

Making common cause

UFW fights harvest of poison

by Pat Hoffman

It was a crowd of about 200, mostly Hispanics with a few Anglos mixed in. Most had known Marion Bravo or knew his family. And some of us had known other farmworker families where the young people had died too soon.

The average age of death for farmworkers is 49 years. They die from on-the-job accidents, respiratory disease, and pesticide poisoning.

Mario died of liver cancer. He was 14, and liver cancer in children is extremely rare. But in his home town of McFarland, Cal. (population 6,000) 11 children have been diagnosed with cancer since 1984.

Like Mario, most of these children come from farmworker families who live in houses built on old agricultural land — some where pesticide drums were once dumped. Their houses, yards and schools are regularly dusted by pesticides intended for surrounding fields but carried by the winds.

Wells in McFarland are contaminated with nitrates from fertilizers — a warning is enclosed in every monthly water bill advising customers not to give water to infants. The extent of pesticide residues in the water in McFarland and many other communities is not known because of inadequate monitoring.

What caused Mario's liver cancer? No one knows, and no one is likely to find out soon.

A California state-mandated study to discover the cause of McFarland childhood cancer has limped along since June of 1985, crippled by a power structure committed to protecting the rights of growers at any cost.

One cost was Mario Bravo's life. Seven other children in McFarland and nearby Delano have died since 1985.

Parents of some of the dead children were at Mario's funeral, joining the Bravo family in their grief. Other families were wondering if their children might next be diagnosed with cancer. Many of Mario's young school friends

were there, solemnly watching their companion's casket as it entered the earth.

Most of the time, problems of farmworkers seem far away, like those of poor people on some other continent. With mass communications we can stay informed on many subjects. But being present with people in the news gives an issue power and human dimension. Mario Bravo's funeral did that for me.

A few months later, I was in the Coachella Valley in Southern California with a group of 60 farmworkers. They had taken off work to meet with members of the National Farm Worker Ministry Board. Workers came to the microphone to report their experiences since their union contracts expired two years ago.

One older man, Juan Sanchez (name changed to protect his identity) spoke of the dignity and security workers had felt when they had contracts with a medical plan, pension plan, stipulations for sanitation facilities, protection from pesticide exposure, and, of course, a guaranteed hourly wage. Now that was over, they were back to the old method of being paid by piece rate and most were earning about \$10 to \$15 a day, compared to \$40 under the United Farm Worker contract. Juan also complained of the "speed-ups" said to be common throughout the Coachella Valley, where foremen drive workers to go faster. Sanchez said, "There is no time for the restroom or for getting a drink of water."

He laughed, but with some sadness, when he told us that when stopped for a traffic infraction, he was checked to see if he was drunk because his eyes were red. But it was only the irritation he suffers from pesticides on the grapefruit he picks.

Workers go daily into fields sprayed with deadly chemicals. According to the U.S. Department of Labor, farmworkers have the highest rate of toxic chemical injuries among occupational groups in the nation. In California, the nation's leading agricultural state, pesticides are the major single cause of occupational illness. Even more distressing is that only about 1% of the pesticide poisonings of farmworkers are reported. Reports are most likely to be made when a whole crew is poisoned.

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During the first week of August 1987, 27 farmworkers from the H.P. Metzler farm in California's rich central agricultural valley were treated for pesticide poisoning, according to Jim Wells of the California Department of Food and Agriculture (CDFA). Three previous poisoning incidents at the same farm were also under investigation.

By October 1987, the company was found guilty of illegal practices involving spraying toxins without required prior notice, failing to obtain a use report for restricted pesticides, using pesticides without following label requirements, and improperly posting signs that warn workers of danger from chemicals. For these violations the company was fined a total of only \$250 by the CDFA.

Months later some of the Metzler workers were still suffering from skin poisoning. The workers exhibited what are called acute symptoms of pesticide poisoning, which can include rashes, dizziness, nausea, eye irritation and respiratory problems.

Pesticide is the broad term used for insecticides, herbicides, fungicides and other chemicals used to combat pests. Though California's regulation of pesticide use is inadequate, it is better than enforcement at the federal level. In 1986 the congressional General Accounting Office studied the Food and Drug Administration's system of enforcing pesticide residue limits in food and concluded that it is more costly for growers and shippers to cooperate with government regulations than to overlook them.

