# THE FARMWORKERS’ MOVEMENT

**A People’s Fight Against Corporate Exploitation**

## THE CONDITIONS

Statistics about the living conditions of farm workers may be quite well-known by now, but as a reminder here is once again a sampling:

**Wages**
- Average hourly wages in 1969: $1.43.
- Farm workers are specifically excluded from collective bargaining laws and unemployment insurance. They are discriminated against in minimum wage coverage ($1.30 for farm workers, $1.60 for others) and social security laws (they must earn $150 or work 20 days for one employer in order to be covered). Without contracts farm workers do not have the protections of job security, holidays, sick pay, overtime pay, sanitary toilets, etc.

**Health**
- Life expectancy for farm workers is 49 years.
- In 1969 infant and maternal mortality was 125 percent higher than the national rate.
- A California Health Department survey in 1969 revealed at least 150 cases per 1,000 workers of pesticide poisoning.
- Child labor is very common. In California alone 1/4 of the farm workers are children under 16.

## BUILDING THE FARMWORKERS UNION

**STRUCTURE**

In organizing farm workers UFWOC functions as a very socialized union. Its greatest concern is to balance central authority with workers’ rights. The union’s principal operating unit is the ranch committee, a group of five voters elected each year by their fellow workers on individual ranches with UFWOC contracts. The ranch committee is responsible for the enforcement of the contract and deals with the growers in case of grievances. The thrust here is to make sure that farm workers feel that their power under the contract is real, so that they will stand up for it.

Today UFWOC holds some 200 contracts, covering 30,000-40,000 farm workers. In all of these cases workers have shown in elections that they wanted to be represented by UFWOC.

UFWOC’s central staff counts some 100 people, while an additional 350 work in field and boycott offices. UFWOC welcomes the help of volunteers in long as they recognize the self-determination rights of farm workers.

The union itself is growing — it has a membership of at least 55,000 at this time. Its members contribute regularly to UFWOC, many other labor unions, church groups and concerned individuals.

**PHILOSOPHY AND LIFE STYLE**

The cornerstones of UFWOC’s operation are the concepts of non-violence and of nonviolence, stemming from Cesar Chavez’ personal commitment. The non-violent worker is both a pragmatic necessity and an inspirational tool. Without being militantly non-violent UFWOC would have little chance of influencing growers’ behavior or gaining federal legislation. At the same time non-violence keeps emotions focused on the proper goal of the movement: gaining dignity for its workers.

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The Employers - Who Are They?

It is a common misconception that farm workers are employees. This could still have been true some years ago, but it is now a well-known fact that conglomerate agricultural corporations are more and more controlling agriculture. Agriculture has become agribusiness and major growers are partners in this new industry.

For example, in California a mere 7 percent of the farmers occupy 80 percent of the arable land. The top 2.4 percent of the farms account for nearly 60 percent of the hired farm labor.

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## CONCLUSION

The notion of counterculture rests on “self-sufficiency, discipline, hard work and (internal) satisfaction.” “Man needs a sense of being a reviant in this way without romanticizing or compromising,” says Cesar.

This philosophy results in a life style among UFWOC’s organizers which is unpretentious. Since 1965 movement workers have been paid a salary of $5 a week, with food and housing provided by UFWOC. It is understood that all of their energy is spent on ‘to cause’.

The movement workers’ dedication to this life and work style symbolizes to farm workers the potential for their new humanity.

**Focus: LETTUCE**

The signing of UFWOC contracts with major grape growers in Delano during the summer of 1970 was just the beginning of the struggle for justice in the fields. Perhaps this first major victory has more clearly pitted UFWOC’s people against the systems of agribusiness.

The latest UFWOC challenge focuses on lettuce. When grape growers were signing contracts with UFWOC in 1970, California’s lettuce growers made secret agreements with the Teamsters Union so that they would not have to deal with UFWOC. Some 7,000 lettuce workers strike the vegetable industry protesting that they wanted UFWOC instead of the Teamsters.

