

“Gaining Justice Ground,” published in *Sojourners*. October 1977

## The 12 year struggle of the United Farm Workers union

By Pat Hoffman

*Be strong and stand firm, for you are the man to give this people possession of the land that I swore to their fathers I should give them. Only be strong and stand firm and be careful to keep all the Law which my servant Moses laid on you. Never swerve from this to right or left, and then you will be happy in all you do.*

Joshua 1:6-7

Lorie Ann Cardosa, four and a half, is dead. She died in May just south of Tampa, Florida. She died because she was a migrant child. Her 23-year-old mother is a migrant and is poor and powerless to control much that happens to her and her children. Mrs. Cardosa and her four children had been living in a labor camp near Ruskin, Florida, for three weeks while picking tomatoes. On Saturday, May 21, Mrs. Cardosa left the camp to buy groceries. When she returned her 15-year-old brother said he couldn't find Lorie. She was found a little later in an abandoned refrigerator near the camp. She wasn't breathing. The young uncle revived her and she was rushed to a small local hospital.

It looked like she would live. The doctor arranged for her to be taken by ambulance to Tampa to a hospital with better facilities. When the child arrived there she was not admitted and was sent to a hospital in St. Petersburg. After 91 minutes of traveling in an ambulance to four hospitals in three counties, Lorie suffered a severe heart seizure and died. “Even if I never become nothing, I want my children to have a chance. My dream is for my children to have what I never had, what my parents never had, what none of us ever had,” says Loretta Sanchez Cardosa. “We are migrants. We pick the fields, but we love our babies, too.”

I read the article about Lorie Cardosa in the *St. Petersburg Times* and thought about all the folks who have commented to me how happy they were that the struggle was over for farm workers now that there is an Agricultural Labor Relations Act on the books in California, and the United Farm Workers have won a lot of union representation elections in that state, and the Teamsters are out of the way, again. But for the Cardosas and migrants and seasonal farm workers in 48 other states, nothing has changed. Average life expectancy for migrants is still nearly twenty years below the national average; infant mortality is still 200 times higher than the national average; agriculture is listed as the third most dangerous occupation, yet one-fourth of all farm workers are children.

The struggle isn't over, because for them the justice struggle has not yet begun; it is only hoped for. Even in California, no farm worker would tell you the struggle is over!

Those who think it is are engaged in wishful thinking, or perhaps they don't know that there are two and one-half million farm workers in the United States and presently only about two per cent are members of the United Farm Workers (UFW) union, and not all of those members are working under a union contract. It's not easy for us to think about the scope of the problem, how long it may take to correct, and what our responsibility may be in it.

During World War II, I was a child in Chicago. We all referred to the war as a world war, but the battles were not fought everywhere. No battles were fought in Chicago. But we all felt involved. I remember conscientiously saving the tin foil from my gum wrappers. I collected it in balls and delivered them to school to aid the war effort.

In the same way, farm workers long for the advent of justice throughout the United States. But the struggle is not engaged everywhere. The focus this time has been in California. Farm workers need the conscientious care, deeds, and prayers of supporters from around the country.

We won't go back to original sin, greed, and the desire for power one is not entitled to, although that might be appropriate. We'll just go back to 1965 and the question, "What is it farm workers want?"

With the Delano grape strike of 1965, the farm workers get quite a bit of national attention. They were saying that they wanted a union of their own and contracts guaranteeing certain wages (low wages—in '65 they were asking for \$1.30 an hour, and it's not much more now). They also sought protection on the job and a hiring hall. The growers said, "Our workers are happy. They don't want a union. We don't know who these troublemakers are. There's no strike at our ranch. These people with picket signs are *outsiders*."

As hundreds and hundreds of farm workers went out on strike, it became more difficult to be convincing that no legitimate workers wanted a union to represent them. The lines hardened and growers finally made it clear that *they* did not want to deal with a union.

In 1970, after five years of strikes and boycotts of their grapes, some grape growers in California signed some three-year contracts with the UFW. Coinciding with the signing in Delano, brother growers in the lettuce industry began a new line of defense, which was to boggle the public's mind by inviting in the Teamsters union. Growers who had said they would die before allowing "their workers" to unionize were having tea with the Teamsters and chatting over contract arrangements. It all seemed reasonable and civil, except that some unreasonable farm workers (the numbers were now in the thousands) kept saying, "We want a union of our own." Teamster officials were saying, Farm workers want to belong to the Teamsters union." Some growers were still saying, "Our workers don't want

a union. They are happy.” In the meantime the public was being pressed to take sides, but it no longer knew whose side to take.

