

THE FARMWORKERS' MOVEMENT

A PEOPLE'S FIGHT AGAINST CORPORATE EXPLOITATION

THE CONDITIONS

Statistics about the living conditions of farm workers may be quite well-known by now, but as a reminder here is once again a sampling:

Wages

- Average annual earnings in 1968: \$1,307.
- Average hourly wages in 1969: \$1.43.
- Farm workers are specifically excluded from collective bargaining laws and unemployment insurance. They are discriminated against in minimum wage coverage (\$1.30 for farm workers, \$1.60 for others) and social security laws (they must earn \$150 or work 20 days for one employer in order to be covered). Without contracts farm workers do not have the protections of job security, holidays, sick pay, overtime pay, sanitary toilets, etc.

Health

- Life expectancy for farm workers is 49 years.
- In 1969 infant and maternal mortality was 125 percent higher than the national rate.
- A California Health Department survey in 1969 revealed at least 150 cases per 1,000 workers of pesticide poisoning.
- Child labor is very common. In California alone 1/4 of the farm workers are children under 15.

Housing

- In 1969 the average farm worker house had only 1.9 rooms.
- 18.4 percent of their housing does not have indoor electricity.
- 90.4 percent does not have a sink.
- 95.6 percent does not have a flush toilet.

There is a federal housing code for migrant camps, matched by codes in 32 states, but their enforcement is pitifully slack because of local political connections. Thus migrant workers are the worst-housed group in the nation, according to a recent New York Times article.²

The Employers-

Who Are They?

It is a common misconception that farm workers are employed by farmers. This could still be validated some years ago, but it is now a well-known fact that conglomerate corporations are more and more controlling agriculture. Agriculture has become agribusiness and major growers are partners in this new industry.

For instance, in California a mere 7 percent of the farms occupy 80 percent of the arable land. The top 2.4 percent of the farms account for nearly 60 percent of the hired farm labor.³

BUILDING THE FARMWORKERS UNION

STRUCTURE

In organizing farm workers UFWOC functions as a very socialized union. Its greatest concern is to balance central authority and workers' rights. The union's pivotal operating unit is the *ranch committee*, a group of five workers elected each year by their fellow workers on individual ranches with UFWOC contracts. The ranch committee is responsible for the enforcement of the contract and deals with the growers in case of grievances. The thrust here is to make the individual farm workers feel that their power under the contract is real, so that they will stand up for it.

Today UFWOC holds some 200 contracts, covering 30-40,000 farm workers. In all of these cases workers have shown in elections that they wanted to be represented by UFWOC.

UFWOC's central staff counts some 100 people, while an additional 350 work in field and boycott offices. UFWOC welcomes the help of volunteers as long as they recognize the self-determination rights of farm workers.

The union itself is growing - it has a membership of at least 55,000 at this time. Its members contribute regularly to the union, but this is still not enough to make UFWOC a self-sustaining union. It is dependent on contributions from the AFL-CIO, the United Auto Workers, many other labor unions, church groups and concerned individuals.

PHILOSOPHY AND LIFE STYLE

The cornerstones of UFWOC's operation are the concepts of non-violence and of servanthood, stemming from Cesar Chavez' personal commitment. The non-violent posture is both a pragmatic necessity and an inspirational tool. Without being militantly non-violent UFWOC would have little chance of influencing growers' behavior or gaining federal legislation. At the same time non-violence keeps emotions focused on the proper goal of the movement: gaining dignity for its workers.

Please complete this pledge and return it to:
UNITED FARM WORKERS NATIONAL UNION, AFL-CIO
Connecticut Lettuce Boycott Office
57 Farmington Avenue
Hartford, Connecticut 06105

TO AMERICA'S LETTUCE WORKERS:

I support your non-violent struggle for justice. I pledge not to buy or eat iceberg (head) lettuce.

— Please send me ___ leaflets for me to distribute.

— Contact me to arrange a film or speaker at my church, union, school, or organization.

— I enclose a donation.

The notion of servanthood rests on "self-sacrifice, discipline, hard work and (internal) satisfaction." "Man needs a sense of being a servant in this way without romanticizing or commercializing it," says Cesar.⁶

This philosophy results in a life style among UFWOC's organizers which is unpretentious. Since 1965 movement workers have been paid a salary of \$5 a week, with food and housing provided by UFWOC. It is understood that all of their energy is spent on 'la causa'. The movement workers' dedication to this life and work style symbolizes to farm workers the potential for their new humanity.

