They prioritize trainings for grassroots leaders so that workers develop the skills of leadership, not just in the workplace but also in the broader community. Leaders may be responsible for organizing their direct co-workers, but they may also organize family members who work at other companies. At the core of their organizing is the worker equipo — an organizing committee composed of 12 leaders from across the industry who identify, recruit, and train other workers as leaders. Equipo members — all volunteer, grassroots members of the community — are the anchors and leadership of the campaign work.

The act of engaging in shared skills development training together builds more than just skills. **“Having people engage in trainings together helps build relationships and connections, and solidarity,”** said Davida Sotelo Escobedo, incoming Co-Executive Director of North Bay Jobs with Justice.



NBJWJ's coalition model centers the farmworkers' leadership, inspiring other workers and helping them learn from the farmworkers' organizing experience and other skills that they've developed over many years. The shared training model has **“created a space where the farmworker campaign and leadership development can be an anchor, a focal point, in terms of who's leading the way in local economic justice fights against the growers, and climate justice work,”** Davida said.

For example, for May Day 2026, Santa Rosa Teachers Association used organizing techniques like phone banking for the first time—which they learned from farmworkers who are part of the NBJWJ coalition. This training in organizing allowed them to have the highest turnout to date for their May Day action. The May Day march had over 1,000 people. **“Because [the farmworkers] have been building this successful structure for years, they were able to show the rest of the coalition how it's done, and how to build a base in the movement,”** said Aura Aguilar, incoming Co-Executive Director of NBJWJ.

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North Bay Jobs with Justice deploys an innovative and dynamic approach to organizing workers in ways that put people and community first. The entire JWW network is strengthened by the cross-pollination and learning that comes from observing creative and thoughtful local campaigns like those developed by NBJWJ. Their approach effectively models the power of intersectional worker organizing.

Mackenzie Baris Deputy Director for Program & Base-building, Jobs with Justice



Improving Conditions Today and Building a Better Future

North Bay Jobs with Justice works to simultaneously improve conditions today for farmworkers while envisioning and building towards a sustainable future.

Improving Conditions Today

Over the past five years, NBJWJ has led the 5 for Farmworkers Campaign to address widespread safety, climate, and economic injustices. They have won major victories for farmworkers, including language justice, clean water and bathrooms, community safety observers, and hazard pay. NBJWJ secured a first-of-its-kind \$3 million disaster-insurance fund for frontline workers who lose wages during disasters, and they have gained commitments from vineyards to provide hazard pay for farmworkers who continue to work through wildfires when the air quality is unhealthy. NBJWJ is now working to make these improvements standard for the industry.

NBJWJ has also held to account vineyards that have treated workers unfairly when they have spoken out about unsafe working conditions, winning several recent settlements, such as one recently with Redwood Empire Vineyard Management, in Geyserville, CA. The company will pay a settlement to current and former employees who were let go because they had attended a march where they asked for hazard pay. NBJWJ helped the farmworkers file complaints. NBJWJ has also supported unions like the Teamsters 665 in their successful efforts to unionize workers across the wine industry in response to unfair working conditions.

Building a Better Future

Whether from climate change or market forces, the wine industry in California is in the midst of a major transformation. But what does that mean for the farmworkers who have fueled the industry's profits for decades? What does a just transition for farmworkers look like?

North Bay Jobs with Justice is helping farmworkers imagine, and build towards, a future where jobs are safe, climate-resilient, and economically just. They are helping farmworkers transition into well-paid vegetation management work, that helps restore the land as well as mitigate fire risk. Over the past three years, NBJWJ has trained over 50 farmworkers through a series of Spanish-language climate resilience trainings focused on forest health and fire resilience. Building on this early model, with funding from the state of California, NBJWJ is now set to launch a six-week, comprehensive Climate Resilience Training Program that will serve as a foundational and innovative bridge to dignified careers in climate resilience with family-sustaining wages for hundreds of workers in the region. The training program focuses on vegetation management, wildfire mitigation, and watershed restoration practices.

The training also weaves together the traditional ecological knowledge of Indigenous and immigrant workers with technical skills. Many people are able to use the skills that were passed down to them by their grandparents in their Indigenous communities in Mexico and other regions, connecting them to their family and to the land.

This work we're doing today is very different from what we do in the fields. The vineyard owners don't teach us this. They just tell us to tend the grapes, because at the end of the year that's profits for the owners. Here we don't work for profit. We work for the benefit of the land, the animals, for us humans too.

