

In Support Of Cesar Chavez & The UFWOC 1970

There are many arguments about how much seasonal farm workers earn per hour or on a particular day or week. But it is a documented fact that migrant and other seasonal farm workers are among the poorest workers in our society. As a matter of fact all government studies show that migrant and other seasonal farm workers average around \$2,000 per year in California and \$1,300 per year in the USA. Farm workers are excluded from our nation's collective bargaining laws and from unemployment insurance coverage. Working without contracts they do not have the protections of medical or pension plans, adequate safety provision, overtime pay, vacations or holidays with pay. Too often women and children have to work in the fields to improve family income.

What do you do if you are a farm worker in 1970, unable to support your family in decency and uncertain about your chances of getting a job in the city? It is easy to be angry and apathetic. But, some farm workers are struggling to improve conditions for themselves and their children. They are not asking for charity nor are they interested in destroying the industry that provides their employment. They are doing what most workers have had to do to gain just wages and working conditions. They are organizing for collective bargaining. The law does not protect their right to bargain collectively so they have had to resort to pressure tactics to persuade their employers to recognize their organization and bargain with them. Under the leadership of Cesar Chavez they have used many forms of pressure, but they have remained true to their pledge to struggle non-violently. Major wine growers have worked out satisfactory contracts with the UFWOC. The workers are now seeking negotiations with table grape growers in California and Arizona.

Is UFWOC Only Interested In Wages? No! The basic issue for the workers is self-determination. They want to be strong enough in their own organization to participate in the decisions that affect them. Through their union they are already active in educational issues in the community and in local, state and national politics. The contracts with wine growers cover many areas including toilets in the fields, sanitary drinking water, safe use of pesticides, job security, grievance procedures, medical care, overtime pay, rest periods, vacations and holidays with pay, etc. Even before there were any contracts UFWOC had developed a credit union, death benefit insurance plan, medical clinic, co-op gas station and casework service centers.

What About Strikes At Harvest Time? All of the contracts with wine growers include no-strike and no boycott clauses. UFWOC has demonstrated that it is willing to give up the threat of strike and boycott in return for a fair and reasonable contract.

Do The Workers Actually Want A Union? There have been three secret ballot elections and five card check elections at the ranches of wine grape growers. All have been supervised by a third party chosen by both the workers and employers and conducted under procedures agreed to by all parties. In every election the farm workers have voted overwhelmingly for Cesar Chavez' UFWOC.

The Table Grape Growers Say That Their Workers Are Happy And Don't Want Elections?

Prior to every strike and boycott action against table grape growers, UFWOC repeatedly offered to meet with growers in discuss elections. In every instance the growers have refused even to discuss elections. If they were so sure of the sentiments of their workers, growers should have granted elections and thus proven that their workers are content without a strong union and without decent contracts.

If The Workers Want UFWOC, Who Is Picking The Grapes?

Thousands of farm workers have joined the strike. But the growers keep replacing them with other farm workers who do not know about the strike or who are too poor to care — a large percentage of these strikebreakers are recruited in Mexico where their families are starving. The industry is thereby using poor people in Mexico to hurt the cause of the poorest people in the USA. (California Rural Legal Assistance [CRLA] has testified that one out of five farm workers is an illegal from Mexico – not counting thousands of green card commuters who live in Mexico and work in the USA.)

Isn't There A Better Way Than Boycott?

The farm workers have tried the other ways. They have asked for elections and negotiations. They have carried on strikes. So far they have not persuaded their employers to talk with them. The boycott is their last hope. And it is still a non-violent means of bringing about needed social change.

What About The Small Producers?

Most workers are employed by large growers. 7% of California farms employ 75% of the labor. UFWOC's efforts have been directed primarily against large growers. The table grape boycott began with Giumarra Vineyards Corp. (12,000 acres) and was only expanded when other growers let Giumarra use their labels to frustrate the boycott. UFWOC is not interested in putting small producers out of business. But they believe with the National Farmers Organization (NFO) that small farmers will not survive by keeping their workers down. They will only survive as they themselves organize to gain a fair price for their products. Justice demands organization and collective bargaining for workers and growers alike.

Who Is Cesar Chavez?

He is a 42 year old ex-migrant farm worker who has dedicated his life to building a union for farm workers and who has become a national symbol of nonviolent struggle and sacrifice. Chavez was born in 1927 on a small farm in Arizona. His family became migrants in 1937 when they lost their farm. In 1952 Cesar Chavez became a volunteer organizer for the Community Service Organization (CSO). In time he became their national director of organization. In 1962 he left CSO and began to build a farm workers union. Cesar and Helen Chavez live in a small four room house with their 8 children. They do not own a car and live like all strikers; room and board and \$5.00 per week per adult working in the strike. At the conclusion of his 25 day fast for non-violence Cesar Chavez said the following:

“When we are really honest with ourselves we must admit that our lives are all that really belong to us. So, it is how we use our lives that determines what kind of men we are. It is my deepest belief that only by giving our lives do we find life. I am convinced that the truest act of courage, the strongest act of manliness is to sacrifice ourselves for others in a totally non-violent struggle for justice.”

“To be a man is to suffer for others. God help us to be men!”

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