Focus: LETTUCE

The signing of UFWOC contracts with major grape growers in Delano during the summer of 1970 was just the beginning of the struggle for justice in the fields. Perhaps this first major victory has more clearly pitted UFWOC's people movement against the systems of agribusiness.

The latest UFWOC challenge focuses on lettuce. When grape growers were signing contracts with UFWOC in 1970, California's lettuce growers made secret agreements with the Teamsters Union so that they would not have to deal with UFWOC. Some 7,000 lettuce workers struck the vegetable industry protesting that they wanted UFWOC instead of the Teamsters.

Some growers rescinded their Teamster contracts, but others obtained a court order against all strike activities in the Salinas Valley. Hence a boycott of lettuce was started in major cities across the country. After the Teamsters and UFWOC 'made peace' in March 1971, negotiations between the lettuce growers and UFWOC began. The boycott was then suspended.

The talks took place weekly from May till November. The proposed UFWOC contracts were essentially no different from the ones agreed on with the grape growers. But no agreement could be reached with the majority of the lettuce growers (six of them did sign contracts with UFWOC).

Being planned again are a *primary* boycott of iceberg head lettuce as well as a *secondary* boycott against certain large chain stores which sell non-union lettuce. Another long struggle is ahead. Its success will greatly depend on the amount of consumer solidarity it can muster.

Telephone 527-7191

Name

Telephone

FACT SHEET

FARM WORKERS' LETTUCE BOYCOTT

A statement by the Committee on Social Development of the U.S. Catholic Conference July 10, 1972. As the Bishops of the U.S. said in their Nov. 13, 1968 Statement on Farm Labor:

"throughout this century, our state and federal governments have done much to assist growers and farmers with their difficulties. The same, unfortunately, cannot be said for the men working in the fields."

Without strong, honest representation such as can be provided by the United Farm Workers, the plight of agricultural workers and their families will remain desperate. A fundamental issue of social justice is presented.

In these circumstances, the Committee on Social Development of the United States Catholic Conference recommends endorsement and support of the lettuce boycott and strongly urges that only "iceberg" lettuce clearly marked with the official United Farm Workers' label, the black Aztec eagle, be purchased. Our purpose in this is to bring about collective bargaining and a just settlement of the dispute.

In the name of justice, church agencies such as the U.S.C.C. Committee on Social Development must speak out on controversial issues such as this one even with the knowledge that they might be misunderstood. Sensitive to the needs and the problems of both sides, these agencies must encourage dialogue by helping to create an atmosphere of charity and justice. It was in this spirit and for this purpose that the Second Vatican Council reaffirmed the traditional teaching of the Church with regard to the right of workers to organize and bargain collectively and, under certain conditions, to resort to the strike.

Today's reading is an excerpt of Cesar Chavez's statement made at the end of his 24-day fast for justice, June 4, 1972:

It is possible to become discouraged about the injustice we see everywhere. But God did not promise us that the world would be humane and just. He gives us the gift of life and allows us to choose the way we will use our limited time on this earth. It is an awesome opportunity. We should be thankful for the life we have been given, thankful for the opportunity to do something about the suffering of our fellowman. We can choose to use our lives for others to bring about a better and more just world for our children. People who make that choice will know hardship and sacrifice. But if you give yourself totally to the non-violent struggle for peace and justice, you also find that people will give you their hearts and you will never go hungry and never be alone. And in giving of yourself you will discover a whole new life full of love and meaning.

Nan Freeman and Sal Santos have given their lives for our movement this past year. They were very young. It hurt us to lose them and it still hurts us. But the greatest tragedy is not to live and die, as we all must. The greatest tragedy is for a person to live and die without knowing the satisfaction of giving life for others. The greatest tragedy is to be born but not to live for fear of losing a little security or because we are afraid of loving and giving ourselves to other people.

Our opponents in the agricultural industry are very powerful and farmworkers are still weak in money and influence. But we have another kind of power that comes from the justice of our cause. So long as we are willing to sacrifice for that cause, so long as we persist in non-violence and work to spread the message of our struggle, then millions of people around the world will respond from their hearts, will support our efforts...and in the end we will overcome. It can be done. We know it can be done. God give us the strength and patience to do it without bitterness so that we can win both our friends and opponents to the cause of justice.

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