

Focus on Cucumbers

Ramiro Sarabia, FLOC Organizer

"When I first came to the US, in December 1969, I went to Florida. I picked strawberries, oranges, and that's all I think. Then I moved to Ohio, and I picked cucumbers. In July, because I didn't have any papers, they had me arrested and took me to Mexico, so I went back to Mexico for one week I think, and then I came back again. My wife was born in the United States, and at that time I had my wife and three kids in Texas, so I had to come back. I worked in Texas, for three months, and then I went back again to Florida, and worked with oranges and tomatoes.

"In 1972, in October, we decided to come to Ohio and try to find a job.... I found a job in 1974 in a factory, and that's where I worked for twenty years. Part-time, I worked in the pickles, in the afternoons. In 1994, I got laid off; they closed the plant. I had been working with the church, with the migrants, for ten years. When the plant closed, I didn't want to go to another factory. I said 'it's good enough working twenty years in a factory.'

"In 1996, I [met] Baldemar Velásquez, the president of the FLOC. I'd been living for twenty-five years in Ohio, forty miles apart from Baldemar Velásquez, and I never got a chance to meet him. But this time, a guy invited me to go to the office of FLOC, and I said 'yeah, ok, I'd like to know this guy.' ...So we started talking, and [Velásquez] said 'well why don't you work for me?' I said 'doing what?' He said

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Facts about Cucumbers

- ◆ North Carolina grows more cucumbers and produces more pickles than any other state except Michigan. *Whitlock*
- ◆ In 1998, 18,200 acres of North Carolina land was planted with cucumbers to be made into pickles. 17,500 acres were harvested, yielding a total of 79,000 tons of pre-processed cucumbers. *NCDA&CS, Vegetables*
- ◆ Of the migrant farmworkers who work in North Carolina during peak harvest season, more than 7,000 spend at least some time picking cucumbers. *Whitlock*
- ◆ In 1997, the average farm in North Carolina made a \$61,598 profit. This was more than twice the net profit of the average farm nationwide, which earned only \$24,210 profit. *NCDA&CS, Cash Receipts*
- ◆ The total value of the 1998 North Carolina crop of processed cucumbers was \$17,325,000. This was \$1.1 million more than was made on the same crop in 1997. *NCDA&CS, Vegetables*
- ◆ The mean annual personal income for migrant farmworkers in the Southeast is between \$5000 - \$7000. Farmworkers working for growers who contract with the Mount Olive Pickle Company earn only one-quarter as much as workers in the Midwest who are represented by a FLOC union contract. *Endorsement*
- ◆ The nine states which produce the greatest amount of processed cucumbers are California, Florida, Georgia, Michigan, North Carolina, Oregon, Texas, Washington, and Wisconsin. In 1994, 82,600 acres of cucumbers were planted in those states alone. *NCDA&CS, Pesticides*
- ◆ In the nine major growers' states, farmers use six different "restricted use" pesticides: Carbofuran, Esfenvalerate, Ethoprop, Methomyl, Permethrin, and Dichloropropene. A total of 149,200 pounds of these chemicals were applied to processed cucumber crops in the major states in 1994. *NCDA&CS, Pesticides*

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From the Ground Up Editor: Sarah Hamilton

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Ramiro Sarabia *continued from page 1*

'well, organize the people, like a volunteer, like the way you're working for the church.' I said 'well, yeah, I think I can do that.'

"We came for two weeks here [in North Carolina] in September 1996, and then we went back to Ohio.... [Velásquez] asked me if I would come for another two weeks over here, and I said yes. I came and in two weeks I was recruiting people and making committees and everything; so when Baldemar came in I made a meeting, I called people and there were about twenty-five people already, and so he said 'we need Ramiro here.'

"I think I was lucky because nobody wanted to take this place. The workers and the staff from Ohio didn't want to come here. I said 'well, I like trouble, so if there's trouble there that's where I'm going to go, because I like trouble.'

"They call me an organizer, but I don't know if I deserve the honor of a name! What I do is take care of the office, but in the meantime my job is to go outside to the camps, to talk to the workers about the benefits of the union, sign those cards, unionize.... When people come to the U.S. I say 'well, I'm Ramiro Sarabia, and I'm working for the Farm Labor Organizing Committee, I'm working for you. I've come to help you. What do you need?'

"The biggest problem for workers in this area is money, treatment, conditions. The money's not good enough, the housing is trouble, the workers don't have any dignity, they're worked like animals—worse, because if you have a cat you treat him nice. I think they need everything.

"How they're going to get out of their problems, the only way I've found, I think it's to unionize. For you and me to be in agreement we have to know each other better, to get the power. So all the agencies and the churches can pray for our justice, but we have to unionize.

"We have to know where the problem comes from, and then we can heal it. A lot of churches don't know what the problem is, a lot of agencies don't know what's going on. Right here we have the problems.

"I feel pretty good [about the Mt. Olive campaign]. I feel that it is not easy, but we are going to win. This is our issue, this is our point, of the union, the point is to win better [conditions] for the workers. And that's why we're working, not just over here but in Mexico, in Michoacán, Querétaro, Guanajuato. The union is trying to figure out how to get a good price for those cucumber workers.

"One thing I'm going to tell you is that we can't lose because we don't have anything. We're not rich people. I won't lose anything because I don't have anything. Somebody's going to lose, but not the union. As long as the company refuses to come and do business, I'm sorry for them.

