



THE WAY OF NON-VIOLENCE

by *Pat Hoffman*

*staff member, National Farm Worker
Ministry, USA*

Everyone who works has the right to just and favourable remuneration ensuring for himself and his family an existence worthy of human dignity, and supplemented, if necessary, by other means of social protection.

Everyone has the right to form and to join trade unions for the protection of his interests.

Article 23.

This article is based on interviews with three women:

Adelina Gurrola, a farm worker from Arvin, California, Sr. Kathleen Young, OSU, of Los Angeles, California and Maria Consuela Garcia also of Arvin. The first two were interviewed by Pat Hoffman on September 23, 1973 in Fresno, California at the First Constitutional Convention of the United Farm Workers of America where Sra. Gurrola was a delegate and Sr. Young an observer. Sra. Garcia was interviewed by Kathy Murguia two weeks earlier.

It was September 21, 1973, Fresno, California; and the First Constitutional Convention of the United Farm Workers of America. The Convention was cheerful and spirited. There were five hundred farm workers from different parts of the USA on the floor of the convention centre. Could this be the same union that during the past summer lost almost all of its

contracts? Was this the union whose leadership had been exhausted from organising picket lines around California grape vineyards for fourteen weeks, seeing to it that hundreds of strikers were fed, housed, encouraged, and were disciplined in non-violent action? Is this the union that had just suffered the deaths of two members

from violence against them? How is it possible that these poor people who have endured so much can yet be full of life and determination? What makes their union live and what about their union draws the love and fervent support of thousands in the cities and around the world?

I want to give you some reflections on the style and life of the farm workers' union from two farm worker women, a Roman Catholic sister and from me.

Meaningful Suffering

"I was not afraid in the last strike (1966), but this time I was. I was afraid for my children. The Teamsters had beaten so many of our people.

"My husband was arrested four times. He told me not to get arrested because I was pregnant and they might hit me. I was in front when they got my husband the first time. He was saying 'No, no' to me. 'Don't get arrested'. I was saying, 'Yes, yes. I want to go to jail'".

Farm workers in this country have always suffered. Choosing to take on hardships and dangers in order to bring about humanising social change has given meaning to their lives. The demonstration of care which characterises Cesar Chavez and the farm workers with him has drawn many supporters.

"My first involvement occurred about eight years ago. The union was just beginning to form. I had entered the convent north of San Francisco and Santa Rosa, which is prime agricultural country. During that time I was privileged to hear Cesar speak to several groups and it was there that I first heard his concern for his own people. Very, very definitely that one thing forcibly hit me".

"Sister Kathleen, when you were in Fresno last, before this convention, you were in jail for two weeks. What made you decide to take that action?"

"I was up in San Francisco prior to my coming, at an international symposium. It was from there that we were asked to come down to represent, or show solidarity with the farm workers.."

"Had you ever been in jail before?"

"Never in my life. That was a traumatic decision really. I think for most, if you're a middle-class American, it's not the ordinary run of the mill occurrence. There are decisions

that one would have to consider. For instance, to keep my teaching credential I cannot be arrested under a felony. The arrests that were made were under two misdemeanors, which really, well, thank God, didn't hurt my credential. There are responsibilities I have as a teacher: what do the parents in the classroom say to me who have been in jail? So there are a lot of nuances that people should consider. It's nothing that should be done light-heartedly. And yet very definitely this has been a profound experience in my life: something that has changed my life and my attitudes. It was very hard. I really can't explain the suffering that I saw there by the people that I was incarcerated with".

Non-violence

"If it wasn't for non-violence we might all be dead now. We were non-violent because of the future. Our kids were with us. I never liked to say anything bad to the Teamsters because our fight really isn't with them".

"I feel bad because of the growers and the discrimination against the people. When Chavez' people came in 1966 to organise us everybody worked for the union and went to the meeting. There was action — the strike. The growers met with us; but they didn't like us. We were put in jail.

*"We have worked all our lives in the fields. I worked for Giumarra and DiGiorgio and they brought in the scabs * But why? We did nothing wrong. We just worked; we worked hard. Through the labour contractors, Giumarra put a lot of scabs in the fields and gave them rifles to stop us. In one of the Giumarra camps, after the death of Nagi Daifullah, a scab said it was a good idea to kill one or two of the strikers each day. Then on the same day they killed Juan de la Cruz, who was a good friend of ours and worked with us. We joined the union at the same time in 1966. He was our 'campanero'. And I feel bad for the movement and all the poor people. The growers know the workers don't want the Teamsters union.*

"You were friends with Juan de la Cruz and his family?"

