

Social Justice and Food Production

Winning self-determination and justice for farmworkers

By Baldemar Velasquez



Baldemar Velasquez, President and founder of the Farm Labor Organizing Committee (FLOC), delivered a keynote address at the 27th National Pesticide Forum in Carrboro, North Carolina. The following is a transcription of his talk. The speech in its entirety can be viewed at www.beyondpesticides.org/forum/video.

Yesterday and the day before, we were in Vass, North Carolina, where we had over 800 guest workers come in from Mexico. The union is there at every arrival to make sure all the workers are processed appropriately. The pesticide video was shown on the big screen as part of the obligations that the growers' association has to make sure the workers have that information. What was even more gratifying to me was that not only are they getting the education, getting the information, not only are there some laws in this country, that thanks to you have been promulgated in our Congress, but what is even better in this case is that the workers have a union and a grievance procedure to enforce those laws on the job day to day that they themselves can police. When workers do not have a union agreement and do not have a grievance procedure, they have to make a choice between reporting violations and hazards and retaliation from their employer, and getting themselves in trouble, losing their job, and trying to find help, legal services, and somebody to back up their protest. It's not an easy life for the farmworkers if they don't have self-organization.

Friends, we have to take the farmworker question back to the sixties, during the civil rights movement, where the mantra of organizing oppressed and exploited communities was self-determination. It is not enough to give people a standard or a law, because if the people who are supposed to be protected by those laws are not organized to ensure their enforcement, they're just

going to be laws gathering dust on the shelf. Maybe then laws will get enforced once in a while when they catch or fine one person.

So, I want to make that distinction clear. When you talk about agriculture in North Carolina, you can't help but talk about farmworkers and migrant workers, H2A workers [workers defined as temporary under immigration law], guest workers, indentured workers, and slave labor workers; you name it. North Carolina is the pits in this country when it comes to workers' rights. We've got to do something about changing that.

We have to take the farmworker question back to the civil rights movement where the mantra of organizing oppressed and exploited communities was self-determination.

The reason the Farm Labor Organizing Committee (FLOC) came to North Carolina in the first place is because FLOC had successfully unionized the entire pickle industry in the North, including Vlasick pickle, Heinz USA, Dean Foods, Aunt Janes, and Green Bay Foods. We caused a domino effect. When we won that Campbell's Soup boycott, we organized one corporation after another to establish multi-party agreements. We have

to look at the global situation when we look at the rights of these workers and the way in which they are being oppressed and exploited. It is not just pesticide poisoning. It is not just the health effects, that they are living in dilapidated housing with no sanitation and people breaking the sanitation codes. It is a barrage of matters that are imposed on these people's lives because they may be undocumented or coming into the country with an indentured status, and there is no way for them to defend themselves. My friends, it doesn't matter how many great laws we pass. We must find a way to enforce the laws by giving the workers the power to carry those laws into the fields and be able to protest without fear of retaliation and be able to protect themselves. I'm afraid, unless this happens, we're going to come up short in the long run.

When I lived in a labor camp last summer for a week, the workers shared with me the pressures on their lives. Most important to them are their families, even though they have physical ailments. One guy had high blood pressure, another guy was diabetic. We had to watch over them carefully in the fields and make sure they were hydrated and had crackers to eat during the day. Despite all of the physical pressures that they have, and the demands on them, including watching out for the hazards at the worksite, what they were most concerned about, what they had foremost on their minds, were the families that they had left in Mexico.

You know how it is to be torn away from your family for months and months at a time? It's very hard. And to know that your kids are back in Mexico, are back over there, and you don't have the ability to help them with the struggles that they're going through from day to day. The torn apart families are just so devastating to them. You can see it in their eyes. A man nicknamed Ponza was lamenting about his daughter, who he is terribly proud of, and was graduating from law school. He told me the story at the beginning of the week. At the latter part of the week he was looking at his watch during one of the water breaks. I said to him, Ponza, why are you looking at your watch? And he said, "Well, it's about right now that they're doing the Mass in the village before they take the students who are graduating to receive their diplomas." You could tell that he was mourning not being there. He was so proud of his daughter. And he said, "This is the reason why I am here. I need to have her there." Every one of those workers was saying, "I'm here because I don't want my kids to have a dead-end life in Mexico. I don't want them running all over the country. I don't want them coming up here as undocumented people. We don't want to be looking for coyotes [transporters of people across the border] to survive."