A large crowd of people, many wearing blue shirts, is marching down a city street. They are holding various signs and banners. In the foreground, a large red banner reads "WORKER POWER". To the right, another red banner says "SOMOS LA FUERZA TRABAJADORA". A person in the center is holding a large black and white flag. Other signs include "ICE BUILDS WALLS AND WHORES BUT NOT A BROTHER", "FUEZA TRABAJADORA", "ICE", "SUELO DIGNO", "DIGNO", and "SUELO DIGNO". The crowd is diverse in age and appearance, and the street is lined with trees and buildings.

NBJWJ is planning to train the inaugural cohort of the new program in Spring of 2027 and will undertake a tiered growth strategy until they have the capacity to offer multiple sessions annually.

NBJWJ is also in the early stages of a process to acquire land for a climate resilience worker training center that will serve as a hub for skills training, leadership development, equipment storage, and as a project site for Indigenous and immigrant farmworkers to steward as a demonstration of a more resilient future. Land stewardship is an ongoing process of building a relationship with the land over time. Having a training center will provide a living classroom with a diversity of ecosystem types for workers that they can return to, learn from, try different approaches on, and be able to observe the results.

More than two dozen of the workers who have participated in NBJWJ's early Climate Resilience Training program are now building a worker cooperative, the Cooperativa Semillas en Manos Unidas. The co-op creates a structure for the workers who have completed the workforce development trainings for several years to enter into positions of leadership, as trainers and as business owners.

Worker-owners have representation on, and vote for, the steering committee of the co-op, and they also manage day-to-day operations. This allows for increased worker voice as well as creating the desired workplace protections and opportunities. As worker-owners, they will forge a new path to dignified, family-sustaining wages and life-changing benefits for their community.

“We’ve been thinking about how do we create more ownership from the workers, and people in the driver’s seat for driving the process,” said Davida Sotelo Escobedo, ***“and taking ownership for all the complex things of self-governance and running a business, and doing that with 25 other people. It’s something most of us don’t have the practice in.”*** It’s been exciting, Davida added, as people start to understand what it will look like, ***“and to believe in it.”***

What's Next

After six years of leadership, Max Bell Alper is transitioning out of the role of NBJWJ Executive Director, welcoming in Co-Executive Directors, Aura Aguilar and Davida Sotelo Escobedo. ***“The leadership transition is emblematic of the DNA of the leadership development at NBJWJ,”*** said Davida. ***“When the organization started 13 years ago, it was doing a lot of advocacy but wasn’t doing leadership or base building. When Max came in, he brought a focus on leadership development and base building, whether in the organization or in the co-op. Max did so much work to build the team and support our growth.”***

This successful internal leadership development has prepared Aura Aguilar and Davida Sotelo Escobedo, who have both served as Lead Organizers, to step into the roles of Co-Executive Directors.

The organization has created a blueprint for how to improve conditions today, while building a better future. North Bay Jobs with Justice has a powerful base of members, a deep bench of leadership, and proof of concept. With new leadership, NBJWJ is prepared to scale its workforce development program and worker-owned cooperative, improving the lives and working conditions of farmworkers while boosting climate resilience for all residents of Northern California.

If you are a funder interested in learning more about North Bay Jobs with Justice’s model and how you can support their work, please contact:

Aura Aguilar, aura@northbayjwj.org and Davida Sotelo Escobedo, davida@northbayjwj.org.

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I have been so deeply inspired by the powerful organizing, strategic thinking, and profound commitment that both Aura and Davida have demonstrated at North Bay Jobs with Justice for over 4 years. It is now truly an honor to be able to support them as the next generation of Movement leaders in building the kind of worker power that is so urgently needed in these times.

Max Bell Alper



Aura Aguilar and Davida Sotelo Escobedo

Credits

This case study was written by Elyse Lightman Samuels and designed by Reason First. Stephanie Teatro and Laura Huizar partnered on the project.

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Photo Credits

Photo Credit 1
North Bay Jobs with Justice

Farmworkers engage in a training on prescribed burns, to help restore the land and mitigate wildfire risk. North Bay Jobs With Justice is helping farmworkers transition into jobs that are safe, dignified, and economically just, and that support climate resilience.

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North Bay Jobs with Justice

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For May Day 2026, Santa Rosa Teachers Association learned about organizing techniques from farmworkers who are part of the North Bay Jobs with Justice coalition, leading them to have the highest turnout to date for their May Day action.

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