"Very good friends".

"Do you feel discouraged by what has happened?"

"Yes".

* "Scabs" are people who work during a strike.

" You are here at this Convention as a delegate? "

" Yes ".

" What do you want to do now? "

" I came to this Convention as a delegate — the first Convention of the Union. I want to be able to vote for the leaders of our union. They need to be very strong. I want to vote for the Board of Directors and for the Constitution so that the children — the next generation can have a better life.

" What do you think, Senora Gurrola, about Cesar being so strong about non-violence? What do you think about non-violence as a way to make life change for farm workers? "

" Yes, he is very strong for non-violence and he tells us when we make noise that we want to do this or that — that would be violent. He says no, you cannot because it will gain you nothing, and everybody likes Chavez' idea ".

" I would say the second thing that really encouraged me in their struggle was his (Chavez) stand on non-violence while trying to gain human dignity for his people. He stands behind the banner of non-violence, and this is very important in any life and death struggle.

" The two months previous to being in jail there had been a lot of violence. I had almost gone to Coachella in early spring... There was no question in my mind as to what non-violent stance I, as a Christian woman, should take... I am very proud to have been part of that.

" I see non-violence as an umbilical cord: It's the life giving force and where there is violence there is less life. My own short term experience with incarceration taught me that indelibly. It really left a mark on me. While there were no beatings and no loss of human life in the prison where I was, yet there was so much degradation and loss of life in terms of freedom. But in so far as a person has to be violent, to that degree he is not free. It is those people who are not free who are not living as fully as Jesus would want them to ".

Non-violence and a willingness to take on suffering for others has a strong pull on those who come in contact with the farm workers' movement. In the spring of 1972 Cesar Chavez went on a 24 day fast for non-violence. Thousands of people surged out

SOME BACKGROUND ON THE FARM LABOUR MOVEMENT IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

1962 — Cesar Chavez begins organising farm workers in the State of California.

1965 — Great Delano Grape Strike begins.

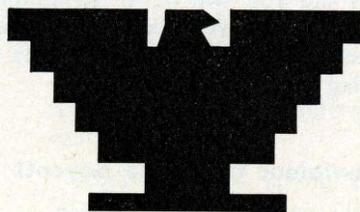
1970 — Farm workers finally win contracts with many growers of table grapes.

May-August 1973 — Owners in California collaborate with the truck drivers' union (Teamsters Union) to shut out the union of the farm workers (United Farm Workers). UFW loses over 100 contracts, only 12 contracts are left. Hundreds of farm workers go out on strike, over 3,000 are arrested, many injured.

July 31-August 13, 1973 — 450 go to jail in Fresno County, California; 67 of those are priests, nuns, and other religious supporters.

Week of August 12, 1973 — Nagi Dai-fullah, Arab striker, killed after being struck on head by sheriff's deputy.

Juan de la Cruz, 60, shot and killed while on a picket line.



to help farm workers in any way they could during that fast. People were saying to themselves: "If a leader is willing to do that, surely we should be making some small sacrifice to help". At the conclusion of his fast on June 4, 1972 he made this statement:

I am weak in my body but I feel very strong in my spirit. I am happy to end the fast because it is not an easy thing. But it is also not easy for my family and for many of you who have worried and worked and sacrificed. The fast was meant as a call to sacrifice for justice and as a reminder of how much suffering there is among farm workers. In fact, what is a few days without food in comparison to the daily pain of our brothers and sisters who do backbreaking work in the fields under inhuman conditions and without hope of ever breaking their cycle of poverty and misery. What a terrible irony it is that the very people who harvest the food we eat do not have enough food for their own children. 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 meaning and love.

A Non-violent tool: The Boycott

Essential to a non-violent movement is constructive work and action that can bring change. The consumer boycott is a prime example of a non-violent action in which thousands of people can easily, daily participate in making social change happen.

The United Farm Workers has worked hard to develop this tool. Hundreds of union members, some farm workers, some not, stand in front of grocery stores all day, each week asking customers to not buy grapes or head lettuce without the UFW eagle on the box: and to not shop at all at certain chain stores which have refused to cooperate for social justice.

