

## The Farm Bureau & The Farm Worker by Chris Hartmire. May 1972

For decades the Farm Bureau has been the nation's most powerful agribusiness organization. In Washington, D.C., Farm Bureau lobbyists claim to represent two million farm families. They have used their influence in favor of right wing causes, in support of more military expenditures and against the aspirations of migrant farm workers and other poor people. Over the past 35 years the Farm Bureau has opposed every serious legislative effort to help farm workers including:

- 1) Full social security coverage for farm workers,
- 2) Minimum wage and unemployment insurance for farm workers,
- 3) Child labor laws for farm workers,
- 4) Health program and child care centers for farm workers,
- 5) Collective bargaining legislation for farm workers,
- 6) Workmen's Compensation & Disability insurance for farm workers,
- 7) Transportation & safety regulations for migrant farm workers.

The Farm Bureau has opposed civil rights advances, supported tax benefits for all companies and other corporations and consistently tried to squeeze the already poverty-stricken condition of welfare families.

Since the beginning of the farm workers movement in Delano the Farm Bureau (FB) has launched a full-scale attack on Cesar Chavez and the United Farm Workers. The FB has:

1. Recruited hungry people from Mexico to break strikes;
2. Taxed its members to provide consultative services and huge amounts of money to help growers resist the farm workers self-determination efforts. (The FB is a major force behind the lettuce growers.)
3. Printed and distributed smear literature aimed at discrediting the leadership of the farm workers' movement.
4. Pressed a heavily financed campaign to pass "anti-Chavez" legislation in every major agricultural state (such bills have passed in Kansas, Idaho and Arizona).
5. Is supporting a November ballot measure in California that will make the boycotts illegal and give Governor Ronald Reagan control over "free and fair elections".

The FB has just produced a film entitled "Road to Delano" which purports to be the "true story" of the farm workers of California (one of the featured "farm workers" is Mrs. Dolores Mendoza, the wife of a Delano labor contractor and the key person in a series of grower-financed company unions in California). In their legislative efforts the FB expresses its great concern for "free elections" and the "rights of the workers". The FB apparently wants the American public to believe that they are more concerned about the rights of farm workers than Cesar Chavez and the leaders of the United Farm Workers. This incredible is an insult to the intelligence of every American:

- a) For more than 35 years, since the Wagner Act was first passed in 1935, the FB was the ever-present, number one opponent of collective bargaining legislation for farm workers.
- b) The FB has consistently opposed all other legislation that would seriously protect farm workers.
- c) Cesar Chavez & the United Farm Workers (UFW) have always asked employers for elections prior to strikes & boycotts (e.g., in grapes & lettuce). The FB, with no regard for the rights of workers, has advised growers financially when grower intransigence has driven the workers to strikes and boycotts.
- d) The FB legislation is not being promoted to protect workers but to outlaw the boycott and makes strikes difficult or impossible. An additional proof of this is that many FB bills carefully eliminate from the “free elections” migrant and other seasonal farm workers – the workers who most need organizational strength and protection.

Cesar Chavez has given his life to the farm workers’ movement. He has worked and sacrificed to build the beginning of a farm workers’ union. He has demonstrated with his deeds his commitment to the hopes and aspirations of farm workers. Has the FB shown us any similar commitment? Why should anyone take them seriously when they talk of representing the rights and interests of farm workers?

Several years ago Congressman Joseph Resnick from upper New York State began an investigation of the FB. Resnick discovered that the FB is not a simple membership organization for farmers. He exposed the fact that the FB is a \$4 billion business empire that is more involved in selling insurance to farmers than in properly representing the needs of the struggling family farmers of America. The FB used their considerable power to oust Resnick from Congress but his aide Samuel Berger continued the investigation and has now published a well documented study entitled Dollar Harvest – An Expose of the Farm Bureau (Heath, Lexington Books, 1971, Lexington, Mass.). In the book Berger concludes that the FB is a gigantic, interlocking, nationwide combine of insurance companies. The FB business empire includes more than 50 insurance companies with some 1.5 billion dollars in assets. In Alabama, the FB owns 7 shopping centers, several hotels, office buildings and undeveloped land. In California the FB owns its own advertising agency. Oil; chemicals, pesticides, mutual funds & fertilizers are among the many other FB enterprises. Berger states: “The FB business empire is one of the largest commercial conglomerates in the country with nearly \$4 billion in assets.... Despite the fact that the FB is now as large as Chrysler, DuPont or Shell Oil Co., it has retained a tax exemption just like religious, charitable and educational institutions.”

Farm workers are now seeking a Congressional investigation of the Farm Bureau. They would like a probe of the FB’s tax-exempt status since there is a serious question as to whether the FB is an “agricultural organization” for the betterment of farmers. (Many FB members are not farmers at all but just happen to buy FB insurance.) Farm workers are

also seeking a full disclosure of the sources of income, salaries and expenditures of the FB. This report is required of unions and of labor consultants and organizations involved in labor management relations. Farm workers are also seeking an investigation of the membership and employment practices of the FB. Are minority group farmers with limited acreage (or sharecroppers) allowed into membership? Can Blacks, Chicanos, Puerto Ricans, Filipinos and other minority people find employment in the many FB offices (the FB conglomerate employs 20,000 people)?

Farm workers have been forced into this confrontation with the FB because the FB is using its considerable power and influence to try to keep farm workers poor and powerless. FB leaders seem to be proud of their efforts against the poor and against the farm workers' non-violent struggle. They need to hear about justice from men and women in the churches.

You can help:

- 1) Write to Mr. William J. Kuhfuss, President, American Farm Bureau Federation, 225 Touhy Avenue, Park Ridge, Illinois 60068. Please send Chris Hartmire a copy of your letter (address listed below).
- 2) Please don't buy head (iceberg) lettuce.

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The Rev. Wayne "Chris" Hartmire, Director  
National Farm Worker Ministry  
1411 W. Olympic Blvd., Rm 511  
Los Angeles, Ca 90015

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