We can't talk about a lot of these issues in agriculture and farmwork without talking about the backdrop of this whole immigration debate. It is one of the biggest pressures on these families and these workers' lives. The lack of regulation, the lack of an ability of people to process some kind of legal status to be able to do what you and I, all of us desire to do, and that's the desire to feed and educate and clothe our families. Friends, I don't care what your position is on immigration, but the only law that these people are breaking is that they just happen to do this work without any papers. And nobody's going to blame anyone for going somewhere to support their families if they have to. I don't think there's anybody in this room who, if your family was needy and hungry,

would not do anything and go anywhere to do an honest day's job for some remuneration to be able to take care of your family. And I don't care how many walls people build or how high they build them, they wouldn't be high enough to keep any of you from getting on the other side, if that's what it meant for your family to survive.

Workers' rights have to be part of the language of all causes. We desire it for ourselves, because all human beings want to be treated with dignity and respect. And all human beings want to be recognized for making a valuable contribution to society. This is why you go to study. This is why people covet titles and positions and advancement and reward for doing a job well done. Everyone needs that recognition. Everyone wants it because it makes you feel like you're important, that you're making a contribution to that person next to you. And certainly, it goes down to some very scriptural principals.

Scripture provides guidance

In addition to being a union leader, I'm a preacher, so excuse me if once in a while I flip over. It goes to those basic principles that Jesus taught us all – no disrespect to people of other religions, I love them, I respect them, but I'm a Christian. So I've got to tell you from my perspective – and that is, Jesus says that all the commandments can be wrapped into the first two: *Love the Lord with all your soul, all your heart, all your strength*; and, *Love your neighbor as yourself*. Now, it doesn't say: Love your neighbor if he looks like you. It doesn't say: Love your neighbor if he talks like you. It doesn't say: Love your neighbor if he's the same political party. It doesn't say any of that stuff. Whoever that guy next to you is, that's your neighbor. Whoever you come into contact with, that's your neighbor. The scriptures are very definite, from the Old Testament to the New Testament, calling on us to live with one another.

God first said in the beginning: *Go and multiply and have dominion over the Earth*. Dominion doesn't say go and exploit and poison the earth. It doesn't say go destroy it. It says go have dominion over it. Dominion means having a relationship. It means being in concert with it. It means developing a coexistence. If you have someone that's close to you: If you have a wife, or a husband, or a girlfriend or boyfriend, you want to be in communion with that person. It's a give and take, an equity, an equal respect for one another, a holding up of one another. That's the relationship we have to have with those around us and the earth around us.



Immigration

Let me just respond to a couple of one liners that sort of appeal to the innocent public, because out of ignorance, because we don't study this, we don't live with the realities of the immigration debate like I do every day, day in and day out. It's very clear what we're supposed to do. I don't know why these talking heads on radio and TV, who are ignorant and know nothing, you can name them – Sean Hannity, Lou Dobbs, all these characters – they all give you sound bites that seem inviting. For instance, they say, "These people who are coming illegally, they should do it the way my grandparents and great-grandparents did it." Well, they're talking out of both sides of their mouths, because it's as if history only started 30 years ago for them when they make that comment. Because if we had the same laws in this country today as when their grandparents and great-grandparents came in, about 95% of the people here without papers would be on their way to legalization right now. I mean, it wasn't until the *Registry Act of 1929* that this country decided it was time to register everyone that was in this country. You know why they did that? It was a voter restrictionist measure. They wanted to restrict the Italians, Germans and Poles from coming over at the turn of the century and voting, because they wanted to have control politically.

So you could not vote unless you had that registry, right? You could register for something like \$25 or \$30. If we had that Act now, imagine all the undocumented workers in North Carolina who would be able to vote. Wouldn't that be great? Up until the early 1950s, all the Europeans who were here without record of entry could go to Canada and reenter as permanent residents. Can you believe that? That law doesn't exist anymore, they took it away.

Back to scripture

The scripture is very, very certain on all these specific issues. For instance, I did a chapel service in one of the Christian schools in Toledo, so I went to my concordance and I looked up one word: I looked up the word 'alien.' There are 119 references to the word alien. If I had looked up 'sojourner,' 'stranger,' I could find a lot more. But I looked up all the ones about the illegal person in the community, and there's 119 references. There are three themes, when you read them all. One of them is underscored in the book of Exodus, 22:21, which says: "Do not mistreat or oppress the alien." Alright, that's very clear. The second one is my favorite one. It's highlighted in the Scriptures in the Book of Numbers, chapter 15 verse 15, which says, "Govern the alien with the same laws that

