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Committee on Natural Resources Roundtable Discussion on “Climate Justice: Community Perspectives and Where We Go From Here”

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Good afternoon, Congresswoman Stansbury, Congressman Grijalva, and members of the committee. Thank you for inviting our organization to speak today.

My name is Marcela Díaz, and I work for Somos Un Pueblo Unido, a statewide immigrant-based economic justice organization in New Mexico. We organize low-wage workers and immigrant families in eight urban and rural counties to advocate for grassroots policy solutions that provide economic opportunities and strengthen our communities.

One region where Somos has been organizing workers for over a decade is the southeastern corridor of our state, which forms part of the Permian Basin. In 2022, New Mexico was the nation’s second-largest crude oil-producing state, after Texas, and the seventh-largest producer of natural gas. This fiscal year, oil and gas revenues will account for over one-third of New Mexico’s general fund and state budget, resulting in transformative investments in social programs (J.Fabion, handout from presentation to New Mexico Legislative Finance Committee, June 11, 2024).

But who are the people generating this money and at what cost? According to New Mexico’s Department of Workforce Solutions, 55% of energy workers in the state are People of Color, 48% are Latino, and about 15% are women (Moskowitz, 2022). While information about the percentage of those who are foreign-born isn’t readily available, it’s evident that Mexican immigrants are fueling this industry. Nationwide, the Bureau of Labor Statistics estimates that about 14% of energy workers are foreign-born (Villagran, 2024). The counties in this region have seen steady population growth of Latinos over the last fifteen years, while population growth in the rest of New Mexico remains stagnant.

Somos recently commissioned a study with the University of New Mexico’s Center for Social Policy to understand the working and living conditions of immigrant oil and gas families and their ideas for a more diversified economy and robust and adequate workforce development infrastructure. Over 100 oil and gas workers and their family members participated in surveys, interviews, and focus groups. Additionally, 30 program heads and representatives of adult education and workforce development programs were interviewed. Some key findings of the Southeastern New Mexico Oil and Gas Workforce Study include (Sanchez-Youngman et al., 2024):

1. Immigrant lives in oil and gas counties are not temporary. The vast majority surveyed have lived in the region for more than five years.
2. These jobs are dangerous. 46% of respondents said they had experienced an injury on the job, and 80% said they know someone who had an accident or died on the job.
3. While wages in these jobs are assumed to be high, they require 12 to 15 hour workdays, often in extreme temperatures, not allowing for a family life or time to re-train or even advance in their own industry.
4. There is a physical shelf life for workers in the field, and undocumented workers “retire” without access to social security benefits.

5. During industry downturns, undocumented workers do not have access to unemployment insurance. This was particularly problematic during the pandemic when they were laid off and could not access federal relief.
6. And very telling, 78% said they do not want their children working in the industry.

Our members, currently tethered to this industry, want a transition to sustainable jobs with less grueling and dangerous work conditions. 95% of those surveyed said they would participate in job training opportunities if they were free and accessible. They noted the need for more in-person adult education and language instruction programs, short-term certification programs, customized training for available jobs, and better access to online courses.

We identified other structural barriers to skills building and workforce training for jobs in emerging industries. New Mexico's workforce development infrastructure, primarily funded by Title 1 funding from the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA), excludes undocumented immigrant workers and does not always allow flexible funding for robust regional sectoral partnerships with worker based organization, businesses, colleges and community-based training providers. While our state has received significant investments from the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law and the Inflation Reduction Act, it is unclear how much of that has resulted in new or expanded training programs in southeastern New Mexico. These funds can be more flexible and less restrictive than WIOA dollars, but community-based training providers, worker-based organizations, local governments need to know they workforce development funds are there and how to access them.

A just transition for immigrant oil and gas workers requires deep and early investments in building a robust workforce development infrastructure that is not only geared toward the industry. This includes major funding for new and improved adult education, high school equivalency in Spanish and English, integrated education programs for "difficult to reach workers" in ESL, literacy, high school equivalency, multilingual certification programs, and pre-apprenticeships. While community colleges can serve as hubs for these trainings in rural areas, we also need investments to strengthen community-based eligible training programs and providers. Additionally, pathways for legalization for undocumented workers and unemployment insurance benefits are essential.

Increased support and wrap-around services, including a guaranteed supplemental income while in skills-building and certification programs, are also crucial. Community engagement and worker voices must be part of developing certification programs to ensure federal investments reach our communities and that marginalized frontline communities are not left behind. Solutions should proactively design and provide workforce training pathways for youth and women, not just male oil and gas workers.

Experts project peak oil production in southeastern New Mexico within the next decade (PFM Group Consulting, LLC, 2023). State and federal policymakers must make early investments with braided funding in renewable energy and infrastructure projects AND educational and training programs. This will prepare frontline workers for a transition away from oil and gas and give them a fair shot at new jobs in emerging industries resulting from IRA and BIL economic investments.

Policy solutions must not leave behind immigrant workers, undocumented workers, women, rural youth, and adjacent industry workers. Not only would that be unjust, but it would also result in a less robust and diversified economy that our whole state deserves. Thank you.

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