In 1973 the hard-won grape contracts expired and nearly all of those growers refused to renegotiate with the UFW. Instead they handed contracts to the Teamsters. Teamster goons roamed the picket lines under the guise of protecting their members and beat up farm workers. In Kern County it was the sheriff's deputies who beat up people. Religious leaders called for elections, “to find out, in a democratic way, what the farm workers want.” It seemed a reasonable request, but the growers said no, and the Teamsters kept alluding to proof (worker petitions) which they already possessed, but never made public. Only the UFW was game for taking a vote.

In 1975, after years of struggle and the deaths of three UFW members, the California State Legislature, prompted by the new governor, Jerry Brown, and his awareness of a decade of farm worker sacrifice said, “We want to set up legislative machinery to allow farm workers to vote for what union, if any, they want to represent them.” The growers fought a last-ditch-effort to fix the legislation so that a lot of farm workers would not be eligible to vote, or so that elections would be held when few farm workers were around, or so that they would have a chance to form company unions that workers could be coerced to vote for but which would keep power in the same hands—the employer's.

Most of these attempts failed because the UFW took up residence in the stated capital and rode herd on every new attempt to emasculate the election law. It was finally passed, and the workers had won the glorious right to take votes (at least when there was money in the state budget to administer it) and say what they want. Larry Tramutt, Director of the UFW's Boycott Department, says, “The law doesn't fill their stomachs; doesn't guarantee there won't be labor contractors. All the law does is give farm workers the right to vote in elections. The *contract*, the contract does those other things.”

Larry Tramutt was exaggerating a little because he was frustrated that so many people have this odd nothing that the struggle is over because a law was passed in the state of California. In addition to giving farm workers a chance to say what they want in a nice way (not by striking; or boycotting grapes, lettuce, and Gallo wines), the law *can* help balance the power of the growers. Now, when California growers do things that are unfair, they may also be illegal—like firing workers because they support the UFW.

The law doesn't keep. Those workers fed and clothed for the next 18 months while the UFW files Unfair Labor Practices, but it is rewarding that some of those unjust, and now illegal, practices finally are settled and farm workers have their grievances redressed. In June of 1977, six farm workers from Hemet, California, were ordered reinstated in their jobs with back pay dating from their firings for union support in the fall of 1975. What's more, the company has to mail a declaration of its wrongs to every farm worker on the payroll currently and back to the summer and fall of 1975, when the representation

elections were taking place in Hemet. This satisfaction is *not* automatic. The UFW's legal staff work hard to achieve a just solution.

In California the farm workers are still involved in what I call *gaining justice ground*. That work will need to go on all across the country, but the union must securely hold enough justice ground in California before it can move on. The union's estimate is that it must win enough contracts to bring its served membership up to 100,000 in California. They hope to achieve that goal by the end of 1978, when Governor Brown completes his term of office. Brown has been an ally; there's no telling who the people of California will elect as governor next.

The union believes its California operation must be self-supporting, too, before organizing expands to other states. Running strikes and boycotts is expensive even when the staff doesn't get paid—people still have to eat, get from one place to another, and use the telephone. And if there is a strike, what union would let their strikers starve? If California is self-supporting, then all donations can be channeled into the all-out effort to take new justice ground in Texas or Florida, or wherever it seems right to go next.

After justice ground is gained in California and other parts of the country, the union will have, does have, the job of *holding justice ground*. It's not enough to get contracts providing guarantees and protections for workers. Where there is a long, traditional relationship of powerful and powerless, no piece of paper can change that relationship.

Experience up to now indicates that most growers, even after signing a contract, are determined to do as they please. The staff of the UFW must stay close to Ranch Committees, reminding them that things have changed: workers have rights guaranteed in the contract and there are steps the committee must take if the employer—or the union—does not fulfill the contract agreements. Demanding their rights is not familiar work for the majority of farm workers. Doing it, learning to do it, is essential to hold justice ground.