you govern yourselves." Now, our laws today don't permit that. So it requires that we change the laws so that we govern the aliens with the same laws that we govern ourselves. That's my amnesty position. The third one comes from the Prophets, the book of Ezekiel. A whole chapter addresses this issue, chapter 22, a very often used verse by the televangelists. But they talk a lot about, are preoccupied with the sexual sin stuff. You know, that's in there too, but there's only one or two references to it. Most of the references in that chapter have to do with economic oppression and exploitation -usury, excessive interest. Does that ring a bell in today's bank scandals? But it sums up in verse 29: God was mad and was going to destroy the Earth. In verse 30 it says, "I'm calling for a man to stand in the gap on behalf of the land so I won't destroy it." Why was God going to destroy the earth? Verse 29 sums up the whole chapter -because of denying the poor, taking advantage of the poor, and denying the aliens their rights. The three things that God has on his mind relate to freedom. Freedom like yourselves, governed by the same laws as yourselves, and if you mess up either of those two things, I'm going to be really ticked off.

So then we come back full circle here, to workers' rights.

The reality of the fields

Five summers ago, a football player died at football practice from heat stroke. It was in the pages of every newspaper across the country, along with warnings to coaches to hydrate their players. In North Carolina, when you're working in agriculture, you don't know what you're exposed to out there. You go out in the cucumber, tomato, tobacco and sweet potato fields, and you don't know what you're getting on your hands. Last summer, when I was topping and suckering those tobacco plants, in the morning when the dew was still on them, or after a rain, you top that flower off the top and the water goes spraying all over the place. A worker said, "If you get it in your mouth, spit it out, because if not, you're just drinking all that tobacco juice and all that nicotine, and tar and who knows what else is on there." Well, you've got the residue of pesticides on there, so spit it out!

They told me their horror stories of the workers that were there two summers ago, how after the second or third day they were vomiting green stuff; even vomiting the gnats they swallowed. The gnats

are nasty at the end of the road, especially in the wooded area where there are a lot of suckers on the bottom of the plant. Because the deer come out of the trees and eat those little tender leaves on the side of the plant, there are more suckers growing out of the plant. You're trying to breathe. The humidity and the heat are just stifling, and you're sitting there trying to survive while there's no breeze because you're under that tobacco plant. You open your mouth to take a deep breath and all those gnats go into your mouth. They said, "Yeah, they were vomiting green stuff and gnats and everything like that. They thought they were going to die. They called in the growers' association; they want to go home."



The family of Raymundo Hernandez in San Luis Potosi, Mexico.

It wasn't a very good case for a man by the name of Urbano Ramirez, who came as an undocumented worker to North Carolina, a farm here in Nash County. He had symptoms of heat stroke and who knows what else. Maybe he was affected by the pesticides. Pesticide poisoning, said the doctor, is a very difficult thing to know if you're seeing it, because a lot of the effects of pesticides are chronic effects, and it builds up over a long period of time, and you don't know when it's going to hit you. You don't know how long Urbano had been working in agriculture or where he had worked, but he showed up on this farm in North Carolina. He had a brother in Raleigh working construction. There was no job for him at the time, so he said, "I've got to get a job at the farms because I need to send money to my family. They're starving." So he goes to this farm in Nash County, starts working in cucumbers and then tobacco, cucumbers in the morning, tobacco in the afternoon. In the morning he was feeling very, very sick: very nauseous, disoriented, and bleeding from the nose. Clearly, he was suffering from something, either heat stroke or some kind of effects from the pesticides around him. No different than the case in 1995 of Raymundo Hernandez, the man who was written up by one of the Free Press, the community newspaper, the only newspaper that ran his story.

You see, when a football player dies, it's on the front pages. When a Mexican dies, you hear nothing, not even an obituary section on the back page. You didn't hear about Raymundo Hernandez, but that story was as tragic as Urbano Ramirez.

The senseless death of Raymundo Hernandez

Raymundo's skull was found by a dog under a pecan tree. He was barking at the skull and the farmer came out to see what the dog was barking about, and found the skull and called the police. There was not enough flesh left on the body to do a proper autopsy. So they took those bones, and they were forgotten for months here in North Carolina, until I heard the story from workers. I pushed to reopen the investigation. I took a trip to visit his widow in San Luis Potosi. I took high school students with me to teach them about the oppression, and why people are so desperate to come

here. They saw the grueling poverty that his family suffered in that thatched-roof hut with a dirt floor and a rock grill for a stove. Even the dogs were skin and bone in that little village in the mountains of San Luis Potosi.

