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on both sides of the border**



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"We have learned that, so long as we do not take charge of our own destinies, but wait for someone else to make changes for us, our living and working conditions will remain the same. We have learned that the international corporations that govern agricultural labor have a much greater voice in government than we do. We have also learned that the cause of our problems here is the same cause of labor problems elsewhere in the Nation, but that each area has conditions that are unique and peculiar to its own region and that therefore, the solution to the problems of each area must be made by the people that work and reside within that area."

- Preamble to the Arizona Farm Workers Constitution

INTRODUCTION

The Arizona Farm Workers Union began organizing Mexican farm workers in early 1977. Prior to this there had been a flurry of United Farm Workers (U.F.W.) activity in California, and the beginnings of the same in Arizona. By 1973, however, the U.F.W. had all but pulled out of Arizona. During the period 1973-1977, there was only one major organizing effort. This was the disastrous 1974-1975 citrus strike in Yuma, Arizona. The strike cost an estimated 1.6 million dollars and ended with no contract. The major characteristic of the strike, however, was the division that it created among Mexican-American workers, Mexican permanent resident workers or "green carders" who commute legally across the border to work, and Mexican undocumented workers.

In San Luis R.C., Sonora, directly across the border from Yuma,

most green carders who did not support the strike encountered almost daily fire-bombings of their cars and homes by U.F.W. organizers. When these assaults failed to intimidate green carders or undocumented workers, and failed to stop their entry into the citrus fields of Yuma County, U.F.W. organizers set up what later became known as the "wet line" -- a line of tents set up along the U.S.-Mexico border on the outskirts of San Luis -- to forcibly put a stop to the crossing of undocumented workers whom they regarded as potential strike breakers. Guards manning these tents had no regard for either the destination of the workers or their purpose in crossing the border. No one was to come through.

The "wet line" soon became feared throughout Mexico. Workers who were caught were robbed, some of them beaten and tortured. Local newspapers provided ample documentation, and the U.F.W. message spread quickly across the border: "No 'wetbacks' are welcome in Arizona." However, even though the workers were intimidated, the tactic failed. It resulted in fear, division, and hatred amongst the workers, but no contract.

During this time many of Arizona's U.F.W. organizers and supporters quit because they opposed the methods used during this strike, and it was not until early 1977 that a meeting was arranged with Cesar Chavez to propose a new strategy for organizing Mexican undocumented workers. The result of this meeting was the beginning of the Maricopa County Organizing Project (MCOP).

MCOP was a civil rights organization with a primary concern for the protection and enhancement of the civil and human rights of farm

workers and their families. The goal was to organize workers and to prepare the groundwork for unionization, at which time the U.F.W. was to come in and make them a part of the union. From its inception the Project's philosophy was that no distinction could be made among the workers, and that the only valid organizing method was education.

ORGANIZATIONAL PROBLEMS

The greatest obstacle in organizing Mexican undocumented workers was fear. There was widespread knowledge that any organizing effort was quickly suppressed by the use of the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) for immediate deportation of troublemakers. In addition, the growers had almost total reign in the fields. Workers lived under the very trees that they worked, they depended on the growers for mail, medicines, and transportation. Surveillance was strict, and any outsider caught inside the fields faced a severe beating.

These conditions, however, gave us our first organizing edge. Undocumented workers had by now become a lucrative business for the growers' foremen who bought and sold them to growers in other states. To accomplish this they had organized a network of "coyotes" who paid the foreman \$20.00 per worker. The coyote, in turn, later sold the workers to growers in other states for \$200.00 to \$450.00 each, depending on the distance travelled. The grower later charged the worker for money he had paid the coyote for his delivery to the ranch.

Since most Mexican undocumented workers could not drive or read U.S. maps, the foreman recruited Mexican-Americans to do the job of the

coyote. Some of them were brutal in their treatment of workers and oftentimes robbed them and left them in the middle of the road. MCOP's first job was to overcome that fear and to gain the trust of the workers. This was accomplished by identifying some of the coyotes and bringing them to a "worker's trial" where restitution was fixed for damages.

Gradually, we formed committees whose job it was to outline the worker's living and working conditions and to identify the worker's place of origin. Through the committees we discovered the following:

- That most agricultural undocumented workers in Arizona worked in the citrus industry because its vast orchards and thick foliage permitted workers to hide from immigration authorities;
- That they were almost entirely male, men and teenaged boys whose wives and families usually remained behind in Mexico;
- That minimum wage laws were not observed and that they were paid from \$6.00 to \$9.00 a day for an eight to twelve-hour work day;
- That Workman's Compensation laws were totally ignored and any worker injured on the job was either given liquor as a remedy or sent back to Mexico;
- That they had no sanitary facilities; workers lived under the trees and were subject to: pesticide and insecticide spraying, irrigation of their bedding that lay under the trees, washing and drinking water available only from irrigation ditches which frequently were contaminated with chemicals;
- That the general public had little or no knowledge of them at all; random Border Patrol arrests, while certainly enough to harass the workers and to create a sense of isolated agency activity, never were designed to threaten the overall work force and stability of the citrus industry;
- That they were paid only once a week and that INS agents often hit on Fridays, right before payday. Agents did not collect their pay and the workers did not know what happened to their paychecks when they were deported;
- That a special fee for "old people" was deducted from their paychecks;

