

SUMMARY OF PRESIDENT'S ADDRESS  
TO THE  
TEXAS ORGANIZING CONVOCATION

February 25, 1979

The Worth of a Farm Worker

As we open this organizing convocation in Texas, our thoughts return to February 10, 1979, a day of infamy for all farm workers.

On that day greed and injustice struck down our brother, Rufino Contreras in a struck lettuce field in California's Imperial Valley.

We wonder what is the worth of a man? What is the worth of a farm worker? Rufino, his father and brother together gave their 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.

We are convinced that true wealth is not measured in money or status. It is measured in the legacy that we leave behind for those we love and those we inspire.

In that sense, Rufino Contreras is not dead. Wherever farm workers organize, stand up for their rights and strike for justice, Rufino is with them. It is our mission to finish the work Rufino has begun among us, knowing that true justice for farm workers and their opponents is only possible before God, who is the final judge.

The Imperial Valley Strike

What are the Imperial Valley farm workers fighting for?

To begin to bring their wages and benefits into the 20th Century with the same relative kinds of economic standards that workers in other industries who do similar work earn.

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The economic situation of our membership is years behind other workers. While other workers had unions generations ago, and those workers made economic progress through their unions, the farm workers remained stagnant. Consequently, farm workers have a great deal of catching up to do.

It took the farm workers in the vegetable industry ten years to build their union to the point we are at today. The issue in these negotiations is to put that union that has been built to work doing what a union should do, which is improving the living standard of its members. The Imperial Valley strike is our union's first real industrial strike--a strike about economic issues and not a strike concerned with union recognition or representation.

It is also the most unified strike the United Farm Workers has ever staged. Farm workers from both sides of the border have refused to break the strike; the growers have failed miserably to recruit farm workers as strikebreakers.

The strike represents a consolidation phase in the union's long struggle to organize farm workers in California. We are reaping the benefits of a struggle that began in 1962.

#### The State of the Union

Our union boasted 100,000 members working under contract in 1978 in three states: California, Arizona, and Florida. Most of these workers have won union contracts under a 1975 California law that was the result of 13 years of struggle. The law has meant free secret ballot union elections and freedom from intimidation and coercion by employers. If the workers chose the UFW, the growers must recognize the union and sit down and negotiate a contract in good faith.

With the law, our union has signed over 200 contracts with agricultural employers. But what have we won?

The union has made dramatic gains for farm workers since it was founded nearly 17 years ago. When farm workers struck the Delano grape growers in 1965, the hourly wage for grape workers averaged 85 cents to \$1 per hour, and that rate had been static since the 1950s. Under UFW contract, the minimum wage in grapes is now around \$3.70 per hour, and that does not include other economic benefits.

Before the 1970 Salinas lettuce strike, the general labor wage for lettuce workers was \$1.50-\$1.65 per hour. Under the old vegetable industry contracts which have expired, the minimum wage was \$3.70 per hour.

The major provisions of UFW contracts free farm workers from the exploitation and discrimination that impoverishes so many of our

people in this rich country: hiring halls, seniority rights, grievance and arbitration procedures, health and safety protections, rest periods, medical, pension, vacation plans, paid holidays, decent wages.

This is what we have won in California and this is what we want in Texas. But our progress has always come at a high price.

### Our Martyrs

We should never forget that these gains have been paid for in blood, sweat and tears.

Rufino Contreras was the fourth person to die in the service of the union during a strike. In 1972, Nan Freeman was crushed to death on a UFW picketline in Florida. In 1973, two union members--Juan de la Cruz and Nagi Daifallah--were brutally murdered during the grape strikes. Hundreds of farm workers were injured; thousands were arrested because they stood up for the union.

### Texas Organizing Structure

When the union was formed in California, the farm workers there created the same types of organizing committees which you will formally recognize today. When the farm workers won recognition from their employers these organizing committees became negotiating committees. And when contracts were successfully negotiated, the negotiating committees became ranch committees.

Ranch committees, in our union, perform the functions of the traditional union local. They are composed of workers elected by their fellow workers to administer the affairs of the union at their respective companies. The ranch committee is at the core of a ranch community, all the union members at a company who compose the basic fabric of the union.

Organizing committees are unchartered subordinate bodies of the union created by the UFW National Executive Board. The board may create an organizing committee in any area, in any state, where there are workers within the union's jurisdiction and not covered by a union contract. It is the president's duty to appoint directors of the organizing committees, define their territorial jurisdiction and supervise their activities.

The board has formally approved a set of Uniform Rules and Bylaws for organizing committees pending presentation of the Rules and Bylaws for action to the 1979 UFW Fourth Constitutional Convention.

### Our Goals

Our union, in its Texas organizing efforts, seeks to fulfill the goals the farm workers have set everywhere they organize under the Black Eagle banner of the UFW. Our objects are:

To unite under the union's banner all workers employed as farm workers, regardless of race, creed, sex or nationality; to negotiate, bargain collectively, contract or otherwise deal with the employers of agricultural employees concerning wages, hours, working conditions, grievances, labor disputes and all other related matters; to protect the moral and legal right of farm workers to strike, boycott, and engage in other nonviolent economic activities; to work and cooperate with other unions for the mutual benefit of the respective memberships and the building of solidarity among the entire labor movement; to engage in legislative activity to promote, protect and advance the welfare of the workers; to promote registration, voting, political education and other citizenship activities; to promote the full and equal participation by women in all affairs, activities and leadership positions in the union.

#### Four Phases of the Work

The farm workers' struggle can be divided into four distinct phases:

First, when we begin the work, the workers are afraid; after so many years of failure, they believe it just can't be done. They laugh when we say we seek to build a true farm workers union.

During the second phase, once we have started the work alittle, we are ridiculed by friend and foe alike.

As we do more work and the organizing begins to take form, the ridicule from our opponents turns to worry and we encounter stern opposition. It is at this stage that the workers' bloods, sweat and tears are shed.

Finally, during the fourth stage, victory is achieved and there is acceptance of the union by the employers.

The farm workers in California have reached the third phase; they are no longer afraid of the growers and that is perhaps the greatest single achievement this union has made. The Texas farm workers are still struggling through the first phase.

#### Our Challenge

The lessons of the past are clear; the challenge before us is great. Farm workers have made many gains. But so many more workers, in Texas and elsewhere, cry out for the union, and our opponents in agribusiness are rich and powerful and determined to stop farm workers from building a union of their own.

We face an immensely powerful industry largely committed to opposing our movement. Our task is to carry on the struggle to build one national union that will unite all farm workers; one union that will bring farm workers the blessings of collective bargaining and union democracy; one union to liberate farm workers from poverty and injustice.

One brotherhood; one people; one union. Viva la Causa!