

“Farm Workers Still Need Us,” published in *The Disciple*
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Support by Disciples and other religious communities remains a chief source of hope for laborers whose lives are at risk.

Farm Workers Still Need Us

By Pat Hoffman

Recently the San Francisco Board of Supervisors endorsed the United Farm Workers' (UFW) table grape boycott. Their endorsement lifted up the concern that pesticides used on table grapes may cause cancer, sterility and birth defects in farm workers and their families, and threaten the health of consumers.

Grower organizations in the great agricultural valley just south of San Francisco were quick to retaliate with their own endorsements of a boycott of San Francisco as a convention site.

The *San Francisco Chronicle* carried one editorial denouncing the city's action. It said in part:

“One can be properly concerned about use of pesticides in the fields. But why not recommend review of the actual effect of those chemicals on farm workers or support full enforcement of current laws designed to protect them?”

There is always the hope that the “people in charge” will do something helpful and appropriate. But the fact is, farm workers are virtually unprotected from pesticides in the fields. Their plight must be a concern for Christians.

According to the U.S. Department of Labor, farm workers have the highest rate of toxic chemical injuries among occupational groups in the nation. In California, the nation's leading agricultural state, pesticides are the major single cause of occupational illness.

An example of ineffective enforcement of regulations which are on the books occurred during the first week of August 1987. Thirty-seven farm workers from the H.P. Metzler farm in California's rich central agricultural valley were treated for pesticide poisoning, according to Jim Wells, pesticide enforcement chief for the California Department of Food

and Agriculture (CDFA). Three previous pesticide poisoning incidents at the same farm were under investigation at the time.

By October 1987, the company was found guilty of illegal pesticide practices. These included spraying toxics without the required prior notice, failing to obtain a use report for restricted pesticides, using pesticides without following label requirements, and improperly posting signs that warn its workers of dangers from the chemicals. For those violations the company was fined a total of only \$250 by the CDFA.

Months later some of the Metzler workers were still suffering from skin poisoning. The workers were exhibiting acute symptoms of pesticide poisoning, including rashes, dizziness, nausea, eye irritation and respiratory problems.

Workers worry about chronic effects such as cancer, birth defects, stillbirths and miscarriages. It is difficult to determine the causes of these problems because they may take three or more years to show up. But some pesticides in current approved use are known carcinogens which cause cancer, teratogens which cause birth defects and mutagens which cause changes in DNA.

The UFW has called for a ban on five of the most dangerous pesticides used in growing grapes. They are Captan, Parathion, Phoadrin, Dinoseb, and Methyl Bromide. These names do not mean much to the average person and, in fact, are hard to remember. But these chemicals are familiar to farm workers, who are regularly exposed to them.

For example, Captan has been a widely sued fungicide which is a carcinogen, teratogen and mutagen. Recently the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), which regulates pesticides, curbed the use of Captan. It will be banned for use on forty-two food products. Saying, however, that some benefits outweigh the risks, growers may continue to use it on grapes.

In a report to the Maryland state legislature in February 1986, Dr. Marion Moses, a specialist in occupational medicine, spoke about Captan. "Because it is not acutely toxic, that is it does not cause immediate and obvious harm, it has been considered to be a safe pesticide. However, chemicals such as Captan may be the most hazardous of all in terms of chronic effects such as cancer and birth defects."

She went on to tell them about Felipe Franco who was born without arms or legs. "His mother worked during the first three months of her pregnancy picking grapes known to have been sprayed with teratogenic pesticides. Captan, which is one of the pesticides she may have been exposed to, is structurally similar to Thalidomide, the drug that caused thousands of infants in Europe to be born without arms and legs."

Felipe's mother, Ramona Franco, says she was told by foremen and growers that the pesticides around here were safe, that they were harmless "medicine" for the plants.

The EPA has made judgments weighing the acceptable risks of using chemicals such as Captan against agricultural benefits. Felipe Franco is now seven and gets around in an electric wheelchair. He attends a school for handicapped children. It's doubtful that he or his parents believe his living without arms or legs was an "acceptable risk." He recently received \$800,000 in an out-of-court settlement from Chevron and Stauffer chemical companies.

Many people do not understand why consumers are being asked to help again by boycotting grapes. There's mumbling that Cesar Chavez and his union must not have their act together if they haven't got that situation resolved by now. After all, in the 1970s seventeen million Americans went without grapes to pressure grape growers to sign contracts with their workers.

But the growers' opposition to unionization has made it difficult to impossible to have union representation elections free of fear and intimidation even in California where there is an Agricultural Labor Relations Act.

An example would be the intimidation in a case from a 1977 election campaign at the Harry Carian Ranch in California's Coachella Valley. Twelve years after the fact, remedies have not been made in this case. During the organizing campaign in 1977, the son of the owner pushed a UFW organizer's car off the road with his tractor, attempted to assault Cesar Chavez while he spoke to workers during their lunch break, threw objects at UFW organizers' cars, and assaulted UFW organizer Fred Ross Jr. on the day of the election. All of this took place in front of workers. In addition, the company laid off thirty-five pro-UFW employees and fired the most active supporters. Other workers were threatened with discharge and the company promised an increase in wages and benefits if the union was not voted in.

The Agricultural Labor Relations Board found the company in violation of the act. August 23, 1985, the Stated Supreme Court upheld the Board's decision. But to date, there has been no compensation to the workers who were illegally fired.

We are called as people of faith to be in solidarity with farm workers who have been so exploited. But in the barrage of news from all parts of the world, it may be hard work to keep farm workers in mind. Do we remember Cesar Chavez's thirty-six-day, water-only fast of last summer calling us to remember the plight of farm workers and others in farming communities suffering as a result of pesticides and needing more say in the workplace?

When the councils of the various churches meet, Felipe Franco and his family need to be present in the minds of decision makers. The Metzler workers with their sores and rashes need also to be present. Cesar Chavez and his great sacrifice needs to be present. These sisters and brothers are watching and hoping for help.

Farm workers and their children are on the front lines. They are suffering and they are warning us of danger. Last May Juan Sanchez, a farm worker in the Coachella Valley, appealed to members of the National Farm Worker Ministry Board, a board which represents forty-four denominations and religious organizations.

“Don’t forget about the farm workers. And don’t forget our boycott. We don’t want to rob the growers. We don’t want to get rich. We only want enough for our families and safety and dignity for workers.”

Pat Hoffman is a writer who lives in Inglewood, California. She has served on the staff of the National Farm Worker Ministry and is the author of Ministry of the Dispossessed, which offers her perspective on the farm worker movement. The book is available for \$8.95 plus \$1.25 shipping from Wallace Press, P.O. Box 83850, Los Angeles, California 90083.