

President's Newsletter



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Office of the President
United Farm Workers of America, AFL-CIO
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PRESIDENT'S OFFICE

Lettuce Striker 4th UFW Martyr; Chiquita Banana Boycott Begins

United Farm Workers striker *Rufino Contreras* became the fourth UFW member to die in the service of the union during a strike when he was brutally murdered by grower agents last month near El Centro, California.

Shortly before noon on Saturday, February 10, on the 22nd day of the Imperial Valley vegetable strike, *Rufino* and a half dozen fellow strikers walked onto a lettuce field owned by grower *Mario Saikhon* in an effort to talk with a crew of approximately 75 strikebreakers imported from outside the valley.

As the strikers entered the growers' property, two Saikhon foremen and a company truck driver standing 80 to 100 feet away from the farm workers opened fire on the men, hitting *Rufino* in the face just below the right eye with a .38 caliber bullet and scattering the other workers, who sought cover in nearby agricultural ponds.

The foremen had positioned themselves on two flanks of *Rufino* and his friends so they could catch the strikers in a vicious crossfire. Repeated attempts to aid *Rufino* by other strikers—including his father and brother who were present on the picketline that day—were defeated by the three Saikhon agents who kept the farm workers at bay with continuing gunfire.

Rufino lay dying in the Saikhon field for more than an hour before Imperial County sheriff's deputies arrived on the scene and an ambulance was called. He died shortly after 2 p.m. in an El Centro hospital.

Later the three Saikhon agents were charged formally with murder.

Picketing Moritorium Called

At a Mass Sunday morning attended by more than 2,000 strikers, I declared a moritorium on all Imperial Valley picketing to coincide with an official period of mourning to honor *Rufino's* memory. The next day—a Monday—farm workers at both struck and non-struck companies participated in a one day work stoppage in solidarity with the slain striker. Forty major lettuce companies and 10,000 to 12,000 workers participated in the walkout.

On Wednesday, February 14, the farm workers again stayed away from work as they buried *Rufino Contreras* in Calexico. *Rufino's* young widow—her legs wrapped in bandages and blankets because of burns suffered in an earlier household accident—was driven by ambulance from a Mexicali hospital and wheeled into the center of El Hoyo (the Hole), the shape-up area adjacent to the Mexican border, where the funeral Mass was celebrated.



UFW photo

Rufino Contreras' widow, Rosa Maximina, is comforted by their son, Julio Cesar.

Through most of the service, *Rosa Maximina Contreras* clutched her young son, *Julio Cesar*, 5, crying into his shoulder as if he were a man. *Rufino's* young daughter, *Nancy Berenice*, 4, stood nearby.

When *Julio Cesar's* grandmother escorted the young boy to the side of his father's flag draped coffin to say goodbye, the child broke into uncontrolled sobs and cries of "mi papa, mi papa..." that touched the thousands of farm workers and several dozen reporters who gathered to cover the funeral.

Gov. *Brown*, who flew to Calexico to attend the Mass, spoke briefly to the workers and offered his condolences to the family. "What we can say is very little," he offered. "We should rededicate ourselves to the struggle *Rufino* died for and in."

'Day of Infamy'

In my eulogy, I noted that February 10, 1979 was a day of infamy for farm workers:

...It was a day without hope. It was a day without joy. The sun didn't shine. The birds didn't sing. The rain didn't fall.

Why was this such a day of evil? Because on this day greed and injustice struck down our

brother, *Rufino Contreras*.

What is the worth of a man? What is the worth of a farm worker? *Rufino*, his father and brother together gave the company 20 years of their labor. They were faithful workers who helped build up the wealth of their boss, helped build up the wealth of his ranch.

What was their reward for their service and their sacrifice? When they petitioned for a more just share of what they themselves produce, when they spoke out against the injustice they endured, the company answered them with bullets; the company sent hired guns to quiet *Rufino Contreras*.

Capital and labor together produce the fruit of the land. But what really counts is labor. The human beings who torture their bodies, sacrifice their youth and numb their spirits to produce this great agricultural wealth. A wealth so vast that it feeds all of America and much of the world. And yet the men, women and children who are the flesh and blood of this production often do not have enough to feed themselves.

But we are here today to say that true wealth is not measured in money or status or power. It is measured in the legacy that we leave behind for those we love and those we inspire.

In that sense, *Rufino* is not dead. Wherever farm workers organize, stand up for their rights and strike for justice, *Rufino Contreras* is with them.

Rufino lives among us. It is those who have killed him and those who have conspired to kill him that have died; because the love, the compassion, the light in their hearts have been stilled.

Why do we say that *Rufino* still lives? Because those of us who mourn him today and bring him to his rest rededicate ourselves to the ideals for which he gave his life: *Rufino* lives insofar as we continue to build a union that will someday bring justice to all farm workers.

'Don't Cry for Me, Organize'

If *Rufino* were alive today, what would he tell us? He would tell us don't be afraid. Don't be discouraged. He would tell us don't cry for me, organize!

