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(Staff photo by Gordon Klog)



The frustrations of poverty

Farm workers push again for wage hike; hunger strike set

Union calls for dialogue with growers

By TONY SEMERAD
Of the Herald-Republic

Union leaders for farm workers began a three-day fast Monday to coincide with a convention in Yakima of the state's tree fruit industry, calling for a "friendly dialogue" with growers on issues like minimum wages, worker health benefits and pesticide use.

As attendees of a convention of the Washington State Horticultural Association met a few blocks away, union supporters and their families gathered Monday at St. Joseph's Catholic Church in Yakima for fasting, reflection and a rally speech by Bill Nicacio Sr., vice president of United Farm Workers of Washington State.

"Being a farm worker shouldn't be a sin or a source of shame," Nicacio said in Spanish to about 30 rally participants, not all of whom are fasting. "Farm workers should be able to be proud of their work, to be completely



NICACIO

FINCH

equal to any other kind of workers in dignity and respect."

Nicacio and others cited claims of low wages paid to farm workers, harsh working conditions and jeopardy of pesticide exposure as well as reduced access to health care as reasons for protest and reform.

"We're hoping to take a new direction," said George Finch of Centro Campesino, a support organization for the UFW, which claims 2,500

members. "It's not a question of facts. It's a question of what the facts mean."

Representatives for growers groups have called the UFW's claims untrue, saying the regions' orchardists pay some of the highest wages in the state's farm sector and that they have accorded close attention to improving work conditions.

Meanwhile, in an open letter to policy makers for the state horticultural association, the state apple commission and the Northwest Horticultural Council, Finch said, the farm workers union is asking tree fruit industry officials to consider:

- Encouraging orchardists to pay wages equal to at least \$7 per hour, and to support a hike in the state's minimum wage.

- Agreeing to implement hygiene practices — including facilities for washing, showering, and clothes laundering and changing — in orchards.

- Developing a policy to extend health benefits to farm workers.

- Adopting a pesticide reduction program that specifies chemicals to be phased out of use and strategies of alternate pest control methods to replace them.

With tightening federal regulations and insect resistance already reducing the number of pesticides available to growers, Finch said, the tree fruit industry will have to come up with its own chemical reduction program anyway. Concern for health risks pesticides may pose for orchard workers, he said, should make getting such a program more urgent.

As to the costs of these measures, Nicacio said apple growers have amassed healthy profits this year, netting between \$100 and \$180 per bin. They also appear willing to pay some \$18 million into the coffers of the state apple commission, and to raise money for legal actions in connection with news reports on the

alleged harmful effects of the growth retardant Alar, Finch noted.

The number of resident farm workers in the Yakima Valley — now estimated at between 20,000 and 30,000, most of them employed by apple growers — is increasing, Finch said. Hourly wages for tree blossom thinning and branch pruning have averaged \$5, he said, and harvest pay, between \$5 and \$8 an hour.

Finch said the "less-than-survival level" of those wages and the hard, injury-prone nature of the work have combined with a lack of health benefits and limited access to medical care to produce a social crisis.

"The problems and the divided nature of the Valley can be most visibly seen in the city of Yakima, where almost two separate cities have emerged, a poor and problem-infested east side and a more affluent west side," said the union's open letter.

The 50,000 farmworkers who work in Washington State's apple orchards are asking for assistance from the Hispanic community. The apple industry is able to raise and spend over \$18,000,000 a year in advertisement to promote the Washington apple, and the industry through the Washington Apple Commission spends \$500,000 specifically to target the Hispanic community. Why can't the Hispanic community show its consumer power and send a message to the apple industry ONE LESS APPLE A DAY until the industry policy makers negotiate with its workforce to improve working conditions and wages.

Read the enclosed information and take the pledge - to Eat One Less Apple A Day.

FACT SHEET

TAKE THE PLEDGE TO EAT ONE LESS APPLE A DAY

Support the fifty thousand farmworkers who work in Washington state apple orchards.

Farmworkers who labor in Washington's apple orchards are subjected to a systematic poisoning process. The apple orchards use the largest amount of pesticides, and from 12 to 16 different toxic chemicals are used in every phase of the production of the apple, from the onset of blooming to storage in the warehouses. This six month spraying process is also a process whereby workers who are thinning and harvesting apples are subjected to pesticide exposure almost on a daily basis through residues on foliage and drift.

Over 80% of the workers in the state of Washington who were exposed to pesticides were exposed in the apple orchards (acute exposures).

The majority of the workers who thin apples commonly experience such health effects as headaches, dizziness, nausea, skin, eye and throat irritations, flu like symptoms and allergies. Workers say the problems result from the pesticide residues which are dislodged while they are thinning and get into their system. The same problem exist to lesser degree while picking apples.

In spite of the daily exposure, Washington's orchards do not provide workers any means to wash off residues and pesticides (wash, shower facilities) or take it off their clothes. Consequently workers may be transporting pesticides into their homes possibly exposing the whole family.

Apple workers who conduct thinning and pruning activities are only paid from \$4.25 to \$5.00 an hour in spite of the skills required for this work and the risk of injuries and pesticide exposure.

Most of the farmworkers in the state of Washington earn most of their wages in the state's apple orchards. They can work up to six months in the orchards conducting such work as pruning, and harvesting apples. The average farmworker in the state of Washington only earns from \$6,000 to \$8,000 a year.