EPA reopened the investigation. We confronted the Department of Labor because Raymundo was an H2A "guest worker." Where was the supervision? Why was his body left to rot? Why was his body, even when they found the bones, left in a morgue, just sitting there? In his village, now an Indian village, in San Luis Potosi, they have beliefs about the body, that it has to be buried so the spirit can be at peace and not wander lost all over the place. When I met his wife, I didn't realize they hadn't sent the body back. So I asked his wife, who speaks Navajo, and we had to have a translator from Navajo to Spanish, and from Spanish to English for the students that were with me. The wife asked me for a favor. I said, "Sure, what is it?" She said, "Can you see what you can do to bring my husband's remains home?" Now, this was four years after he passed away, and his body was still here in North Carolina. So, we called the Department of Labor, the students did a letter-writing campaign, and within a month we had that body on its way home. We did a return visit to the grave to make sure the body was properly delivered home.

Urbano, when he complained about his heat stroke symptoms to a supervisor, did exactly what a doctor said: go sit under a tree. Then, they moved the crew to the tobacco field. When they loaded up the labor bus at the end of the day, they didn't think to look for Urbano. When he didn't arrive at the labor camp that night, his coworkers began to look for him. They couldn't find him, and after eight days, they decided to go back to the last place they had seen him. So they walked the seven or eight miles back from the labor camp to the field, they looked under that tree, and they found his body decomposed beyond recognition. It was unrecognizable. So here you've got a worker who was a guest worker under the H2A program and a worker who was undocumented. But both are dead just the same in the fields of North Carolina. When



FLOC members march in 2000 supporting Mt. Olive pickle workers in North Carolina.

people die periodically like that here and nobody says anything, let alone does anything about it, friends, this is not what America is supposed to be.

Truth to power

So it is time that North Carolina addresses the antiquated labor relations system of this country, to make it a beacon of hope, the most progressive labor relations state in the nation. Now, people say to me, “You’re crazy! You’re absolutely nuts!” North Carolina is completely opposite what you’re saying. It is the least-unionized state in the country, it’s the most hostile labor state in the country. But you know what, I don’t care who these people are. I feel so passionate and so right about justice for these people that even the most adamant opponent has to be convinced that this is the right and good thing to do that they need to be on our side. See, the objective of nonviolence always is to win the opposition over to your side. And if you can give me a good reason to be on your side, you let me be on your side. But not while people are dying in the fields. Not when people are being mistreated the way they are. Not when people don’t have any rights as human beings. It’s time that we turn this thing around in this state.

Take action

So, that being said, let me tell you one thing that you can do. I’m an organizer. I’ve been called a lot of names, from bad to good, but organizers always ask people to do something. So I’m here to ask you to do something. First thing I’m going to ask you to do is to help me stop these tragedies and avoid these tragedies in the future. Now, in Ohio, we won worker self-determination. We’re able to sit down with the industry, not just with the farmers, employers, because I feel that the farmers are getting a raw deal when it comes to the public debate. Yes, it’s the farmers’ property we work on. They are the people we see day-to-day. They’re our immediate employers. Yes we have employers that are bad employers, but we have many employers who are good

employers who are trying to do things the right way. I can tell you right now that the majority of those growers in the North Carolina Growers Association are trying to do things the right way. That’s why they’re using the guest worker program, because it’s the only way you can bring legal workers to work here in the United States. They’re not employing undocumented people. So I applaud them for that and they’re trying to do the right thing. But they’re struggling with all the regulatory things, too. We’ve got a big debate over the Bush regulations still intact that decimated some of the standards in the guest worker program. We’re negotiating that, coming up with a common packet of what the union and the employers can propose together, as opposed to one pulling this way and the other side pulling the other way. There’s got to be a way to take the next step together.

I’ll never forget the story that my grandfather-in-law taught me. He was a Methodist missionary during the Indian Revolution and he met with Mahatma Gandhi. He would tell me the story of Gandhi’s meeting with the anarchists. Gandhi would say to the anarchists after listening to them for a whole day, “You know what, you have an ideal of being over here, and you know what, I agree 100 percent with you. But the matter is that we’re way over here, and the first thing that we need to be concerned about, all of us together, is the next step we can take together. But until you have recognition and people at the table putting all their trash on the table and saying, “Okay, well, this is the mess, what is the first step we have to take to clean this up?” The first one is recognition of those workers as human beings, and an organization that speaks independently for them to sit down at that table of equity in order to put all the stuff on the table and see what we can start taking care of, one step at a time. We’re asking RJ Reynolds to do just that, my friends. If you want to see the vision of what FLOC is pushing, just go to our website, www.floc.com, and I spell it out there. I have a letter that I wrote to President Obama over this thing.

