



Oppression and Farmworker Health in a Global Economy

A call to action for liberty, freedom and justice

By Baldemar Velasquez

Baldemar Velasquez, human rights activist and founder and president of the Farm Labor Organizing Committee (FLOC) AFL-CIO, headquartered in Toledo, Ohio, was born in Pharr, Texas in 1947. His parents were migrant farmworkers, and he began working in the fields at age six, picking berries and tomatoes. He formed FLOC in 1967. In 1983, Mr. Velasquez led a historic 600-mile march of 100 farmworkers from FLOC headquarters in Toledo to Campbell's Soup Company headquarters in Camden, New Jersey. Three years later, the migrant workers, growers and Campbell's announced a three-way pact in which the growers agreed to give farmworkers limited medical insurance, a paid holiday and a wage increase. It was the first three-way pact in labor history.

What follows are excerpts of a talk and singing by Mr. Velasquez at Beyond Pesticides' 21st National Pesticide Forum, Toxics in the Age of Globalization, Austin, Texas, April 26, 2003.

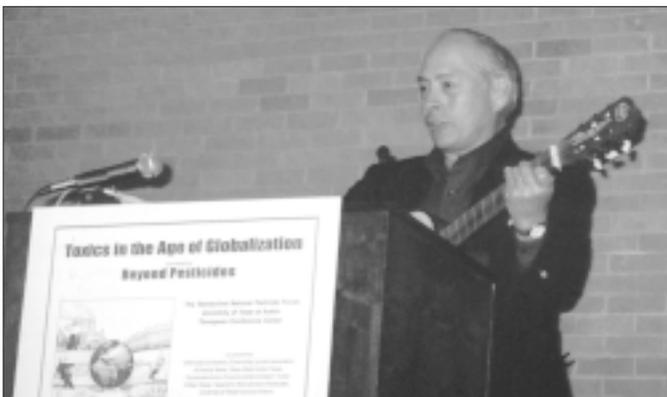
Organizers have to get the word out anyway they can. We talk, we sing, we stand on our heads – whatever it takes. I appreciate the invitation to be here today. I really respect Beyond Pesticides and all the brothers and sisters that work with this group to educate the public about this very serious issue. I want to focus this morning on the broader picture.

Certainly the environmental issues that farmworkers face are not limited to the exposure to dangerous pesticides. Generally, the working conditions of farmworkers are a national disgrace. It is not only disgraceful, but it is shameful for the richest country in the world to continue to ignore and neglect some of the hardest working people in America.

NAFTA & immigrant farmworkers

Traditional Mexican workers who have migrated from Texas, Florida and other places to the west coast, midwest and the east coast to harvest vegetables, are being joined now by a huge wave of immigrant workers from Mexico and Central America who are invading the U.S. This is no surprise considering our trade policies and our economic policies with our neighbors south of our border. We have now the flushing out of the truth that is coming to bear.

When they negotiated the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) with Mexico, just about every Mexican group was in favor of it. I remember sitting in on some meetings with the various unions of the U.S. and Mexico that were arguing about NAFTA. Everybody and their mother in Mexico was for this trade agreement, because they all thought it would attract American dollars and create more businesses and more jobs. Some



Baldemar Velasquez sings farmworker labor songs at the 21st National Pesticide Forum.

(To the melody of "Crying My Heart Out Over You")

*Off somewhere the picket lines not far away
As you left me all alone the other day
I was blind I could not see, that you meant the world to me
And like a fool I stood and watched you go*

*Now I'm crying my heart out over you
As you pick tomatoes for somebody new
Ever since you went away, I die a little more each day
Yes I'm cryin' my heart out over you*

*Well each day I walk out to my lonely fields
And I swear I hear your voice around me still
I miss the sweat of your children's back, with no money in my bank
While I'm cryin' my heart out over you*

*Yes I'm cryin' my heart out over you
As you pick tomatoes for somebody new
Ever since you went away, my profits drop some more each day
While I'm cryin' my heart out over you
Yes, I'm cryin' my heart out over you*

