



Farmworker Justice and Our Healthy Future

Excerpts from the 26th National Pesticide Forum
March 14-16, 2008, University of California, Berkeley

By Arturo Rodriguez
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We have a saying in our movement that the laws in the books are not the laws in the fields. A great example was a law passed in California six years ago called AB 947, which has never been implemented. Basically, AB 947 provides for pesticide buffer zones around schools, communities, parks and towns. But it's never been utilized. Agriculture commissioners knew nothing about it. The school districts, the superintendents, city councils, mayors and so forth weren't aware. Some had heard about it, but there was no enforcement taking place.

Because of this lack of implementation, Gustavo Aguirre (then with the UFW, now with the Center for Race, Poverty and the Environment) used his organizing techniques that we've all learned, and started going into the fields with the workers and talking with their families. He got them to understand, "Hey, we have this right you know, and it doesn't make any difference what our legal status is, we have this right, and they can't take this away from us." So then they started writing letters, and they started talking to other organizations and building that coalition of folks that believed in what they were doing. They went to the schools, the superintendent and the school board, which of course, was all growers. They went to them, and started putting the pressure on them, and really getting them to understand that "look, we want to see this implemented."

Finally, after a little struggle that took place for a few weeks, they were successful in getting the town of Cutler-Orosi, first one in the San Joaquin valley, to implement AB 947 so that now they have a buffer zone around the town. We may say, "Well, OK, that's one town." Yeah, that's one town, but it gives those folks in that community the faith, the confidence and the hope that they can do something to change their lives. And then, that story gets out. That's why we have Radio Campesina. We can go and talk to everybody else about those kinds of victories, and let them know. We tell them, "Hey, the folks in Cutler-Orosi did this. If they did it, you can do it too."

My organization believes that what really brings about change is going out and working with the people that are most impacted and most affected, and giving them the tools that are necessary to really bring about positive change. That is what has changed people's lives and changed the communities that we're working in. That is what brings about the victories necessary to keep an environmental justice movement sustained.

Sisters and brothers, we have the power. That's what those that came before us - Fred Ross Sr., Dolores Huerta, Cesar and Ricardo Chavez, and many, many others who were willing to take the risk back in the 1950s and 60s - taught us. And it's even truer today than back then, because we have so many more tools today. The Internet is also a very powerful tool in bringing about change. Sounds like something very simple, but man is it powerful.

The Power of Boycotts

One of the things that Cesar always talked to us about, when we first became part of the organization, were the boycotts. We were boycott kids as you call them—that's how we got started, boycotting this, boycotting that—hell, we couldn't eat anything because we were boycotting everything. But it taught us the power of doing those kinds of things. Cesar used to tell us, the power of the boycott is that you can do it all day long. You can do it anytime you want. You don't have to worry about the first Tuesday of November to vote. No, you can vote every single day, and you can bring about change, and it is done nonviolently. That is the beauty of a boycott. We forced the largest agricultural industry in the state of California to sit down and bargain with farmworkers back in the 1960s when nobody ever heard about a union among farmworkers. And so he said, "That's very powerful."

Well, I have grown to learn that the Internet is just as powerful, because you can sit in front of your computer, which most people do anyway, and check out the email that somebody's sending you and boom, punch the button and it's there. We do it anyway,

right? We've learned to utilize that. The way you have impact on politicians is two things—money, and votes. We don't have the money, so we got to look for the votes, and build the pressure.

Immigration Reform Offers Power to Protect

This year, we have to make every effort to get immigration reform for farmworkers. We have been working on this as an organization now for over eight years. In March, I was in Washington, DC meeting with Senator Dianne Feinstein (D-CA), Senator Larry Craig (R-ID) and Congressman Howard Berman (D-CA), and we came to agreement with the growers on an immigration deal. Working on this issue takes leadership and a lot of guts, and Senator Feinstein has been there with us for the last three years doing everything possible to make it happen. So once we heard the growers had agreed to our proposal, the Senator said, "Ok, I'm telling you growers you'd better go out and get every single one of your associations behind this because it's going to take tremendous work to make it happen." And it's true.

We're going to be doing a series of marches and mailings to politicians, putting a lot of pressure on a lot of folks. It's time to make this happen. As you know, farmworkers work hard for you every single day of their lives. They sacrifice. It's the farmworkers that first come into contact with the pesticides. They do it, some of them because they don't really know the impact, but most of them do it because they don't have a choice. It's not their decision to work in the fields. It's their only option. We may say, "Why don't they just strike?" Folks, when you've got families to feed, whether they're in this country or in some other country, you don't have a choice. They're going to do what they have to do.

And it's time for us now to do what we have to do. So that's why we want to have the capacity on the Internet. Because we know we're going to have to flood legislators with all kinds of emails, and faxes, and telephone calls over the course of the next few months

in order to be able get this, to make it happen. Once farmworkers and other immigrants have some type of legal status, then they'll be free to be able to join and participate—even more so than what they do today. They will be free to go out and do what they need to do to not only protect their families and take care of them, but also to protect their communities. So we really need your help on this one. Farmworkers want to feel this time they're not alone. They make the sacrifices for us every day. It's time for us to make some sacrifices for them.