I say all this for the sake of those families and those children in Mexico and all those people who are part of the industry here, because they are the labor force that is doing your agriculture in North Carolina. The workers who we represent work on farms growing 27 different crops, not just tobacco, not just sweet potatoes, not just cucumbers. Fruits, vegetables, all the way to Christmas trees in the mountains. Okay, so we’ve got this broad array of people and we have a lot of human beings involved in the agriculture picture here in North Carolina that stretches all the way to the villages of Mexico. I want to just play this little song for you, a song I wrote about Urbano Ramirez. [Mr. Velasquez sings “Urbano’s Song.” Watch video of his entire talk, including his singing of this song, on the Videos for Change section of the Forum webpage at www.beyondpesticides.org/forum/video.]

The union makes us strong

When we win self-determination and justice here in North Carolina, workers will have the ability to protect themselves in the field against pesticides, against mistreatment, against dilapidated housing, and not be afraid to report those things because they will have a grievance procedure to protect them from retaliation. We're organizing a march at the RJ Reynolds shareholder meeting on May 6. I'd like to see, like we had last year, 300-400 people on the street when we first marched against RJ Reynolds in October of 2007. The other thing that I want to remind people about: when we did this with Campbell's Soup, it wasn't more than three years later when we negotiated an agreement, the elimination of the use of Maneb and Bromacil, two very toxic fungicides that they use in the preparation of tomato and cucumber crops. We're able to rotate those crops and do it differently so they don't have to use those poisons on those tomatoes, on those cucumbers, and therefore on the leaves that our people are handling with their bare hands. We'll do the same thing in North Carolina. Now, in the meantime, we carry ourselves with dignity and respect for the opposition, because there are a lot of forces that are going to be opposed to this.

They're afraid of things called unions. There's nothing to be afraid of because everybody's a member of a union. A really right-wing Republican whose kid was supporting one of my marches in Toledo, wrote a protest letter to the principal. I called him and said, "I hear you've got a problem with my ministry. And I want to sit down and talk to you about it." He invited me to his country club to have a meeting with him. So I went and met with him at his country club and he says, "Well, but unions, you're doing what Jesse Jackson does, you're just shaking down these companies," and so on. And I said, "Oh, is that so? Well, let me ask you something, Mr. Frank. You're a member of this country club. Why are you a member of this country club?" "Oh, because I do my networking here, I do business deals, I do this and that." Aha, I said, "I bet you're a member of the Rotary Club and the Kiwanis and everything like that." He said, "I'm a member of those, as well, for the same reason."

"Do you pay a fee or dues to be part of that?" "Oh, yes, I've got to pay my fees to this country club, absolutely." I said, "See, all you white guys, you've got all these unions and us Mexicans, can't we even have one?"

I said, "We're doing what you're doing. It's just the American way. If people come together to network and to help themselves, that's what a union is. And I'll tell you what, if I get a personal benefit from that, you know what, I'll sign a contract right now with you." He said, "No, you've got me convinced, I'll support you." I'm telling you, win that opponent over to your side.

Love them all

I'm sure that Susan Ivy, CEO of Reynolds America, the 43rd most powerful woman in the world, according to *Forbes Magazine*, is mighty and powerful. But you know what, I'm not after her power. I'm not after her might. I'm after her heart and her sense of justice, which I know she has. I just have to find it somewhere in there. I don't know what's clogging it up. I'm going to go and find it, and I'm going to win her over to our side.

You win that person over to our side. What a great public relations thing for them, to start dealing with those atrocities in her production chain. It's a procurement system that they design; it's by human design. It wasn't created, it wasn't creationism, it was human design that designed that system of procurement. She sits atop that procurement chain, and she's the one that can address these issues. In all regards, as we go through the struggle, come and join us and have some fun with us. As we go, we show our light to those people who have got their thinking on backwards. When you confront that person who is stingy with you, be generous to them, okay. If they discriminate against you, include them. Because when you include them, they can't discriminate against you. If they're not including you in their thing, that's their discrimination. But if you include them, you respond with inclusion to their discrimination. If they're mean to you, be kind to them. And if they curse you, bless them. If they hate you, just love them. Love them all. Thank you very much.

Baldemar Velasquez

President of the Farm Labor Organizing Committee (FLOC), AFL-CIO, Baldemar was raised as a migrant farmworker. After an incident when his father was cheated out of promised wages in front of the family, Baldemar began organizing workers to stand up for their rights, which led to the founding of FLOC. In 1979, FLOC workers called for a strike and boycott against Campbell Soup. They made many sacrifices for the cause, and suffered many abuses. But after eight years, FLOC, Campbell Soup, and the growers made history by signing three-way labor contracts. FLOC's organizing has also led to contracts with Heinz, Mt. Olive Pickles and others.