- That if they were caught by the INS in Tucson, Arizona, INS agents took their money, claiming it was owed as income tax;
- That they were subject to constant raids by bandits who came to rob them of their savings;
- That in order to migrate they had to incur heavy debts to pay for coyotes that smuggled them across the border. The average fee for the trip to Maricopa County was \$250.00;
- That most of the workers come from the states of Querétaro, Guanajuato, San Luis Potosí, Nayarit, Michoacán and Guerrero, Mexico.

Most workers migrated because they were faced with dire economic conditions in Mexico. Workers came in groups and every group had its natural leader who was in charge of protecting the rest from coyotes and from foremen. In some cases, entire villages were depleted of their male population who migrated first to the North of Mexico in search of agricultural work in the states of Sonora and Sinaloa, and later into the United States. We also learned that most workers were owners of private land or ejido parcels but that either the land was unfit for cultivation or they simply lacked the seed, fertilizer, and machinery to make it productive.

ORGANIZING METHODS

With this information at hand, we proceeded to train some of the undocumented workers as organizers and sent them with a MCOP organizer to the six states already mentioned to educate and form strike committees among the migrant undocumented agricultural workers. The main thrust of the education was to inform them that as workers they were entitled to the same rights and legal protection as every other worker, regardless

of their legal immigration status. We emphasized that they had the right to an established minimum wage, workman's compensation, work safety, decent living conditions, and the right to organize to attain a collective bargaining agreement. In addition, organizers were to set up strike committees and security committees that were to become operative upon reaching the United States.

At first, we were afraid that our organizing in Mexico would encounter opposition from the Mexican authorities, but we soon found out that the migrant undocumented workers were usually the most prominent citizens of their communities and that they enjoyed the full respect of local authorities. In a period of three months, during the summer of 1977, these organizers trained 23 committees whose jobs were to infiltrate, organize, and take direct strike action in Arizona. When the citrus season started in September of 1977, these committees were transferred into ranch committees divided into groups (as they had originally crossed the border) with a central committee composed of the leaders of each group.

MCOP was keenly aware that a strike by undocumented workers could provoke an adverse reaction from the American public. Our strategy, therefore, included heavy media coverage of the working and living conditions in the fields, and a strong legal and political mechanism that would prevent deportation en masse of the workers. With this in mind, we formed strong support committees throughout the state. We contacted a number of attorneys who committed free time to defend against possible criminal and civil actions against any worker or organizer,

and who also took charge of developing a legal counter-strategy in case of a number of contingencies. We also contacted local and national politicians to inform them and lobbied for their support.

We were aware that the growers would attempt to recruit new workers from Mexico to create a surplus of workers. The organized workers took down the license plates of all coyotes in action, traced them and threatened them with legal action should they bring any workers to a ranch on strike. It worked, and during the strike no new workers were brought in.

On October 3, 1977, the ranch committee of Goldmar, Inc., owned by the Matori Bros. and by Robert Goldwater, brother of Senator Barry Goldwater, went on strike. The media responded immediately with wide and extensive coverage, accomplishing part of our goal. Within ten days, however, 260 of the 300 workers had been deported, and two of our organizers were jailed an average of once a day until the strike was won twenty-four days later on October 27, 1977. Our basic organizing tactics have not changed since, except that workers are increasingly identified and trained for strike action in states other than Arizona.

ACCOMPLISHMENTS

Our first, and most satisfying immediate accomplishment was the union of the undocumented workers with local citizen workers. Shortly after our first undocumented worker strike, 3,000 local union workers went out on strike under the Maricopa County Organizing Project. Much

of the funding and organizing for this strike came from the already organized undocumented workers.

On December 15, 1979, the Arizona Farm Workers Union (A.F.W.U.) held its First Constitutional Convention in El Mirage, Arizona. On that day most of the MCOP organizers became organizers for the A.F.W.U. The A.F.W.U. constitution sets up four major committees composed strictly of workers as the main bodies governing the Union's business. Article III of the constitution sets out the Union's objectives as follows:

Section 1. The Union shall represent and defend all member-workers without regard to legal status, race, creed, sex, national origin or political belief.

Section 2. Our community and work areas are plagued by discrimination, unemployment, governmental abuse, dire poverty, and lack of education, good nutrition, medical care, legal services and decent housing. Additionally, many of our members face cultural and language barriers in dealing with our environment. It shall be the main objective of this Union to change these conditions for our members through the organized and united struggle of our workers with other Unions and Community Organizations elsewhere who think as we do.

