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UNITED FARMWORKERS AFTER 25 YEARS OF STRUGGLE

by William Segal

Over 5,000 UFW members and supporters gathered in Delano, California on May 23 to celebrate the 25th anniversary of the union. Speakers included AFL-CIO Secretary-Treasurer Thomas Donahue; Jack Henning, Executive Secretary-Treasurer of the California Labor Federation; and Shirley Carr, President of the Canadian Labour Congress. Teatro Campesino, which inspired a generation of farmworkers and popularized their cause throughout the country in the '60s and '70s, helped to rekindle the spirit of *La Causa* in a lively performance that brought the audience to its feet.

Five trees were planted on UFW property to commemorate five UFW members and supporters who were killed in the struggle to build the union. Surviving family members came before the audience to accept flowers and plaques commemorating those who died. The ceremony was a sober reminder of the difficulties that continue to face the union, which has been forced to take on not only the growers, but police officers, judges, and politicians who serve the state's powerful agribusiness interests.

Damages for Strike Losses? -- A blatant example of grower bias is California Judge Lehnhardt, who dismissed charges against grower foremen who shot and killed UFW organizer Rufino Contreras during a 1979 strike against the Maggio Corporation. Lehnhardt's wife had volunteered as a strikebreaker during the walkout.

In a separate case decided in February of this year, Lehnhardt awarded the Maggio Corporation \$1.6 million in their lawsuit against the UFW, on grounds that the grower suffered lost output during the strike. This figure is greater than the entire annual budget of the union. Unless the UFW posts a bond of \$3.3 million, its assets could be seized by the court. Cesar Chavez has issued an urgent call for donations.

If Judge Lehnhardt's decision is allowed to stand, it could set a dangerous precedent for the entire labor movement. Making labor unions responsible for strike losses would in effect deny their right to strike. UFW lawyers feel certain they can reverse this unfair decision, but only if the union can post the required bond.

Boycott Grapes! -- The UFW used the occasion of their anniversary to renew their call for a nationwide boycott of table grapes. The goal of the boycott is to win a ban on five dangerous pesticides that cause disease and death among farmworkers and their families, and endanger consumers as well: Parathion, Methyl Bromide, Phosdrin, Dinoseb, and Captan. In addition, the UFW wants free and fair union representation elections and good faith bargaining by growers.

Under collective bargaining contracts signed between the UFW and growers during the 1970s, the use of dangerous pesticides was banned or restricted. Since George Deukmejian was elected California governor in 1982 with the backing of powerful agribusiness interests, however, growers have violated and ignored contracts they had previously signed with the UFW. The union charges that Deukmejian has stacked the Agricultural Labor Relations Board with appointees sympathetic to the growers.

Pesticides and Cancer -- An estimated 500,000 cases of pesticide poisoning occur each year worldwide, according to the *Wall Street Journal*. Unfortunately, California Governor George Deukmejian recently vetoed a measure which would have required posted warnings at farmworkers entering fields recently sprayed with pesticides.

Consumers are also at risk from pesticides. High levels of cancer-causing pesticides are routinely found on food reaching consumers, according to a report released May 20 by the National Science Foundation. The report states that eating table grapes will measurably increase the likelihood that consumers will contract cancer. However, environmental and

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, BERKELEY
(415) 642-0323

CENTER FOR LABOR RESEARCH AND EDUCATION
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consumer groups say the study underestimates cancer risks because it includes only 28 of the 53 chemicals identified by the EPA as possible carcinogens. The report also ignores the effects of pesticide residues in drinking water, even though less than 15% of sprayed pesticides reach their target.

Farmworkers and their families are exposed to massive quantities of pesticides day after day, and they suffer the most. California farmworker Antonio DeAnda used to take his son Salvador with him when he worked at the table grape fields at M. Caratan ranches in Delano, CA, where the deadly pesticide Captan was heavily used. Salvador, nine years old, now has cancer. When Antonio told his foreman that he had to take his son to the doctor, Antonio was fired.

Captan is structurally similar to thalidomide, which in the early 1960s caused thousands of European children to be born without arms or legs. The United Farmworkers Union has documented cases of similar tragedies occurring today. In one case, a child was born without arms or legs after his mother had worked during the first three months of her pregnancy picking grapes sprayed with pesticides.

California grapes were sprayed with 344,243 pounds of Captan in 1983.

Six months ago, a 24-year-old farmworker went to work in the cotton fields in the southern San Joaquin Valley. He was spraying crops with the pesticide Dinoseb when a hose broke and the chemical splashed into his eyes. Like many other farmworkers, he was not provided with protective clothing or goggles. His request to see a doctor was denied, and a month later he began to lose his vision.

According to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), Dinoseb causes birth defects and male sterility. Yet Clare Berryhill, director of the California Department of Food and Agriculture rescinded his own five-day-old ban on Dinoseb in September 1986 after consulting with the California Farm Bureau.

California growers sprayed 700,000 pounds of Dinoseb on their crops last year, 17% of it on grapes.

Boycott Gathering Steam -- UFW President Cesar Chavez, Vice President Dolores Huerta, and staff members have fanned out across the country to build support for the boycott and educate the public. The boycott has been endorsed by 22 national and international unions, with some local unions providing office space to aid UFW boycott efforts. Trade unionists around the country have been among the most enthusiastic supporters. The boycott has also drawn the endorsement of political leaders, including Chicago Mayor Harold Washington; Tom Bradley, Mayor of Los Angeles; and Gov. Toney Anaya of New Mexico.

Last August, more than 200 delegates at the UFW annual convention voted unanimously to escalate the grape boycott of all retail stores which sell table grapes.

California grape growers are getting worried, and they have launched a pro-pesticide public relations campaign. Bruce Obbink, President of the California Table Grape Commission, has been dispatched to follow Cesar Chavez around the country in an effort to undermine the boycott. "Pesticides do the same job for plants that medicines do for humans," wrote Stewart Truelson of the American Farm Bureau Federation in an article published last summer.

Growers appear to be calling in political debts owed them by California Governor George Deukmejian, to whom they contributed over \$1 million in campaign "donations." David Stirling, general counsel of the Agricultural Labor Relations Board (a Deukmejian appointee) has recently engaged in personal attacks on Cesar Chavez. Stirling used state funds to contact governors and mayors throughout the U.S. and Canada. These tactics appear to have backfired, however. Stirling's actions have been criticized by the *Sacramento Bee* and Los Angeles Catholic Archbishop Juan Arzube. Two ecumenical religious groups and a *Los Angeles Times* editorial called for Stirling's resignation.

Is the UFW turning the tide against the growers and their representatives in Sacramento? The answer to this question ultimately depends to a great extent on the actions of the rest of the labor movement. One thing for certain, however, is that without more strength in agriculture, labor is fighting with one hand tied behind its back. The growers are among the most conservative employers in the country, and they have provided financing and a political base for anti-labor politicians including Nixon, Goldwater, Reagan, and Deukmejian. Winning union representation and collective bargaining in California's farms and fields will show employers throughout the state and the country that labor is a power to be reckoned with in the '80s.

-- William Segal

Donations may be sent to the UFW at P.O. Box, La Pas, Keene, California 93531. A powerful 14-minute video on the grape boycott, "The Wrath of Grapes," is available from the same address.

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