

# An Update on the United Farm Workers

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Pat Hoffman



## Holding Justice Ground

There's a child today who won't go to school because she doesn't have shoes. There's a man who will work full time this week, but will scarcely be able to feed his family. There are about two and a half million farm workers across the country living in desperate poverty. Improved wages and more humane conditions have come to only a small percentage of workers in pockets of California, Arizona, Ohio, Michigan and Florida through the persistent work of the United Farm Workers (UFW) and the Farm Labor Organizing Committee (FLOC) in the midwest. Even for those working under union contracts, there must be constant vigilance to hold what little justice ground they have gained.

*Pat Hoffman is a former staff member of the National Farm Worker Ministry. She is the author of *Ministry of the Dispossessed*, reviewed in this issue.*

The UFW is asking supporters to exercise vigilance with farm workers. Here is a brief report of what is going on, and how we can help.

### Grape Boycott

The farm workers have called for a renewed boycott of fresh grapes because of the continuing recalcitrance of growers and their political allies. Growers with UFW contracts regularly declare bankruptcy and reorganize under a new name, as a way to void their labor contracts. Workers organizing for union elections are often fired and have little recourse. The landmark agricultural labor law passed in California in 1975 has been rendered impotent by the current governor.

So the UFW has returned to the boycott as a way of pressuring growers to contract with their workers for fair wages and healthful working conditions. And it seems to be working. Growers

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Left: Seven-year-old boy paid 30¢ a bucket in Leipsic, Ohio; Below: "Danger/Peligro" Salinas, California; Opposite: 7:00 a.m., green onion field in Salt River Valley, Arizona

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acknowledge that prices for fresh grapes are the worst in twenty-five years. They are holding back grapes in cold storage trying to elevate the price. Christmas is an important season for fresh grapes. Those who observed the boycott over the holidays, gave farm workers the precious gift of support in their struggle.

#### Pesticides

The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) reported early last year that "the risk from pesticides, especially pesticide residues on foods" was one of the greatest overall risks to human health and the environment in the United States, along with air pollutants and the destruction of ozone in the atmosphere. EPA listed twenty-eight pesticides that pose the greatest cancer risk and identified foods that put us at even greater risk when eaten raw. The list was headed by tomatoes and included potatoes, oranges, lettuce, apples, peaches, carrots and grapes.

An op-ed piece by Jane Hathaway of the Natural Resources Defense Council in Washington in the *Los Angeles Times* October 8, 1987 explained the difficulties the EPA has in getting these dangerous pesticides off the market. Under the provisions of the Federal Insecticide, Fungicide and Rodenticide Act, when the EPA bans use of a pesticide it must compensate the chemical company for the full retail value of all existing stocks, and must pay for disposal of the chemicals. The cost of this "indemnification" and "disposal" far exceeds the EPA budget. The chemical companies are left to bear *none* of the financial responsibility for the carcinogenic pesticides they have produced.

In the meantime, workers are getting sick and some are dying. Childhood cancer clusters in farming communities continue to grow.

In the absence of government control over dangerous pesticides, the UFW has just made the decision to begin its own testing. Dr. Marion Moses, a nationally recognized authority on pesticide poisoning, and Thomas Lazar, Ph.D., MPH will head up the effort. The Union is raising funds to build and equip the testing facility. It hopes that the data gathered will help in the campaign to improve environmental conditions for farm workers and consumers.

#### "Wrath of Grapes"

Have you seen the UFW's video, "Wrath of Grapes"? It tells about the pesticides in the fields and on our food. Farm workers are interviewed whose

children have been born with defects believed to have been pesticide-related. Workers in the fields get sick and some have died. The UFW believes these stories are so important that they will send you the video cassette free. Order it from UFW, P. O. Box 62, Keene, CA 93531.

#### Maggio Court Case

Many people contributed to the UFW appeal in the Maggio case. Maggio Farms in Indio, California won a large settlement earlier this year in a case that had to do with loss of crops and alleged property damage during a 1979 UFW strike. The rural judge was felt to be biased in that he is a longtime resident of that small community, and his wife had been a strikebreaker in the 1979 strike.

The UFW had to post a \$2.5 million bond in order to appeal the judgement. The Union feels confident that it will win on appeal. But the whole process will take about three years.

#### How People Can Help

It's a hard time for all unions, and a very hard time for the UFW. But they have a clear sense of direction and continue to work hard. Here are ways you can help.

1. Don't buy grapes, and help spread the word.
2. Get and use the UFW video "The Wrath of Grapes" at meetings and conferences. It is free.
3. Pledge to the National Farm Worker Ministry. It is the agency committed to keeping the churches on board with the UFW and FLOC. (P.O. Box 302, Delano, CA 93216).
4. Pledge to the UFW, P.O. Box 62, Keene, CA 93531.

Some people wonder if the UFW has changed over the years. Yes and no. Recently I made a visit to the UFW headquarters in the Tehachapi Mountains of California to have some brochures printed in their state-of-the-art print shop. I arrived during a farewell luncheon for a staff member, and was startled to see that of about thirty staffers, almost all were in their twenties or early thirties. Most have been farm workers or are children of farm workers.

A young former farm worker took me on a tour of the computer room and explained the operation of the mainframe and its storage units. Paul Chavez, one of Cesar's sons and director of the print shop, introduced me to the printing staff. Many were babies when their parents began the struggle in 1965. Marcos Camacho, who dropped by the party, grew up in a farm worker family in Dinuba. Last year he passed the California Bar without ever attending law school. In fact, he didn't go to college. All his legal training was with the UFW.

Everyone still works for the Union for board and room and \$10 a week. At La Paz, staff is about fifty per cent farm workers or children of farm workers. Throughout the Union, it is about sixty per cent. More sophisticated tools are available to do the work today, and the union has become more structured and less of a "movement." But the staff, farm workers and others, still care deeply about decent conditions for those who work in the fields.

They are committed to nonviolence for bringing in the day of justice. And more than ever, in these difficult days for all unions, the UFW needs our help.

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