Some growers considered their Teamster contracts, but others obtained a court order against all strike activities in the Salinas Valley. Hence a boycott of lettuce was started in major cities across the nation. After the Teamsters and UFWOC “made peace” in March 1971, negotiations between the lettuce growers and UFWOC began. The boycott was then suspended.

The talks took place weekly from May till November. The proposed UFWOC contracts were ran against different from the ones agreed on with the grape growers. But an agreement could be reached with the majority of the lettuce growers (six of them did sign contracts with UFWOC).

The new contracts were a preliminary boycott against certain large chain stores which sell non-union lettuce. Another long struggle is ahead. Its success will greatly depend on the amount of consumer solidarity it can muster.

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- Agriculture has become agribusiness and major growers are partners in this new industry.
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- Some growers considered their Teamster contracts, but others obtained a court order against all strike activities in the Salinas Valley. Hence a boycott of lettuce was started in major cities across the nation. After the Teamsters and UFWOC “made peace” in March 1971, negotiations between the lettuce growers and UFWOC began. The boycott was then suspended.
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**LETTER TO THE FARMWORKERS UNION**

I support your non-violent struggle for justice. I pledge not to buy or eat iceberg (head) lettuce.

Please send me leaflets for me to distribute.

Contact me to arrange a film or speaker at my church, union, school, or organization.

I enclose a donation.

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**TO AMERICA’S LETTUCE WORKERS:**

- I support your non-violent struggle for justice. I pledge not to buy or eat iceberg (head) lettuce.
- Please send me leaflets for me to distribute.
- Contact me to arrange a film or speaker at my church, union, school, or organization.
- I enclose a donation.

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**Phone:** 527-7191
A statement by the Committee on Social Development of the U.S. Catholic Conference
July 10, 1972. As the Bishops of the U.S. said in their Nov. 13, 1968 Statement on
Farm Labor:
"throughout this century, our state and federal governments have done much to
assist growers and farmers with their difficulties. The same, unfortunately, cannot
be said for the men working in the fields."

Without strong, honest representation such as can be provided by the United Farm
Workers, the plight of agricultural workers and their families will remain desperate.
A fundamental issue of social justice is presented.

In these circumstances, the Committee on Social Development of the United States
Catholic Conference recommends endorsement and support of the lettuce boycott and
strongly urges that only "iceberg" lettuce clearly marked with the official United
Farm Workers' label, the black Aztec eagle, be purchased. Our purpose in this is
to bring about collective bargaining and a just settlement of the dispute.

In the name of justice, church agencies such as the U.S.C.C. Committee on Socia-
Development must speak out on controversial issues such as this one even with the
knowledge that they might be misunderstood. Sensitive to the needs and the problems
of both sides, these agencies must encourage dialogue by helping to create an atmos-
phere of charity and justice. It was in this spirit and for this purpose that the
Second Vatican Council reaffirmed the traditional teaching of the Church with regard
to the right of workers to organize and bargain collectively and, under certain con-
ditions, to resort to the strike.

Today's reading is an excerpt of Cesar Chavez's statement made at the end of his
24-day fast for justice, June 4, 1972:

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
fellowmen. 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 will find that you will gain their hearts and you will
never go hungry and never be alone. In giving of yourself you will discover a
whole new life full of love and meaning.

Man Freeman and Sal Sontes have given their lives for our movement this past
year. They were very young. It hurt us to lose them and it still hurts us. But the
greatest tragedy is not to live and die, as we all must. The greatest tragedy is
for a person to live and die without knowing the satisfaction of giving life for
others. The greatest tragedy is to be born but not to live for the sake of losing a
little security or because we are afraid of loving and giving ourselves to other
people.

Our opponents in the agricultural industry are very powerful and farmworkers
are still weak in number and influence. But we have another kind of power that comes
from the justice of our cause. So long as we are willing to sacrifice for that
cause, so long as we persist in non-violence and work to spread the message of our
struggle, then millions of people around the world will respond from their hearts,
will support our efforts, and in the end we will overcome. It can be done. We
know it can be done. God gives us the strength and patience to do it without bitter-
ness so that we can win both our friends and opponents to the cause of justice.