We were singing songs like that the whole way to Camden, NJ. But we decided that all of our English-speaking friends are coming to our rallies every night, so we need to make up a song for our English-speaking friends about the cause. We thought, "Who among the Anglos needs to learn the most about our cause?" We figured it had to be the rednecks. So we turned on the country and western stations, and we picked a love song because the farmers are always talking about how much they love their workers. There happened to be this real popular hillbilly song on the radio those days by this singer named Ricky Skaggs. So we took his song and sort of changed the words around to be about a group of farmworkers who left their farmer to go on strike. So this is the farmer in misery, commiserating with the public about his plight about his workers who have left him to go on strike.

of the biggest supporters of that legislation were the Mexican peasants, the small farmers of Mexico, who thought they were going to export their products without tariffs at the border.

But now the chicken is coming home to roost, so to speak. Now the Mexican farmworkers are turning around, because the trade agreement has devastated the countryside in Mexico. It has devastated the coffee industry, the corn industry, because Mexican farmers cannot compete with subsidized agriculture. So now the Mexican peasants are calling for a repeal and a renegotiation of that trade agreement. And this is true of some of the most conservative organizations in Mexico, like the Confederacion de Nacional Campesina (CNC) that has millions of members. Even they are turning against these agreements. They are beginning to see the immediate suffering that is being imposed upon the people because of our trade policies.

What's happening to those workers? They have to go somewhere to make a living. So they're coming to the U.S., anywhere they can. They're going to the urban areas of Mexico. They inundate the cities, saturate the job market, and there's an economic shift northward to wherever they can find jobs.

The declining U.S. workforce

In America, we have a declining worker population. Even all of our statistical geniuses in Washington are indicating that in the next 15 years we are going to need an additional five million workers, which our population will not generate. In other words, we're going to need a workforce, and we don't have any people being born in the U.S. to grow up to be workers to fill the job market. So we're going to need these workers. America needs these immigrant workers.

Right now, the workers who are coming north have completely changed the demographic of the population in the deep south of the U.S. In North Carolina alone, where we are doing our Mt. Olive Campaign,¹ NC officials indicate there are at least 400,000 immigrant workers, mostly from Mexico, some from Guatemala and Central American countries, in four basic industries: agriculture, poultry, landscaping and construction. Over 100,000 of those are required just for agriculture. And they are all undocumented workers, with the exception of 10,000-11,000 authorized foreign (H2A) workers under the U.S. Department of Labor program.²

But whether you come as an illegal worker or under the H2A program, which North Carolina is the biggest user of in the country, it's a way for industry to attract a cheap exploitable workforce. Other workers, African American and white workers have left those jobs and gone onto better pastures, so to speak. There is no one in the workforce to fill this void, so this immigrant worker population is filling it. You may have heard about the slavery cases of south Florida.³ What is happening there is endemic of what's happening all over the deep south.

We organize a lot of immigrant workers in NC. We have signed up a couple thousand in three weeks. I've asked them their work history and what they've done in the last 16 months, and how they got to the U.S. Invariably, they work in a job that has high turnover in any one of the four basic industries. They fear exposure and getting caught. So when the going gets hot,



FLOC members and supporters rally in Mt. Olive, North Carolina, May 2003.

they don't leave the area, they just move over to another job. Now you are beginning to see them in housekeeping, in the hotel industry, restaurants, all over the place. In the previous 12-16 months, a worker that is currently in agriculture, may have worked in construction and poultry.

The plight of farmworkers

Agriculture is a good hiding place. It is in remote and rural areas, and they are not as exposed as they are in urban areas working construction or something like that. To get here, most of them pay a smuggler or a recruiter from the H2A program. H2A employees do not follow the law the way the program is supposed to run. The recruiter is supposed to pay the workers' visa expenses, travel expenses, food expenses and so on. They don't do any of that. They make the worker cough that money up, and sometimes an additional fee (\$600-3000 per worker, similar to the smuggler's fee) for the "privilege" of being recruited to come work under that program.

