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THE FARM LABOR ORGANIZING COMMITTEE AND THE CAMPBELL'S BOYCOTT

BY [unclear] [unclear]

The Farm Labor Organizing Committee (FLOC) is an organization of farm laborers based in Toledo, Ohio, which has been conducting a boycott of Cambell's products since January of 1979. FLOC, which is endorsed by the National Farm Worker Ministry, the United Auto Workers, the United Farm Workers, and the Ohio AFL-CIO, initiated the boycott in order to draw attention to a long but as yet unsuccessful strike by migrant farm workers in the Ohio tomato and pickle fields. In 1978, two thousand farm workers struck 38 growers in Ohio demanding a guaranteed minimum wage, a halt to pesticide spraying while workers were in the fields, installation of plumbing in the shacks in which the growers housed them, fresh drinking water, and toilets at the worksites. The strike was successful to the extent that more than half of the tomato crop went unpicked that year, but was ultimately unsuccessful since FLOC was unable to force the growers and the processors to recognize and negotiate with them.

Reasons for the Boycott—Although the strike was an action directed against the growers, the processors are the ultimate target of both the strike and the boycott. In order to understand why this is the case, it is necessary to look at the structure of the agriculture in Ohio. There are two important elements here; the legal background and the relationship between the growers and the processors. The legal situation is that Ohio, unlike California, does not have an Agricultural Labor Relations Act to protect the right of farm workers to organize and bargain collectively. The relationship between the processors and the growers is a sub-contracting one. The growers, who are small and relatively powerless, are under contract to the processors, who dictate the terms of the contracts which they sign with the growers. The contracts stipulate "what kinds of seeds and pesticides the growers should use, how to cultivate, when to harvest, and most important what price they (the growers) will receive." (*Dollars and Sense*, December 1983). Hence the growers are really subcontractors of the processors, controlling almost none of the decisions regarding production except who they hire to work their fields. Even this prerogative has been encroached upon because, since 1979, Campbell's has refused to sign a contract with any grower who does not have a mechanical harvester. FLOC argues that although the processors do not in fact employ any farm workers, they dictate the wages that growers can pay to the farmworkers by dictating the prices they will pay for the grower's produce. Furthermore, by controlling production so closely the processors are also responsible for working conditions in the fields, including such abuses as the spraying of pesticides while people are working. Although there have been pickets every summer since 1978, the strike has been largely replaced by a boycott against Cambell's products. Campbell's was chosen as the target since it is the largest of the processors in Ohio. FLOC envisions a system of three-way negotiations between the processors, the growers, and the workers. Their immediate demands are union recognition, security for union members, the establishment of a hiring hall, and dues check-off.

Opposition by the United Food and Commercial Workers Union—Given the arrangement between the growers and the processors it seems clear that directing the boycott at the processors, and especially at Campbell's, the largest and most powerful of them, was really the only viable strategy for FLOC to follow. Ironically, this strategy has led to opposition by the United Food and Commercial Workers Union. Members of the UFCW work in the Campbell's processing plants and fear that their jobs might be jeopardized by the boycott. Their opposition was muted somewhat when Cesar Chavez, President of the United Farm Workers of America, affirmed his union's support for the boycott. Chavez argues that Cambell's, worried about its public image, will recognize and negotiate with FLOC long before it will cut back production, if the boycott is successful.

BERKELEY, CA 94720
(415) 642-0323

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, BERKELEY

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Effects of the Boycott—Is there any evidence that the Campbell's boycott is having any effect? One of FLOC's most important tasks has been the development of public awareness of and support for the boycott. In the summer of 1983 they staged a 500 mile "long march" from Toledo, Ohio to Camden, New Jersey, the home of Campbell's headquarters, to draw attention to their struggle. The "long march" received considerable media attention and when the marchers reached Camden, Campbell's said it would meet with members of FLOC. However, instead of sending representatives with the authority to make decisions, they sent people from their public relations department. FLOC members refused to meet with the public relations personnel and the meeting was cancelled.

Since then Campbell's has not relented on its position. However, there are several indications that Campbell's has been made increasingly uncomfortable by the boycott. Their advertising effort has been increased and recently they issued 8 x 10 glossies of model labor camps. They have also begun to fund some social programs for migrant workers, including three day care centers in Ohio for farm workers' children. Another indicator of their discomfort can be seen in the fact that, after the Board of Supervisors of Alameda County and the Oakland City Council endorsed the Campbell's boycott in May 1984, the Vice President of public relations for Campbell's, Jeremiah O'Brien, visited and asked both bodies to rescind their endorsement. Neither organization did so.

Campbell's although concerned about its public image, has shown no signs of being willing to negotiate. The Reverend Jesse Jackson reached this conclusion after he had arranged for talks between Baldemar Velasquez, the president of FLOC, and Jeremiah O'Brien, and after he himself had met last summer in Washington, D.C., with Gordon McGovern, the president of Campbell's. It was this intransigence that led Jackson to mention the boycott during his speech at the Democratic National Convention in San Francisco.

Clearly the Campbell's boycott must gain wider recognition and support if the farm workers of FLOC are going to achieve their goal of becoming the recognized bargaining unit for the farmworkers in Ohio.

--Suzanne Meehan*

**I would like to thank the Rev. Fred Eyster of the National Farm Workers Ministry for a lengthy interview that he kindly granted to me. Any errors in this article remain my responsibility. --SM*

Campbell's products:

Cambell's Soup
Mrs. Paul's Frozen Fish
V-8 Juice
Prego Spaghetti Sauce
Vlasic Pickles
Bounty Products
Franco-American
Pepperidge Farm
Swanson Frozen Dinners
Campbell's Fresh Farm Recipe Pet Food
Godiva Chocolate
Hanover Trail
Pietro's Gold Coast Pizza
DomSea
Lexington Gardens Retail Centers
Herider Farms Gold Nugget
Le Menu

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