I'll share with you one final story. A farmworker named Tarino Carlos from the San Joaquin Valley joined us on a UFW lobbying trip to Sacramento with his wife Luz. Towards the end of the day we were having a meeting with the Deputy Assistant for the Governor. There were ten of us, and Tarino was the first to tell his story about what it felt like to be a farmworker and some of the problems he encountered. Then everyone else went around the room to tell their story. We were ready to get up and leave, and Tarino said, "Arturo, I want to make one more comment." Everybody sat back down, and Tarino began to tell a story that I didn't even know.

Tarino works for a grape grower in the San Joaquin valley. He is 76 years old. He says, "You know, I've worked all my life in the grapes. I've been a farmworker all my life. Ever since I migrated over here from Mexico. And my wife Luz, she's 66. We don't mind doing what we do. In fact we're very proud of what we do. But I have never worked under a union contract. I've never got a decent wage. I've never had a medical plan. I'll never have a pension plan—that's why I'm still working. I don't get paid holidays. I don't have vacations. And I got to do what that grower tells me to do every day." And he went on, and man, we all just sat there and listened to him. He said, "I know I'll never see the benefits of what I'm doing today. But I know that the next generation of farmworkers and their children are going to benefit from this. So that's why I'm here."

So that's why we really sincerely believe that we can bring about the changes necessary if we join together, work together, and provide workers with the tools that they need. So we can create more buffer zones. We can get rid of the kinds of pesticides and the chemicals and the carcinogens and the teratogens that impact on their children, and also our children. So sisters, and brothers, it's an honor, and pleasure to be here with you this afternoon. We look forward very much to working with you, and we look forward to working for a victory for farmworkers this year in bringing about immigration reform. If we can do that, then the Tarino Carloses of the world—they don't have to continue doing what they are doing every single day. They can get to a point in their lives where they can enjoy life as well, just like each and every one of us do.

Thank you very much. Si, se puede.



Recognized for Dedication to Farmworker Justice

Shelley Davis, deputy director of Farmworker Justice, receives Beyond Pesticides' Dragonfly Award at the 26th National Pesticide Forum

By Shelley Davis

In 1989, Cesar Chavez, founder of the United Farm Workers, went on a hunger strike, not to demand better wages, although those were needed, but to demand that five pesticides be eliminated from grape orchards and the agricultural workplace in general.

These five products were:

- parathion and phosdrin, highly toxic products that affect the brain and nervous system;
- dinoseb, which was shown in animal studies to cause birth defects from a single, low level exposure;
- captan, which in both animal and human epidemiological studies, is associated with increased risk of cancer; and
- methyl bromide, a neurotoxin that is also associated with birth defects and cancer.

Three of these pesticides were eliminated in the course of the next six years: parathion, phosdrin and dinoseb. I and many other advocates worked on these efforts, and it was my privilege to be one of the lead attorneys in the dinoseb case.

But captan, the probable human carcinogen, remains in widespread use. Methyl bromide continues to be extensively used in strawberries and tomatoes, in California and Florida. Nevertheless, it was supposed to be banned worldwide by 2005, under the Montreal treaty due to its ozone depleting properties. Consequently, Cesar's fight remains our own.

One reason that these and other highly dangerous products continue to be used in American agriculture today is that the law, the *Federal Insecticide Fungicide and Rodenticide Act* or FIFRA, governing pesticide use on farms is extremely weak. To eliminate the use of hazardous pesticides on farms, farmworkers must prove that the costs outweigh the benefits. This standard is nearly impossible to meet: The "benefits" to growers from using a particular pesticide are easily stated in dollar terms. But the state of scientific knowledge today is insufficient to allow us to quantify the number of people who will suffer cancer or birth defects



Beyond Pesticides Board President Robina Suwol (left) presents the Dragonfly Award to Shelley Davis (right).

as a result of the use of a particular product, much less put a dollar value on those harms – even when animal studies show a link between exposure to the product and these chronic health effects. Consequently, we have been fighting this fight with the scales tipped in favor of the pesticide companies from the outset. This inequity must change.

We owe it to farmworkers and their families today, and the memory of Cesar Chavez, to change the law and change the reality on the ground – so that no one has to work in an environment where they risk neurological damage, cancer or birth defects when they go to work each day. As activists, we can make a difference!

Finally, it is my great pleasure to accept this award on behalf of the farmworkers I represent, not because of any great accomplishments of the past, but as a commitment to fight this fight until we succeed.

Ms. Davis was selected to receive the Dragonfly Award, our highest honor. The award is presented "in honor and appreciation of Shelley Davis for tireless dedication advancing knowledge and action."