Now, you're almost better off coming as an undocumented worker, because if you come under the H2A program, the recruiters know where you are, where you live, where your family lives. If you owe them money, then you're subject to retaliation. You become an indentured servant to these recruiters. The recruiters and the smugglers shepherd them along the way and they get them in the worksite, and supervise them to make sure they are working and their money is getting paid back. So it becomes the old company store routine where you never get

out of debt. This is similar to what happened to the cases that were exposed in south Florida. Only in that situation they made an issue of two or three cases, when the same case could be made for thousands and thousands of immigrant workers throughout the deep south.

The challenge of organizing those without rights

These are the kind of workers that is our challenge to organize in North Carolina. You're talking about organizing a group of workers that have no rights, are invisible, and they fear exposure. So this is an even more difficult task than organizing traditional workers on the job site. The mobility and fluidity of the workforce

makes the effort very difficult. But nothing is impossible. If you work hard enough, and if you do the right thing long enough, good things are going to happen.

People go into these issues thinking, 'well here is our timetable for this, here is our budget for this.' You can't run movements like corporations. It's not about winning or losing. That's not what it is about. It's about doing the right thing. And you do the right thing as long as you are alive.

I ask people, "Who are you?" I mean one of the big problems in our society is the issue of identity— who we are individually, as a people and as a community. We keep redefining ourselves because things change. Certainly in this age

of globalization we need to ask ourselves who we are and who is our community. We have to redefine our community. A community of farmworkers is no longer just a group that came from far Texas to work in Michigan or Ohio or around a particular farm. Now we're being inundated with all of these workers from all of these Indian villages in Mexico. This expanded group of people is our new community, because we all work for the same rich people, the same employers in many cases.

The same companies that harvest tomatoes in Florida harvest tomatoes in Mexico. You go to Mexico's Sinaloa Valley and a lot of those packing sheds filled with onions, cucumbers and tomatoes that they bring to the U.S. have American owners. Instead of growing

tomatoes in the U.S., owners have operations in Mexico. The same goes for a lot of other products.

In the case of North Carolina, they don't have to import the pickles from Mexico. They bring the workers and exploit

**The real economic enemy
is not the farmer, but it's
the corporation that
designed the whole
economic system to take
advantage of [farmworkers
and farmers].**

I Ask People, Who Are You?

Define who you are. Are you a freedom-loving person? Do you believe in ideals? I don't care whether it's for reasons of ideology or reasons of religion that you support a particular cause. When you define yourself, you say this is who I am. This is what I represent. This is what I believe. This is what I profess. Well then, you have to be that person. You have to be that word made flesh in the world. You need to walk it and talk it. If you believe in freedom, then you're walking, talking freedom. If you say you believe in liberty, then you're walking, talking liberty, all of the time. You're not walking, talking liberty as long as you're winning or as long as you're losing. You're walking, talking liberty no matter what is happening in the world. That is the light that you shine upon the darkness wherever you work, wherever you travel, and whoever you meet with. That's who you are.

When I see you, I don't see Allen Spalt.⁴ I see liberty and freedom and justice sitting there in front of me. And he better talk it all the time, because I'm going to remind him. You see, it's not about winning or losing. It's about doing the right thing all of the time. If you do the right thing long enough, then good things will happen – like contracts, agreements, breakthroughs. Those are the fruits of your labor. Those are the consequences of your actions. You don't need to give up hope. You don't need to give up anything.

them here. Everybody and their mother knows that these workers are undocumented. You can't take Miztecos walking the streets of Clinton, NC and mistake who they are. People look the other way. All the sheriffs departments, town cops, judges, county commissioners— everybody who is anybody— knows they are breaking the law, but they look the other way because it's a convenient thing to do and it accommodates their economic system.

Mr. Tom Ridge, Secretary of Homeland Security, is clamping down on all immigrants. They came out with a ruling a few days ago that immigrants can be held without bond indefinitely. Sure it's focused on Middle Eastern people, but anyone who is doing anything, including speak up for their rights, is subject to that treatment because it's allowable under the law now. So we have additional obstacles to overcome to organize these people for one simple thing: the ability to redress their grievances. Now, isn't that an American principle? Isn't that what we say we're supposed to be fighting for over in Iraq? Freedom?