Section 3. Many of our members are constantly faced with deportation, separation from family, incarceration and/or harassment by employers and government police solely because of their immigrant status. It shall be the objective of this Union to seek full human, civil, and constitutional protection for these workers.

Section 4. Throughout the years the Arizona farm workers have been unable to fully organize and correct their socio-economic and political problems, due to lack of local authority to enact their own work plan and policies. It shall be the objective of this Union to follow a policy of democratic Unionism with a national common policy and a regional control over the regional group's local economic and political affairs.

Much of what we learned in our organizing efforts was that the Mexican undocumented worker in this country differed very little in

economic, working and living conditions from the workers in Latin America. We are all subject to the same underlying disease: the inhumane and ethereal transnational corporation that has regard only for profit. We therefore sought to strengthen ourselves by joining with others who were undergoing a similar experience. We did this on the local and regional level, and also helped organize the National Workers Conference on the Undocumented held in Washington, D.C. April 8-12, 1978. In this way workers not only made direct linkages with other groups throughout the nation, but also met with many U.S. Senators and Representatives, including most of the Hispanic Caucus and Senators Kennedy and DeConcini. Also, for the first time, undocumented workers went to the White House to confer about their problems with a presidential assistant.

One of our main objectives was to internationalize the struggle of the undocumented. This was accomplished by organizing and participating in the First International Conference in Defense of the Full Rights of Undocumented Workers, held in Mexico City April 28-30, 1980. This conference was the result of years of meetings between the Arizona Farm Workers Union and labor unions, community, legal and religious organizations in the United States and in Mexico. The conference adopted a Bill of Rights for Undocumented Workers, a series of resolutions, a List of Recommendations, and a Plan of Action. Most important, the conference brought about the formation of an International Coordinating Committee composed of over 60 United States and Mexican organizations committed to the organization and defense of the undocumented worker.

We have already mentioned that the reason the Mexican worker

migrates to the U.S. is that he is forced to do so by economic conditions in Mexico. To alleviate this, and to instill self-sufficiency in the workers, A.F.W.U. demanded, as part of its collective bargaining agreements, an economic development clause that requires each grower to pay ten cents per hour, per worker, into a special economic development fund that is to be used exclusively for regions where the workers come from. The money is administered by a board made up of the workers themselves, and in the summer of 1980 they channelled \$45,000.00 into four areas in the States of Sinaloa, Guanajuato, and Queretaro.

The workers have achieved a high level of awareness of the political clout that they can exert when they act as a Union. For instance:

- In 1978 about one hundred undocumented workers held a picket line against the Bishop of Phoenix in protest of the Bishop's policies toward them;
- The same year workers held a sit-in at Governor Babbit's office until the Governor met with them, listened to their complaints, and offered some help;
- During the A.F.W.U.'s latest strike against Fletcher Farms in the summer of 1980, over 200 undocumented workers marched through the major streets of Phoenix in protest against inhumane treatment.

Every A.F.W.U. contract has an education and training clause that provides for the education of workers and financed by the growers. This money is used to pay for educators who hold classes in labor camps and in the fields on basic reading and writing in both languages, and on workers' contractual rights. Education is also given on basic organizational tactics, including driving and map-reading to avoid exploitation by coyotes when workers need to travel around the city, or to migrate. Union workers have identified and, in many cases, provided testimony

against major smugglers in both countries. Training is also used to form migrant organizing committees for other parts of Arizona, as well as in other States. The Union has educated the American public and helped to change perceptions of the undocumented worker by constant exposure of their plight through strikes, broad media coverage, and meetings with various groups.

Finally, undocumented workers have held strikes all over the State of Arizona, as well as in Florida and Washington, and have working committees in four other States. In addition, workers have signed three collective bargaining contracts, and have established and administered, in addition to the Union, a service center with over 20 staff members, a clinic that serves all farm workers and their families, the Economic Development Corporation, and a national civil rights organization called the National Organizing and Training Project.

CONCLUSION

The Arizona Farm Workers Union knows that our work has just begun. The majority of undocumented agricultural workers are not yet organized, and events and special interests of the governments of Mexico and the United States may drive an already complicated situation to a contorted solution. The problem of the undocumented worker is for us a very simple one. The undocumented worker comes here because he cannot make it economically in Mexico, and because there is a demand for his services in this country. The solution? Improve, through unionization, the working and living conditions in this country in order to make the now

available jobs attractive to unemployed U.S. citizens, cutting, thereby, the demand. Without the demand for his services, the Mexican worker will have to stay in Mexico and confront his own government for an economic solution to his problems.

As for our beginning with the United Farm Workers, shortly after we won our first strike we received orders from Cesar Chavez asking us to stop all our organizing efforts; we refused, and became independent. We believed then, as we do now, that the trained and conscious undocumented worker will play a major role in the organizing of all agricultural workers in Mexico, and in this country.