Workers worry about chronic effects such as cancer, birth defects, stillbirths and miscarriages. It is difficult to determine the causes of these problems because they may take three or more years to show up. But some pesticides in current approved use are known carcinogens, teratogens (cause birth defects), and mutagens (cause changes in DNA).

Ruben and Dora Rodriguez live in McFarland. They had five healthy children. Their sixth child died in the womb during the ninth month of pregnancy.

They examined what in their lives might have contributed to the baby's death and became convinced it was Ruben's change in jobs. The United Farm Worker's magazine *Food and Justice*, in a story about their loss, noted that two years before the baby's death, Ruben had become a pesticide applicator at Sandrini, a table grape company in Delano.

"I learned later that the chemicals I worked with were very dangerous," Ruben said. "I worked with parathion, captan, paraquat and sodium arsenite. Often I worked with no protective clothing at all. Once in a while I was given gloves or paper overalls which were already soiled with



Ramona Franco holds her son, Felipe, born without arms or legs. She worked during the first three months of pregnancy picking grapes known to have been sprayed with teratogenic pesticides. She was told by foremen and growers that the pesticides were safe, harmless "medicine" for the plants.

pesticides."

Dora came in daily contact with pesticides when she washed her husband's work clothes. Both Dora and Ruben experienced frequent headaches. Ruben has since quit the

job at Sandrini. Ruben concluded, "If I had known something like this could happen, I would not have been spraying. I would rather lose my job than my child."

Captan, one of the pesticides Ruben said he used, is a widely-used fungicide identified as a carcinogen, teratogen, and mutagen. In a recent report to the Maryland State Legislature, Dr. Marion Moses, a specialist in Occupational Medicine, said of captan, "Because it is not *acutely* toxic, that is, it does not cause immediate and obvious harm, it has been considered to be a 'safe' pesticide. However, chemicals such as captan may be the most hazardous of all in terms of chronic effects such as cancer and birth defects."

She went on to tell about Felipe Franco who was born without arms or legs. "(His) mother worked during the first three months of pregnancy picking grapes known to have been sprayed with teratogenic pesticides. Captan, which is one of the pesticides she may have been exposed to, is structurally similar to thalidomide, the drug that caused thousands of infants in Europe to be born without arms and legs."

Felipe's mother, Ramona, says she was told by foremen and growers that the pesticides around her were safe, that they were harmless "medicine" for the plants.

The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), which regulates pesticides, makes judgments weighing acceptable risks against agricultural benefits. Felipe is now seven and gets around in an electric wheelchair. He attends a school for handicapped children. He is a loved and loving child. But it's doubtful that he or his parents believe his living without arms or legs was an "acceptable risk."

The Pesticide Education and Action Project (PEAP) recently released a report on compliance in North America with the International Code of Conduct on Distribution and Use of Pesticides. It was a field survey of pesticide-related practices as reported by 105 agricultural workers in British Columbia, California, Louisiana, and Ohio.

The study concluded that "conditions facing agricultural workers in North America, and particularly migrant workers, are more similar to those in developing countries than is commonly supposed. High illiteracy rates, lack of protective equipment and training, ignorance among both workers and doctors, lack of safety precautions and a fundamental lack of access to usable information appear to characterize working conditions in each of the four areas surveyed for this monitoring report."

Among the findings was that 80% of mixer/loader/applifiers like Ruben Rodriguez had no formal training in how to deal with pesticides. Two-thirds of those interviewed did

not change their work clothes at the work place. And 72% washed their work clothes at home, exposing other family members to the chemicals used on the job.

The report calls on agricultural employers to provide the most basic protections from toxic chemicals — soap and water — along with showers and laundry facilities at the work place. It also pointed out that lack of toilet facilities and drinking water in the fields is related to increased incidents of poisoning. Residues of many pesticides are washed out of the body in urine. Workers who have little access to drinking water during the day experience a build-up of pesticide residues in their bodies. And when no toilet facilities are available, women in particular will not drink water because of the embarrassment of relieving themselves in the field.