So we have to convince Mr. Ridge, and I don't know how we're going to do this, but we have to think of a way to win him over to our side. If not by pressure, then by convincing

him that there are good reasons why undocumented workers should be legalized with a legalization program set in place in our country so that people that live in our communities have rights.

The first argument that we give Mr. Ridge and President Bush for legalization of all these undocumented workers, so that they can then stand up for themselves and have some ability to redress their grievances, is for homeland security itself. If you want to govern a people, make them do some things and not do some things, first of all you need to know who they are, where they work, where they're coming and where they're going. When you have eight or nine million people in this country that are undocumented and you don't know these things, how are you going to govern them? Plus, you're supporting a whole black market economic system that maintains the whole undocumented worker population with specialists in making phony IDs and ways to smuggle people. You're helping the real criminals do what they do best. But if you legalize the workers, you put them out of business. So, we tell Mr. Ridge and President Bush that in the name of homeland security they ought to legalize all of these Mexicans, Guatemalans, and everybody else who is in our country. Plus, if our great moral President wants to get argumentative about it, let's go and be moral about it.

Walking, talking freedom

I'm also a preacher. The scriptures, from the Old Testament to the New Testament, talk about God watching over three groups of people – the orphans, the widows and the aliens. In the book of Exodus, the book of Leviticus, the book of Numbers and the prophets – we won't even go to the New Testament, Jesus sort of blows everybody out of the water – says we need to treat the aliens in our midst like one of our native born. In the book of Exodus the warning is even more severe. It says don't do any wrong to these people or I will run you through with my sword and make widows and orphans of your children.

So I tell my Christian friends, if you are a follower of Jesus, you do what Jesus said. You do it all of the time, not just some of the time. And when you get tired, are you not going to believe in freedom anymore? If Mt. Olive is too big of a corporation and they fight too hard, are you going to give up? Are you not going to believe in liberty and justice for all? If you're an American and you say these are the ideals that we hold dear in our society, then you need to be walking, talking freedom, liberty and justice for all, all of the time.

Joining with farmers against corporations

Let me address one issue to all of my friends in the family farm movement, the guys that Willie Nelson sings for all the time. From North Carolina to Ohio to Michigan to Indiana, it's those small family farmers that oppress the farmworker.



Supporters of the Mt. Olive boycott march in Mt. Olive, North Carolina, May 2003.

These are the guys whose farms I came to work on as a little kid. They would steal from us, and they would rob us. They were diversified, not only tomatoes and cucumbers, but also sugar beets, corn, wheat and soybeans. I would help many of them bail hay and feed their cows, pigs and horses. These are the small family farmers. But the small family farmer in our neck of the woods has been set into a system where corporations exploit farmers, who in turn exploit farmworkers. Everybody exploits everybody else. We found this a very difficult issue to deal with when we first started organizing, because the anger that we had was sometimes a hatred against that white guy that sat on the tractor and oversaw our work day in and day out.

So we have to reconcile this situation. After beating our heads against the wall on this issue, we would go to the farmer and say we need to improve working conditions and clean up the fields. They would say, well there's only so much we can do. Campbell's Soup Company or H.J. Heinz Company only gives a certain price for tomatoes, \$35 per ton. \$12-14 goes to the worker. Once you pay for the depreciation of the machinery, fertilizer, gasoline and all the other expenses to put that crop in the field, you're talking about a return that's marginal from that price of tomatoes. The farmers told us if we could get more from the companies, then they could do better. When we go to the company, their famous argument, the one we got from Campbell's Soup, Mt. Olive Pickle Company and all these huge corporations, is, "We're not the employer. Go argue with the employer."

Then it dawned on me. It reminded me of when my mom threw bones to the dogs and they fought over the bones. This is what they wanted us to do with the farmer. They

wanted to throw some bones and let the farmer and the farmworker fight each other for that piece of the bone. So I said to myself, this is not going to work. We need to convince the workers that the real economic enemy is not the farmer, but it's the corporation that designed the whole economic system to take advantage of both of us.