"The way we're working, we have our supporters and we have our committees. And the committees are living here year-round. The committees come from the workers, and they keep it going all the time. We have committees in Georgia and Tennessee and Ohio and some in North Carolina.

"We need support from everybody in order to win. Win not just for me, not just for the workers, but win for everybody, because these things hurt you too. This is for better conditions and a better state for the country."

Interview by Sarah Hamilton



Farmworker Unions Strive for Change

United Farm Workers

The first step towards effective farmworker organizing in the United States was made in 1959, when the Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee (AWOC), a member organization of the American Federation of Labor-Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO), was established on the west coast. During the early 1960s, AWOC and the National Farm Workers Association, founded by Cesar Chavez, conducted a number of strikes against various growers and won several wage increases.

In September of 1965, AWOC and NFWA joined forces in a major campaign against several grape growers in Delano, CA, where Chavez' operation was based. The two organizations represented both Filipino and Chicano workers, which undermined growers' anti-union strategy of using ethnic animosities to break strikes.

A nation-wide boycott was soon called, encouraged by the raised awareness of human rights of the era. Though growers again tried raising wages to appease the workers and induce them to call off the strike, many of the strikers were veterans of previous campaigns and stood their ground. One of the largest growers, Schenley, responded to the strike by spraying protesters with agricultural poisons, spurring Chavez to lead a protest march to the state capitol. Chavez started the 340-mile walk with only 70 workers behind him, but by the time he reached Sacramento over 10,000 people had joined the ranks. By 1970, the boycott was effectively over and many contracts were being signed.

In 1972, the unions—now officially merged—received a charter from the AFL-CIO and became the United Farm Workers of America. In 1973, when the first contracts with grape growers began to expire, the UFW faced a difficult struggle against the Teamsters Union, which had begun signing 'sweetheart' deals. The UFW struck back with another grape boycott, strikes and protests.

Two striking workers were murdered for their union activities before California governor Jerry Brown signed the Agricultural Labor Relations Act into law, guaranteeing farmworkers' right to organize and protecting and enforcing that right in the courts in California.

In 1984, with continuing difficulties with the Agriculture Labor Relations Board's failure to respond to union complaints and faced with growing concerns about the dangers of pesticides, Chavez called the third international boycott of California table grapes. This boycott is ongoing.

Most recently, the UFW has devoted itself to a campaign against the Florida-based Quincy Farms and its PA-based parent company, Sylvan, on behalf of workers in their "Prime" mushrooms operations. Quincy Farms has had 24 workers arrested for their involvement in union organizing and has fired 85 others for the same offense. The UFW has responded by calling a national boycott of all Sylvan and Quincy Farms products.

The UFW is also organizing the "5 Cents for Fairness" Campaign in support of 20,000 strawberry workers in California demanding a living wage, toilets in the field, job security, health insurance, and an end to sexual harassment and discrimination.

(ufw.org, "Indestructible Spirit")

Farm Labor Organizing Committee

The Farm Labor Organizing Committee was founded in 1967 by Baldemar Velásquez, and in 1979 was formally established as a Midwestern farmworkers' union. After unsuccessful attempts to enter friendly negotiations with Campbell Soup Company, FLOC workers voted in 1978 to strike all Campbell's tomato operations in Northwestern Ohio. When the corporation retaliated by mandating its growers' use of mechanical harvesters instead of farmworkers, FLOC called a national boycott of all Campbell Soup products. Leaders in church, labor, and other organizations sympathetic to farmworkers' rights endorsed the boycott and educated others on the issues. Volunteers were mobilized to advocate the boycott and to collect funds, food, and clothing for the strikers.

In 1983, FLOC became involved in the struggles of farmworkers in Michigan against sharecropping in the cucumber/pickle industry. Simultaneously, FLOC expanded its campaign against Campbell by beginning to organize pickle workers in Ohio and Michigan who were involved with Campbell's Vlastic products.

After seven years of marches, protests, awareness-raising, and boycotts, FLOC negotiated historic three-year agreements covering 800 Campbell and Vlastic workers. These agreements established contracts among the three major parties involved: farmworkers, growers, and food processing corporations. This ensured that farmers as well as farmworkers had a voice in conditions that affected their well-being, and also that corporations could put forth the conditions that ensured its viability as a corporation of public shareholders.

The agreements also established the 'Dunlop Commission', a private labor relations board composed of representatives of each of the three parties concerned, to review, arbitrate, and resolve disputes and complaints. A final FLOC victory from the agreements was the formal elimination of sharecropping, and the guarantee of set minimum earnings, merit bonuses, safe and sanitary conditions, and benefits for all workers.

The contracts with Campbell and Vlastic were only the first, and FLOC soon developed similar three-way contracts with Heinz, Green Bay, and Aunt Jane corporations in Ohio and Utah. FLOC eventually came to represent over 7000 workers under union contracts. Currently, FLOC has moved its focus from the strong unions of the Midwest to the unionized workers of North Carolina, where some of the same companies also have pickle operations.

(Whitlock, floc/nc.htm)

Pineros y Campesinos Unidos del Noroeste (Northwest Treeplanters and Farmworkers United)

PCUN was founded in April 1985 by about eighty farmworkers and treeplanters. Since that date, the union has grown to represent more than 4,200 members. 98% of these workers are Mexican or Central American immigrants, about half of whom reside permanently in Oregon, making PCUN the state's largest Latino organization.

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