Workers who try to get information or press growers to improve conditions suffer retaliation by employers, according to the PEAP study.

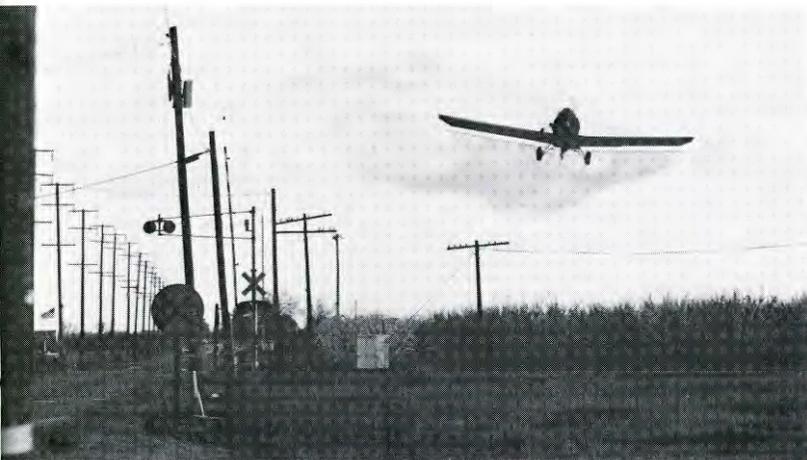
Another survey finding was that most workers do not see a doctor for pesticide-related illness, and do not receive workmen's compensation even if the illness is diagnosed as work-related. "A major reason for workers not seeing a doctor is that the employer refuses to send them, and they cannot afford to take uncompensated time off, or to pay a doctor on their own," the study reported.

In 1985, the United Farm Workers began a new boycott of California table grapes. The boycott emphasizes that farmworkers have common cause with consumers in that both are being affected by pesticides. Whereas farmworkers receive the greatest exposure, with an estimated 300,000 workers a year made ill, consumers are daily ingesting pesticide residues on food.

The Environmental Protection Agency, after a self-study, has put pesticide regulation at the top of its most urgent problems list. Steven Schatzow, head of the Office of Pesticide Programs, was quoted in the *The New York Times* as saying, "Pesticides dwarf the other risks the agency deals with. The risks from pesticides are so much greater because of the exposure involved. Toxic waste dumps may effect a few thousand people living around them. But virtually everyone is exposed to pesticides."

Pesticide use has escalated tremendously in the last 30 years. In 1987 farm use topped 1 billion pounds, up from just 200,000 pounds three decades ago. Regulation, such as it is, is fragmented and varies from state to state. Meaningful enforcement of regulations for application, use and residues on food is virtually non-functioning.

While working on this article for THE WITNESS, I took a sheaf of reading material on pesticides to a restaurant to



Cesar Chavez makes plea

In the early 1960s the United Farmworkers union began what many people said was an impossible task. We wanted to get DDT and other poisons out of the food production system. It took us five years, but we succeeded — because of a grape boycott which millions of Americans supported.

Now there is extensive proof that more deadly chemicals are being used in food production. Chemicals like:

- Methyl bromide — extremely poisonous to all forms of life, this fumigant has been responsible for more occupationally related deaths than any other pesticide. Even non-fatal exposure can cause severe, irreversible effects on the nerve system, with permanent brain damage or blindness.

- Parathion and phosdrin — rapidly fatal, can produce illnesses in workers in as little as 20 minutes. These poisons contaminate surrounding areas when sprayed from the air . . . as much as 90% of aerially sprayed chemicals miss their target area.

Please help by joining the grape boycott and donating so that we can continue to organize for pesticide-free foods.

Cesar Chavez, UFW Letter

study during lunch. Wanting to have something healthy, I ordered the lightly-steamed vegetable plate. While eating, I became aware of the disparity between what I knew about pesticide residues on vegetables and my confidence that I was eating safe, healthy food.

We want to believe that government agencies are looking out for our welfare. But, according to *The New York Times*, "The environmental agency has been able to provide assurances for 37 of the more than 600 active ingredients used in 45,000 pesticides on the market. Even at the more aggressive pace adopted recently, it can review only 25 such ingredients a year."