We started what many people thought was a crazy campaign that we were never going to win. I sat in the main offices of the AFL-CIO in Washington in 1984 with the number two leader of the AFL-CIO and told him what we were trying to do. I said we are going to demand that Campbell's Soup, all of their growers, suppliers and the farmworkers sit at one table and negotiate one agreement. The guy said it would never happen. Campbell's will never negotiate with a group of work-

ers that are not their employees. And they're telling us the same thing about the Mt. Olive Pickle Company. Mt. Olive is saying, we're not the employer, why are they picking on us? We're not breaking any laws.

Well they can argue all they want and hide behind the fact that they're not the employer, but they are the designers of this procurement system. I mean, you're not going to make pickles with tomatoes, tobacco or sweet potatoes. You've got to get cucumbers. So they create a system to procure these cucumbers. Like Campbell's Soup, like Heinz, like Vlassic Pickle, like all these huge corporations, they source their produce all over the world, not just in the U.S. Mt. Olive, for instance, buys their cucumbers in Mexico, Honduras, India, Sri Lanka and Spain. It's a global procurement system.

How are a group of farmworkers who have no power, no political leverage, no money, nothing supposed to respond to this? Well, is it too much to say that we can be walking, talking freedom, liberty and justice also? That is not just for some white folks to have dominion over us? No, that is for us too.

The gospel through the windows of a migrant labor shack

I was going to tell the speaker last night, don't give up on the right-wing evangelicals, there is a lot of basis for them to be on our side. We can win them over to our side. You just have to speak to them in the language that they understand. There are a lot of reasons why they should be on our side. Certainly, God's word says they should be on our side. I figured this out when I decided that Campbell's Soup is not a monolithic institution that cannot be convinced to do something that they

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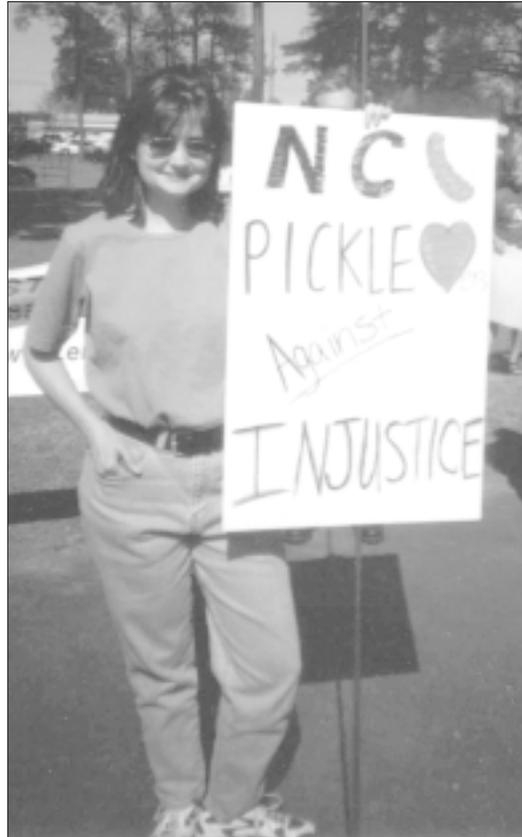
otherwise would not want to do. You just have to find out where their weakness is to tell everybody to get them to do what you want them to do. It's the same thing with the right wing, even the political right wing in this country. There are all kinds of reasons in the world why they ought to be on our side. So don't give up on them.

Some of our biggest supporters in Toledo, OH are high school students who are children of what most people would consider right wing evangelicals. I send my kids to this Christian school, because I believe that these rich, white kids from the suburbs ought to have contact with Mexicans and Blacks and other people. So I send my children to the school. Then, I wondered. This God that I hear the televangelists talking about, who does this God belong to? He doesn't just belong to them. God belongs to me too. God's got the right to speak through me. If he can speak through a donkey and a jackass in the Bible, then he can speak through me. So, I decided, I'm going to tell the world what the Gospel looks like through the windows of a migrant labor shack. And I did.