"I'm not much of a talker. I went to the fourth grade. If I had a chance I think I would tell everyone not to eat grapes or lettuce. I would ask them to join our picket lines at the stores and to talk to the managers".

Maria Garcia is going out on the boycott: leaving her home in Arvin and going with her husband to Denver, Colorado.

"Yes, it will be hard, but not so hard like working for those labour contractors. They push you and you feel like an animal. Now I will work hard because it is good for all of us.

"You know, we really believe in God. Maybe more than the grower. We have more faith in life. The growers have so much money. They think of buying people and things and only worry about their money. We worry about each other and really do depend so much on God".

"Senora Gurrola, with the strike over, how do you feel about the boycott? Do you feel hopeful about the boycott working?"

"Yes, I think it is a better arm for the union. I like the boycott. I will boycott until it is time to do the pruning, pruning the Perlettes".

"Senora are some of the other Arvin strikers going out on the boycott?"

"Yes, a lot of them are".

"Sister Kathleen, with the strikes over, how do you hope to help farm workers and what do you see ahead?"

"I see much struggle. I think Fr. Eugene Boyle said it very well in this morning's mass, that a man must take up his cross daily. I see the willingness to serve one another so very strong as the real life within the union right now. And I also see another advantage, it's that the boycott has been going on all along... so there's a lot more grass roots knowledge of at least the boycott. It's going to be very important because it's the pickets of your large agricultural men that have to really feel that before other people's rights are going to be considered.

COMMITTEE AND STAFF NOTES

" The boycott can be effective for the people who want to do something in a more positive light. There are innumerable things for helping the boycotters that are coming: provide food; provide clothing; ask your churches to provide housing for the picketers. I think a very life giving element would be to make a point to meet some of those boycotters that are coming in from the Delano and Fresno area; get to know them. They are beautiful, beautiful people who are not bitter from their suffering, but who have grown and are more open towards their fellow man as a result of it ".

With the deaths of the contracts the UFW struggled so long to gain, and with the deaths, jailings and beating of UFW members and supporters, there is a life force in this union, in this movement, and it will go on. Around the world each of us can be part of the UFW's tenacious struggle to live. Every time we see grapes or iceberg (head) lettuce we should be wary and ask ourselves: " Are these grapes, is this lettuce, from the fields of a grower who has plotted to keep his workers powerless? " You can identify grapes and lettuce picked under UFW contract by the Aztec eagle on the packing box.

" The greatest tragedy is not to live and die . . . as we all must. The greatest tragedy is to be born but not to live for fear of loving and giving oneself to others ". (Cesar Chavez at Mass for the Dead, April 11, 1972)

Mademoiselle Alice Paquier and *Miss Priscilla Padolina* attended an International Youth NGO Workshop on Population and Development held in Geneva, September 12. From October 25-31 *Mlle Paquier* went to Moscow for the World Congress of Peace Forces. She attended several NGO meetings in Geneva.

Miss Elizabeth Palmer, *Miss Ruud van Hoogevest* and *Madame Helen de Mestral* attended the European YWCA General Secretaries' meeting held in Domburg, Netherlands, September 14-17.

The 28th Session of the UN General Assembly started in New York on September 18 and *Mrs. Mildred Jones* is attending the meeting.

Miss Lettie Stuart represented the World YWCA at the UN International Conference on Education held in Geneva, September 18-27 and left Geneva on October 1 to visit the YWCA of Sri Lanka.

The World YWCA Regional Consultation on Adult Education chaired by *Mrs. Hyun Ja Kim Oh* was held in Seoul, Korea, October 13-23. *Mrs. Violet Coomarasamy*, *Mrs. Margaret Dunn*, *Miss Priscilla Padolina* and *Miss Lettie Stuart* shared the leadership. After the Consultation *Miss Padolina* visited several YWCAs in Asia.

Miss Ruud van Hoogevest took part in the UNHCR Executive Committee October 8-15 and then left Geneva on October 19 to visit the YWCAs of Japan, Vietnam and Bangladesh. On her way home she attended the International Red Cross Conference held in Teheran, Iran.

Mrs. Katherine Strong attended the UN Population Commission October 29-November 9, in Geneva.