The same article went on to discuss "the case of ethylene dibromide, a fumigant used on grain and fruit that is suspected of causing cancer in humans. It was banned by

the agency for most uses two years ago after residue was found in a wide range of food products and in underground water supplies in several areas." It also noted the comment of the EPA's Dr. John Moore, "I am still astounded at some of the uses of EDB and how we could be so stupid."

Such information can leave consumers feeling helpless, and eager to escape the helplessness. Many buy organically-grown produce or search out natural food restaurants. But the attempt is basically illusory. Pesticide residues have been found in cake and muffin mixes. Pesticides are appearing in underground water supplies. As of 1986, pesticides, including carcinogens and teratogens, had been found in the ground water of 23 states. In California, where more comprehensive monitoring is done, over 50 pesticides have been found in ground water.

Consumers should feel grateful for organizational efforts such as the United Farmer Workers' drive to ban several of the most dangerous pesticides and to limit the use of others. They have called for a ban on captan, parathion, phosdrin, methyl bromide, and dinoseb. On Oct. 6, 1986, the EPA suspended dinoseb, a known teratogen.

A ban on these pesticides is one of the demands in the UFW's California Grape Boycott. The UFW bargains hard for pesticide regulation in all its contracts, and those bans have affected national legislation. The first grape contracts included a ban on DDT, dieldrin and aldrin. Subsequently the federal government banned them also.

The UFW's publicizing of the pesticide problem has strengthened the work of environmental groups. For example, some large food chains like Safeway and food processors like Welch's Grape Juice, Inc., no longer buy apples and grapes treated with alar. Dr. Moses has stated, "Cesar Chavez is doing more to protect the health of the American consumer than anyone I know of in Washington, D.C."

Recently, a United Methodist Task Force looking into issues of support for the UFW grape boycott, concluded that many fruits and vegetables were more contaminated with pesticides than grapes, and asked why grapes were singled out. UFW President Chavez said there were three reasons: Grapes constitute the largest food crop in California. More restricted pesticides are used on grapes than on any other food. And grape workers report more illnesses to the California Department of Food and Agriculture than workers in any other crop in the state.

The grape growers are the most powerful lobby in the opposition to effective enforcement of farm labor laws, which include protections for workers against pesticides. The National Farm Worker Ministry notes that 18,000 grape workers have voted to be represented by the UFW, but have



never gained a contract because of the intransigence of the grape industry. And grape growers are reported to be prominent in undercutting enforcement of California's Agricultural Labor Relations Act.

The UFW must break through the barrier erected by the grape industry in order to represent farmworkers in other crops and other parts of the country.

It is in our best interest as consumers to join farmworkers in the boycott of California table grapes as a way of bringing focused pressure on a powerful farm lobby. It is in our interest as caring human beings to be in solidarity with exploited farmworkers.

The town of McFarland has tried to dismiss the furor caused by families of the children with cancer. They say, "It's just those Mexicans, complaining again."

Farmworkers and their children are on the front lines, warning us of danger. Juan Sanchez of the Coachella Valley appealed to the National Farm Worker Ministry Board: "Don't forget the farmworkers. And don't forget our boycott. We don't want to rob the growers. We don't want to get rich. We only want enough for our families and safety and dignity for workers."

How You Can Help

WITNESS readers seeking more information on victims of pesticide poisoning may order, free of charge, a 14-minute video, "Wrath of Grapes," from the United Farm Workers, P.O. Box 62, Keene, CA 93570.

Contributions may also be sent to support the Ministry Among Pesticide Victims of the National Farm Worker Ministry, P.O. Box 302, Delano, CA 93216.

The National Farm Worker Ministry is an ecumenical organization with 68 years of service to farmworkers. It has a staff of 16 in Florida, Texas, Ohio and California. Staff work closely with the United Farm Workers and with the Farm Labor Organizing Committee in the midwest.

Related to this story, General Convention watchers will be tracking the resolution to fund a Working Class ministry submitted by the Appalachian People's Service Organization (APSO), and Resolution D-012 responding to environmental problems.

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