They made the decision at this school to invite me to speak at one of their first attempts at a diversity assembly for the entire high school and junior high. What a great opportunity. So I told these kids what the scripture says about the orphans, the widows and the aliens. I told them the story of Remundo Hernandez.

Remundo Hernandez was one of these H2A workers that came to work in NC. The heat and the pesticides that had recently been sprayed in a tobacco field overcame him. According to a co-worker, he became nauseous and disoriented and was vomiting blood. The farmer came to the fields after the workers stopped working. The workers had to load up Remundo into the farmer's truck because he couldn't even find the door handle to the pickup. They loaded him in the truck and the farmer drove off with him and after that they had no word from him. He disappeared.

According to one account of this from an interview with the farmer, sometime later the farmer came out of the front



door of his house to see what his dog was barking about. The dog was barking about a human skull under a pecan tree in his front yard. The cops came, gathered the remains and took them to the morgue.

The co-workers of Remundo kept looking for him, and came across a Catholic seminarian in Clinton who had been working with the workers and remembered the remains. He took them to the morgue to examine the clothing and sandals and they recognized them as Remundo's clothing and sandals. There was not enough flesh on the bones to do an autopsy, no vital organs because the field animals had eaten away most of it. That incident happened in 1995. I started telling the story in 1999. I found out who the widow was and where she lived. She lived in this little Indian village in San Luis Potosi, Mexico. I found out she was destitute. He left four children, the oldest of which was 16 at the time.

So I said to these high school kids, would you help me do something for Remundo, his widow and these children? If you do something for these people, you're doing something for the three groups of people that God watches over jealously. How many of you are willing to do that? Everybody in that auditorium raised their hands. So I'm going to ask you to do three things, I told them.

One, you're privileged to eat three meals today. Now

your parents and churches teach you about fasting and praying. I want you to fast and pray for this family for your lunch hour period. And the money you would have spent for your lunch, give to the administrator of the school for a fund for this widow. How many of you are willing to do that? Everybody raised their hand. They raised \$1,000 in one lunch hour period.

The second thing I'm going to ask you to do is go to your parents and your churches, and get air transportation, ground transportation, hotel and food money and come with me to deliver this money to the widow. Eight students answered the call. You have to remember these kids are from pretty conservative families, but when they saw the poverty that

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The family of deceased farmworker Rebano Ramirez, including his widow and five children.

made Remundo take these tremendous risks, they were appalled. These kids from the suburbs of Toledo, OH, who had everything handed to them since the day they were born, go to this Indian village to see this hut made of sticks, with a thatch roof, dirt floor and a rock grill for a stove. The family made tortillas and fed us some frijoles and tortillas for lunch that day. It grabbed these kids' hearts and they came back and told the story.

I asked these kids to do a third thing. I said, "Help me avoid these tragedies by helping me boycott the Mt. Olive Pickle Company, one of the systemic creators of this situation in North Carolina. If we boycott that product and convince them to negotiate an agreement so that these deaths are not happening, then you are doing the right thing and doing the right thing for these orphans, these widows and these aliens. How many of you are willing to stand up with me in front of a Kroger's store on a Thursday, a school day, after getting permission from your parents, to tell people not to buy Mt. Olive pickles?" Over 200 kids came out of that school to join me in that demonstration to initiate the Mt. Olive boycott.

The leaders of the labor movement couldn't believe it. They said, "How did you get the children of these right-wing evangelicals to do a labor demonstration?" I told them the truth and the truth set them free. They are walking, talking freedom. They are walking, talking justice. They are walking, talking liberty. To this day, those kids are some of our biggest supporters. We just had a demonstration in Toledo, March 26, 2003. We had almost 600 people and more than half of them high school students from the Christian, Catholic and public schools.

Again, just the summer before last, we had the case of Rebano Ramirez. Rebano was a worker who was smuggled to come work in the fields of North Carolina. Rebano was overcome by heatstroke. He had all the symptoms, nausea, disorientation and nosebleeds. Farmworkers are regularly denied medical help almost anytime they complain about anything. They just get accused of having a hangover and are told to sit under a tree. That's what they told Rebano, to sit under a tree

– that was his medical help.