This is a day of sorrow, but it is also a day of hope. It is a time of sadness because our friend and brother is dead. It is a time of hope because we are certain that *Rufino* today enjoys the justice in heaven that was denied him on earth.

It is our mission to finish the

work *Rufino* has begun among us, knowing that true justice for ourselves and our opponents is only possible before God, who is the final judge.

The press estimated that 8,000 - 9,000 farm worker mourners marched silently the three miles from El Hoyo to the Mountain View Cemetery north of Calexico.

Rufino's death came at an ironic time, his family said later. He was an active and loyal union member who participated in UFW activities and attended union meetings. The day he died he was particularly proud of his union membership because he had just been notified that the UFW's Robert F. Kennedy Medical Plan would cover medical costs for his injured wife. The day he died was the first time in several days that *Rufino* had returned to the picketline at Saikhon because of his wife's condition.

Several days after the murder, *Mario Saikhon* told a Los Angeles Times reporter that many of his friends believed that the farm workers had killed *Rufino* so the union could have a martyr. "A pretty animalistic thing to say," the UFW spokesman responded.

Rufino Contreras is the fourth person killed serving the union during a strike. In January, 1972, *Nan Freeman*, a young Jewish girl from Massachusetts, was crushed to death by a growers' truck on a UFW picketline at a sugarcane company in Florida. At the height of the summer, 1973 grape strikes in Kern County, UFW strikers *Nagi Daifallah*, a young immigrant from Yemen, and *Juan de la Cruz*, an original union member, were murdered in separate incidents only a few days apart.

Bad Faith Bargaining

Despite *Rufino Contreras'* death, the employers steadfastly refused to budge from their insistence that the farm workers keep their wage and other economic increases to within President *Carter's* seven per cent wage-price guidelines.

On March 1, the UFW filed unfair labor practice charges with the state Agricultural Labor Relations Board against all 28 growers who have been negotiating together in one group with the

union since last year. The companies are accused of bad faith negotiations by engaging in "surface bargaining"—going through the motions of collective bargaining but refusing to deal honestly with the real issues at the talks.

In our charges we noted that the growers' economic proposal of February 21 was in many ways inferior to the employers' proposals offered in January. The growers' third year hourly rate proposal in January was \$4.53. The growers offered \$4.50 on February 21.

The employers have rejected UFW offers on local and cropwide issues and on non-wage economics. They have refused to explain their rejections and have refused to advance counter proposals.

The union is also asking the Agricultural Labor Relations Board to investigate the growers' position on the President's seven per cent wage guidelines. The employers have been unable to explain why they think they are covered by the wage-price guidelines when it is clear that they are not. (Producers of unprocessed food are exempt from the price guidelines and workers earning \$4 or less per hour are also excluded—including the majority of the vegetable workers.)

In 1977 and 1978, farm workers in the vegetable industry received wage increases of only four per cent per year even though inflation increased 10 per cent annually during the same period.

The growers also cannot explain how they can justify wage controls but no price controls. The employers have raised lettuce prices from \$4-\$6 per box when the strike began to \$12 per box by late February. How can growers justify a 300 per cent increase in lettuce prices when they demand farm workers keep their economic increases to 7 per cent?

The ALRB in Sacramento said the board would investigate the union's charges.

Boycott Chiquita Bananas

One company cited in the unfair labor practice charges is Sun Harvest, Inc., one of the nation's largest producers of iceberg lettuce.

Despite a long and profitable relationship with the UFW (it goes back to 1970), Sun Harvest has joined other struck growers in a cynical campaign to break the union.

Sun Harvest has used rural courts and rural sheriff's departments in two states to all but deny the farm workers' ability to picket and exercise their First Amendment rights to peacefully assemble and demonstrate through court injunctions and excessive numbers of law officers in the fields. Sheriff's deputies from seven counties have been massed at strike locations in both California and Arizona.

Farm worker pickets who have been physically threatened and provoked by heavily armed private security guards and other grower agents have been subject to unjustified harrassment and arrest by rural police agencies. Dozens of UFW members have been injured at the hands of deputies and guards.

Sun Harvest has employed these private guards and the company has actively recruited professional strikebreakers in two states. In Arizona, Sun Harvest's operation takes place nearly exclusively on Indian reservation land where our union has been forbidden from picketing. The company has taken back proposals advanced by it at the bargaining table; it has not lived up to its collective bargaining obligations.

Because the farm workers can no longer effectively picket and because Sun Harvest has refused to bargain in good faith, the farm workers were left with no choice except to call an international boycott of Chiquita bananas throughout the United States, Canada and Japan. The Chiquita label is owned by United Brands Company of Boston, Massachusetts, Sun Harvest's parent company.

Farm workers are asking their supporters everywhere to not buy Chiquita bananas, to urge their friends and relatives to back the UFW's appeal, and to talk to store managers about honoring the boycott.

Sun Harvest will now be forced to face the farm workers both in the fields and in the cities.

(Note: We apologize for delays in publishing the President's Newsletter. The demands of the strike have dominated our time and energies. Future issues of the Newsletter will cover the recent successful UFW organizing convocation on February 25 in San Juan, Texas.)

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