Cesar Chavez and the United Farm Workers are already in the schoolbooks. Sections on the farm worker movement have been appearing in social studies and history textbooks from elementary to college level for several years. It's right that they should appear, because the movement is historic; but in some ways it is like writing about World War II before the parades and confetti of D-Day, or before the Atomic Bomb was dropped on Hiroshima. It is premature to record the movement in history books as an accomplished fact, an event complete.

No piece of paper can change the traditional relationship of the powerful and the powerless.
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Interestingly enough, young people know it is still history in the making. For the past twelve years I have watched wave after wave of young people come fresh to the struggle. They know the movement is important and feel privileged to participate in some small way

in shaping it. Two weeks ago I attended a UFW community meeting at a Jewish temple in West Los Angeles. There were about 75 people there and only a sprinkling were over age 30.

After the meeting I talked with Larry Frank, the UFW organizer for West Los Angeles. I discovered that his background had been in the Evangelical Free Church. He was discouraged with the responses he had been getting from church people. He had tried to find a church for the meeting and had been turned down several places before he called a rabbi and was welcomed to use temple facilities. Larry said one minister claimed the neighborhood wasn't zoned for political meetings (a new tack I hadn't heard of before). Several others referred vaguely to "church policy." Larry said, "Nothing could be more discouraging than to have a minister use the word 'policy' as a cloak for what he doesn't want to do. It's cheap morality."

As Larry talked, scraps of conversations I have had with "older people," institutional people, church people, ran through my mind: the presbytery budget discussion in which it was argued that we had carried the National Farm Worker Ministry in the budget long enough (three years) and it was time to make that money available to some new endeavor—the farm workers were well on their way now; the clergy friend yelling at me that he was "sick and tired of being harassed by union organizers," and "don't they know how much I did to support them in the past?"; and the church officials in every denomination that have moved on to "The Hunger Issue," or "Economics and Justice," but clearly do not want to relate hunger and economics to the concrete, present social issue of the farm worker struggle.

The farm worker struggle continues to be too real. If those clergymen or church administrators admitted that the UFW is working on the hunger issue or is shaping economics for justice, they might feel compelled to leave their desks and join young people on a picket line on Saturday morning and to give their hearts to poor people who are farm workers. Older people, established people, church people will play the cynic, will ask the "probing" questions: "All institutions are the same. The UFW may have been fine in the beginning, but they will probably end up like all the other unions, power-hungry." "What will happen when Chavez dies?" "Don't you think they have pressed the use of the boycott too hard?" The questions are smoke screens; poor people are pulling on their hearts and they don't want to give them up. They don't want to risk looking silly, because the fad is over.

Every one of us who supported farm workers by not buying grapes, by talking to produce clerks and managers, who (perhaps for the first time in our lives) passed out leaflets to customers asking them to not shop at that store until the grapes were out, have given farm workers hope. Loretta Cardoso and two million other farm workers have heard about Cesar Chavez and the UFW. The struggle hasn't begun for them, but they have a glimmer of hope that their children might have what they never had: a wage they could eat

on, medical benefits, some job security, and money to bury their dead. We gave them hope. We're in the mix as surely as Cesar Chavez.

We helped lead farm workers to believe it is possible to make change, that power is available in them and to them. We were part of the reason that Javier Santibanes, Donato Ambriz, Justo Garcia, Antonio Bernal, Isaac Primo, and Jesus Jurado made clear and public their support for the UFW and were fired from their jobs at Hemet Wholesale Nursery in the fall of 1975. We took the responsibility of giving them hope and now farm workers gaining and holding justice ground in California and their sisters and brothers across the land will see if we make good on our promises. The union is making good on its promises to farm workers. The staff of the union, in many cases the same since 1965 and before, continue their incredible work without pay, only board and room and \$10 a week (it was \$5 a week for 12 years and has finally been adjusted for inflation).

So to you old supporters and to those who are new to the struggle, get to where some farm workers are, if you can, or pick up a copy of Robert Coles' *Uprooted Children*. Don't mind if the tears run down your cheeks; it's just the therapy we need to renew our love, to renew our anger, and get us moving again; to remind some of us that we have been accomplices in giving farm workers hope. The farm workers will continued to press for justice, and we—for God's sake—must not desert them.

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