When the boss loaded up that evening to go back to the labor camp, he wasn't under that tree, so the boss left without him. His co-workers kept walking back to the field looking for him. This is what they found two weeks later. [He shows the police photographs of a decomposing body.] This is Rebano Ramirez. It took our lawyers six months to get these photos from the cops.

Rebano left a widow and five children, the oldest of which was nine years old. I went to see her too. The school kids raised money for that widow also. We had the Department of Labor do an investigation. It turns out that they weren't even giving these workers water on that hot, humid day. They were selling them

beer. The penalty, the punishment? \$1,800 for violating the federal field sanitation standards. That's it.

We wrote a letter to the editor of the *Charlotte Observer* to expose this tragedy. The editor tells our guy in Toledo that he's not going to print the letter. They ask him why, and he

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says because the farmer is named and it might ruin the man's reputation. We're dealing with a seared conscience in that part of the U.S. toward a group of workers who they feel either aren't human or pretend don't exist, that they can do anything they want to.

Liberty, freedom & justice for all

So you can talk all you want to about liberty, freedom and justice. But until we make it real for the people right under our own feet, right in our own backyards, how are we going to demonstrate for the world that we are serious about liberty, freedom and justice for all? So you see, it's a burden upon all of the people of this country who have even an inkling of these principles to extend this to all of those who are in our communities, to give them respect, to give them recognition as human beings, as workers, as good living people who want to feed and cloth themselves and their families. We're not asking for much, just for the right to live.

We tell people that we're boycotting the Mt. Olive Pickle Company, and people say it's not going to happen. Mt. Olive hides behind this structure of procurement. They're not the employer of farmworkers, they're not violating any laws, and they have received rewards for how they treat their factory workers. That's fine. It's not the issue. The issue is this group of farmworkers that America is ignoring.

Not we've gone around and around about farmworkers for many years. And somewhere, sometime, America has got to wake up and say we cannot allow this to happen in our own country. You're talking a million and a half farmworkers in this country, who have not achieved that liberty, justice and freedom. I know, I am convinced, that everybody – whether you're right-wing or left-wing – should be on the right side of this issue. And if we can keep after them long enough, we can convince them to be on our side.

So I leave you with this challenge. Define yourself. If you feel that you believe in freedom, liberty and justice for all, whatever your philosophy, whether you are left or right, you've got to believe in these principles. Then be those principles. That's my message to you today. And that's why you're struggle is not going to stop after you win this particular fight with this pesticide company or with this rulemaking. It doesn't stop there, because the world certainly is going to continue to gobble everybody up, like they're doing in these trade agreements all over the world.

People are preoccupied with making more money for themselves. The accumulation of wealth without a conscience must be stopped. It is contrary to those philosophies of equality, freedom, liberty and justice for everybody. I don't care how much money you make. I'm not going to tell you that you can't be a millionaire. But I'm telling you, if you make one penny off of the Remundo Hernandez's and Reban Ramirezs of the world, then I'm going to be in your face. Because I believe in freedom. I believe in liberty. And I believe in justice. And that's why you have to be in the face of everybody that does those things, and hold their feet to the fire, and hold them accountable for those tragedies and those atrocities that they impose upon other people. Because that's who I am as an American.

The day that I was proud to be an American was the day I went to Remundo Hernandez's widow and Reban Ramirez's widow and said I am here to extend liberty and freedom and justice to you and your family. I'm going to make sure that justice is done for your family in the U.S., because I am an American and I believe that for everybody, not just somebody.



FLOC staff and members pose for a photo after a day of advocacy work in Washington, DC.

