

## FARMWORKERS NEED MORE THAN A HOLIDAY (4/01)

Truly honoring Cesar Chavez will take far more than the recent celebration of his birth date as an official state holiday. Now we must join in what had been his extraordinary efforts in behalf of America's sorely oppressed farm workers.

The United Farm Workers union, which Chavez headed for more than 35 years until his death in 1993, has won better conditions for thousands of farm workers. But they are only a small minority. The vast majority of farm workers, in California and elsewhere, are still mired in poverty, their working and living conditions a national disgrace.

The need for forceful legal steps and other action to finally bring economic and social justice to all farm workers is obvious. The latest government surveys show that farm worker pay averages only about \$6 an hour or less than \$10,000 a year.

The workers have few, if any, fringe benefits. They suffer chronic unemployment. Job security is virtually unknown. Most hiring and firing is done strictly at the whim of employers, many of them wealthy corporate growers.

At least one-third of the workers also are at the mercy of notoriously exploitive labor contractors who collect fees for transportation, food, housing, tools, protective clothing and, in some cases, even drinking water.

Theirs is one of the most dangerous of occupations, but farm workers have little protection against pesticides and the other health and safety hazards they commonly face. They're lucky if they even have fresh drinking water and clean field toilets on the job.

A high percentage of the workers are desperately poor immigrants, legal and illegal, from Mexico and Central America who must take whatever is offered or be replaced by other desperate workers from the endless stream of migrants.

Child labor is rampant despite the laws against it. Studies show that at least 300,000 children aged seven to 16 work on the nation's farms, many for 10 to 12 hours a day, six days a week during harvest seasons for as little as \$2.50 an hour.

Conditions off the job are as bad. Farm workers are almost invariably forced to live in overcrowded, seriously substandard housing.

What farm workers need above all is the legal right to bargain collectively with their employers that the federal government granted non-agricultural workers in 1935. Chavez and the UFW won that right for California's farm workers in 1975, but the state law granting it has been only laxly enforced and there have been no serious moves for enactment of a national bargaining law.

Despite the great obstacles, the UFW has been growing, albeit slowly, since Chavez' death.

More than half of California's rose growers, including the country's largest, are now under UFW contracts. So are most of the state's mushroom growers, one of the state's largest lettuce growers, vineyard workers at Washington state's largest winery, Chateau Ste. Michelle, and employees of Florida's largest mushroom farm. Workers in the Sonoma County vineyard of Gallo, the world's largest winemaker, also are now protected by a UFW contract.

None of the UFW's recent victories are more significant than its signing of a three-year contract in March with Coastal Berry, the world's largest strawberry grower and a main target of the union's five-year campaign to unionize California's \$800 million-a-year strawberry industry.

The union's current efforts, however, extend far beyond the strawberry fields of California. Other major campaigns include:

\*Organizing drives among apple pickers in Washington state and workers in various other crops in Arizona, Texas, Florida and elsewhere, as well as attempts to get local authorities to improve and expand the public services available to them.

\*A boycott against the frozen vegetables and fresh mushrooms marketed by PictSweet, which has repeatedly refused to negotiate a contract covering UFW members at its Southern California mushroom farms.

\*Joining with other unions to seek amnesty for America's 6 million undocumented immigrants – many of them farm workers – and a strengthening of the right to organize them.

In those campaigns, as in all it does, the UFW needs strong public support. Providing it would truly honor the memory of Cesar Chavez and his life-long struggle to bring social and economic justice to those who grow and harvest the food that sustains us all.