

Hear the Rally Cry

by Pat Hoffman

WE WERE NEW in the San Joaquin Valley. My husband was pastor of a small congregation and was working with the California Migrant Ministry. During that first summer I heard about an old woman who was given just one day's notice to move out of company-owned housing. This was to make room for more needed workers. I naively called the wife of the ranch superintendent (they were members of our church), and asked her if there was any way some of us in the church could be of help to the old woman as she looked for another place to live. The superintendent's wife told me no, help was not needed, that this happened every year, though it might have been a bit sooner this year than usual. And she said, "You have to realize, these are just fruit tramps."

That was 1958. The spring of 1966 offered a different scene.

During Lent, striking farm workers had made a pilgrimage from Delano to Sacramento—300 miles. They were going to the steps of the State Capitol to dramatize their requests for support from the governor and legislators. My husband, our nine-year-old son, and I were part of a mass of 10,000 supporters who had flocked to the outskirts of Sacramento to show their solidarity with the workers. Among the 10,000 were many important people: congressmen, national labor leaders, high-ranking clergymen of many de-



What Can the Farm Workers Teach Us?

nominations. Together we marched into the city. At the Capitol, chairs were set up near the steps where the program would be held. As we arrived, public officials, clergymen, and other "dignitaries" filled the chairs. A member of the union went to the microphone and asked that the chairs be vacated—they were for the *campesinos* who had walked all the way from Delano.

That scene brought something new into the history of farm labor. Thousands of supporters were standing with farm workers. Dig-

nity was being acted out as the workers took the seats of honor in the midst of that illustrious crowd. Those workers would not long be called "just fruit tramps." And who had brought about this change? It was not men and women sitting in houses of legislation, it was not investigating committees, it was not educators, it was not the Church. This change had come because some farm workers, beginning with Cesar and Helen Chavez, had said, "*Basta!*" "Enough!" They had decided that they would change the life possi-

bilities for farm workers in this country and that they would work at it not just for a year, not just for a decade; they would spend the rest of their lives struggling for justice for themselves and for their fellow human beings.

Most people in this country have heard of the Delano grape strike. But many who know about the strike may know little about the United Farm Workers' Organizing Committee. UFWOC is at work in fields other than vineyards and in states other than California. UFWOC is a movement which intends to reach out to farm workers from California to Washington, from Arizona to Texas, from Florida to Michigan. Its vision is a better life for all poor people. Given a base of strength in their union, Cesar Chavez and the farm workers with him intend to serve families displaced from farm labor and to ally themselves with the struggles of the urban poor. Already their programs include economic co-ops, a retirement village for older Filipino workers, retraining programs, and an economic development fund.

UFWOC is a nonviolent movement with few parallels. Farm workers who have been sloughed off by a careless nation are angry. Those who are not too undernourished are impatient with the injustices which have been their lot. They want a better chance not just for their children but for

themselves as well. But Cesar Chavez believes in channeling that anger, not into violence, but into constructive programs for changing the structures that keep people poor and make people believe what their society tells them—that they are valueless “fruit tramps.”

UFWOC is a movement with vision beyond feasibility studies. During 1966 UFWOC carried on a national consumer boycott against the giant DiGiorgio Fruit Corporation. It was a David and Goliath struggle. Each week when I did my marketing, I would talk with the produce man about the strike. He told me the union was foolish to tackle the DiGiorgio Corporation—didn't I know how big they were? Union members were surviving on donated canned goods. But more than that, they had a spirit of hope and determination that couldn't be charted in a feasibility study. Ultimately, the DiGiorgio Corporation agreed to negotiate a contract.

UFWOC has given hope to me and to thousands across this land. We see the world filled with prob-

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lems and ask ourselves how an individual can make any impact. Then we see how those “fruit tramps” have been asserting themselves and announcing their names. Their victories say to us, “Some problems CAN be solved. Come and learn from us of determination, patience, hard work, and restructuring for humane relationships!”

Since 1962, a strong organization run by farm workers has been built in California. The Delano grape strike made history: as the longest strike in the history of the United States and as the only successful farm labor strike on the continent (Hawaii has long had unionized farm workers).

Many church women have supported UFWOC. One of the first to back the California Migrant Ministry's position alongside farm workers and to urge concrete support for the strikers was Loris Colletta, then president of Church Women United, Southern California/Southern Nevada. In a letter written in February, 1966, she quoted a woman who typified many: “I didn't want to hear about it. I wanted the problem just to go away, but I knew it couldn't. Our place is by the side of the oppressed.”

Some women like me were in Delano on July 29, 1970 for the signing of a contract by the Delano grape growers, marking the end of that historic struggle. It

had been an exhausting struggle, yet within twenty-four hours of the signing UFWOC members and hundreds of volunteer supporters were on their way to the Salinas Valley to support local farm workers who had worked hard and waited patiently for years to be represented by Cesar Chavez' UFWOC.

The struggle to protect the rights of farm labor and to bring justice in the fields only began on July 29, 1970. The grape strike was the first significant battle. Nationwide there are approximately two million farm workers. In California the average wage is \$3,000 per year for a worker's family. Nationwide it is closer to \$1,500. To quote from the 1968 report of the Senate Subcommittee on Migratory Labor:

Farm workers still rank lowest in annual income of all the nation's occupational groups. In all sectors of the nonfarm economy and in every state the average hourly earnings of production workers are above farm wage rates . . . the extent of unemployment and underemployment for the farm worker is likewise higher than general industry, and is occurring at a more severe rate than other industries. Rapid mechanization and increased growth in the size of our nation's farms has in many ways made agriculture similar to our nation's other large industries, and agriculture is not the

family-farm operation that it was twenty-five years ago. No other segment of our population is so poorly paid yet contributes so much to our nation's health and welfare. (page 27)

UFWOC has indeed announced its intention to change that description. Even with the table grape victories, the union is still

poor and small. It continues to depend on its friends for support. Some of you who read this article can pick up on this issue and decide that you will learn all you can about farm labor and work to aid the union in its struggle to bring hope and a better life to migrants and other seasonal farm workers. •

Here's how you can get more information:

Read *Sal Si Puedes* by Peter Matthiessen (Random House, 1969, \$6.95). It's very readable. If your public library doesn't have it, request it; or buy it for yourself or your church library.

Subscribe to *El Malcriado*, monthly publication of UFWOC. Send name, address and \$3.50 to Box 130, Delano, California 93215.

For history and information on the Church's relationship to UFWOC, write or phone: California Migrant Ministry, 1411 West Olympic Boulevard, Suite 501, Los Angeles, California 90015 (213) 386-8130.

Have your name put on the annual mailing list of the Senate Subcommittee on Migratory Labor: Senator Walter Mondale, Senate Office Building, Washington, D. C. 20501.

Here's how your offerings make a difference!

Farm workers were included in 1970 and will be included again in 1971 among those aided through Intercontinental Mission—the fund made possible by your offerings on World Day of Prayer and World Community Day. Much of the important work of the California Migrant Ministry would not be possible without the continued undergirding of Church Women United. And when it comes to support on an emergency basis, the CWU fund entitled “where most needed” is an ever-ready channel. Last year, for example, it was the source which supplied mattresses critically needed at the La Paz Retreat Center established by UFWOC in Keene, California. As World Day of Prayer again approaches, it is hoped that the church women of this nation will give generously so that efforts of this kind, for freedom and justice, can be sustained.