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Endnotes

- 1 In 1999, the Farm Labor Organizing Committee (FLOC) called a boycott against the Mt. Olive Pickle Company after it refused to negotiate contracts with thousands of workers who chose to be represented by FLOC. The Mt. Olive Pickle Co., headed by CEO Bill Bryan, has taken a strongly anti-union stance and refuses to recognize the voice of the farmworkers. FLOC points out it is farmworkers whose labor not only feeds people, but helps the Mt. Olive Pickle Company reap millions in profits, which come at the expense of workers who are denied the right to organize, live in overcrowded and run-down housing, and often not even provided water in the fields.
- 2 Each year, the U.S.' H2A guest worker program allows qualifying U.S. farmers and agricultural companies to recruit and hire foreign citizens to work on their farms as seasonal laborers. H2A is a provision of the *Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986*, which amends the *Immigration and Nationality Act*. H2A workers can only work for the employer that hired them under the H2A guest worker program. If H2A workers are subjected to unacceptable working conditions, they can't quit and then go to work for someone else. They can't form a union. They can be fired for any reason whatsoever. They can't vote. They can either put up with anything their boss demands of them, or be deported.
- 3 One case involved citrus farmer Michael Allen Lee, who recruited homeless people to work in his fields with promises of good wages. However, instead of the usual \$35 to \$50 a day, Lee's workers were rarely paid more than \$10 a day, despite working from dawn to dusk. Mr. Lee was convicted after prosecution officials made use of the 13th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, which ended slavery. In 1999, a total of ten people were convicted for using slavery in two separate cases.
- 4 Allen Spalt is a Beyond Pesticides board member from Carrboro, NC that happened to be sitting in the front row during Mr. Velasquez's talk.

Mt. Olive Pickle Company Boycott



FLOC demonstration urges consumers to boycott Mt. Olive Pickle Company outside of a North Carolina grocery store.

The Mt. Olive Pickle Company Boycott is being organized by FLOC, 1221 Broadway, Toledo, OH 43609, 419-243-3456. For more information on the boycott, see www.floc.com.

The Mt. Olive Pickle Company is a premier packer and a powerful, persuasive force in pickle processing. Its familiar jars of pickles, relishes, and peppers look and taste good – but the label only tells you what’s inside the jar. It says nothing about the workers who harvest the pickles. It’s time you heard about the sweatshop conditions on the eastern North Carolina farms that grow Mt. Olive pickles.

As a harvester of the cucumbers that become Mt. Olive Pickles, you get roughly 65 cents per 33 pound bucket (averaging 6 buckets an hour). Your crew chief often pays in cash without a pay-stub, making it easy to cheat you. You sleep in housing packed with many more workers than humanely fit. Your workplace seldom has a toilet close or clean enough to use or soap to wash your hands. If you’re injured or sick, you rarely find a first aid kit or someone to take you to the doctor. Your crew often shares the same filthy water jug without any cups, if water is provided at all.

Though the company makes millions each year from selling its pickles, Mt. Olive refuses to give the workers who harvest its pickles a voice in contract negotiations. Only an agreement between the company, the farmers, and farmworkers will create a process by which problems can be resolved openly and workers can get their fair share without overburdening already struggling farmers.

What you can do

- 1 Get organized. Form a support committee in your area or work with one that already exists.
- 2 Get your church, union, community group, Girl Scout troop, Elks Lodge, political party, bowling league, or bridge club to endorse the Mt. Olive Pickle Co. boycott by signing a resolution form (available by calling FLOC’s NC office at 919-489-4485).
- 3 Publicize those endorsements.
- 4 Send FLOC scouting reports of where you see Mt. Olive Co. pickles sold-what states and in what stores.
- 5 Picket lines at food stores that carry Mt. Olive Co. products. These include national chains like Kroger Co. stores. In the south, the “house brand” pickles for Food Lion and Harris-Teeter stores are packed by Mt. Olive Pickle Co.
- 6 Write letters to the editor.
- 7 Publicize your activities through the press, church and union newsletters, etc.
- 8 Hand out literature at community events.
- 9 Speak to any organization that will listen; get them to endorse boycott.
- 10 Send a letter to Bill Bryan, Mt. Olive Co. CEO-today. His address is: POB 609 Mt. Olive, NC 28365. Or email him at bbryan@mtolivepickles.com. Or give him a call at 800-672-5041.