The Apple Industry raises over eighteen million dollars (\$18,000,000) from individual growers in order to advertise and promote Washington apples. In other workers, each apple grower contributes about \$4.00 a bin to the industry for advertising purpose, almost half of what they pay workers to pick a bin of apples.

The Washington Apple Industry spends five hundred thousand dollars (\$500,000) a year to promote Washington apples within the Hispanic communities of this county, even though they pay the Hispanic workforce sub-poverty wages and subjected them to continual pesticide exposure.

The Apple Industry which brings in over \$400,000,000 a year has a corporate structure which makes policy for the industry (Washington Apple Commission, Washington Horticultural Association).

Washington State Apple Commission
Washington State Horticultural Association:

We are taking the pledge to EAT ONE LESS APPLE A DAY. One less apple a day will keep the doctor away from farmworker families in the state of Washington who are constantly exposed to pesticides while working in the apple orchards and jeopardizing their health for sub standard wages.

The Hispanic culture is rooted, in part, in the history and struggle of the farmworker family. As part of this family we are joining their voices and asking that the industry develop policies which will improve the health and well being of the over fifty thousand farmworkers who labor in the State's orchards.

We find it very hard to ascertain why an industry which can raise and spend over \$18,000,000 a year and spend it to promote the goodness of the Washington apple cannot provide workers an environment free from pesticide exposure and wages which are commensurate with the hazards and dangers entailed in this work.

As Hispanics we would rather the industry spend the \$500,000 it now uses to convince us how good Washington Apples are to improve wages and provide a safe workplace for farmworker families. At this time we cannot see the Washington Apple as a good product when the workers who cultivate and harvest this product must endure constant pesticide exposure without adequate protections and are paid below poverty level wages.

Until the industry adopts the following policies our message to the Hispanic people in this nation will be ONE LESS APPLE A DAY TO KEEP THE DOCTOR AWAY FROM FARMWORKER FAMILIES.

- Adopt and implement A Pesticide Reduction Policy.
- Set a wage structure which for a thinning and pruning which is commensurate with the dangers inherent in such work and which allow families to escape poverty.
- Provide workers with hygiene practices as showers, wash, and change facilities which will reduce the effects of pesticide exposure and prevent workers from transporting pesticides into their home and possibly exposing their family.
- Support farmworkers collective bargaining.

NAME	ORGANIZATION	CITY	STATE

When you return to your project or program, could you please have people send a letter or sign the petition. Please return it to Centro Campesino P.O. Box 800, Granger, 98932. We will send it off to the Commission. If you wish to write a letter, the name and addresses of the organization directors are as follows:

Tom Hale
Wa. St. Apple Commission
2900 Euclid
Wennatchee, Washington 98801

Frank Delong
Wa. St. Horticultural Association
P.O. Box 136
Wennatchee, Washington 98807

Again, though, please send a copy of the letter to Centro Campesino so that we can gage the effectiveness of the campaign.



Apples ready for shipment: Free-trade talks could make Mexico's 80 million residents the state's No. 1 exterior market. (Staff file photo)

Mexico could offer markets, competition to Valley growers

By DAVID LESTER
Of the Herald-Republic

The Yakima Valley stands on the threshold of dramatic changes in the marketing of many of its products, creating new opportunities for some commodities and potentially troubling problems for others.

The source of the impending changes has been under the industry's collective nose all along. It's Mexico, where a change in government philosophy could make our southern neighbor with its 80 million residents Washington's No. 1 exterior market for apples, pears and other fruits.

Mexico also could become an even greater competitor for markets for labor-intensive, warm-weather vegetable crops now grown here, such as asparagus.

The breakthrough began with Mexico's decision to join the worldwide General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade and will culminate in the planned start of talks for a free-trade agreement among Mexico, the United States and Canada.

Such an agreement was reached between the United States and Canada in 1988.

Congressman Sid Morrison, R-Zillah, said the wide disparity between the United States economy and that of Mexico will be a major point of discussion when talks begin in June, involving the three countries and simultaneous discussions between Mexico and the United States.

There also may be discussion of immigration and drug trafficking during the talks.

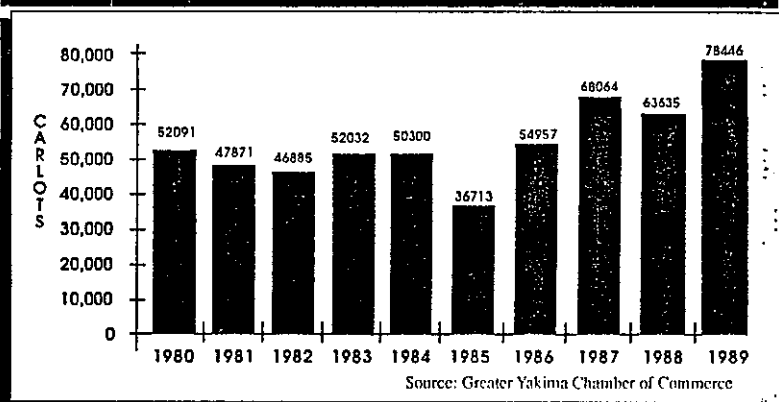
A North American free-trade zone would create an economic unit of 360 million people with production of \$6 trillion.

Morrison said the concept is attractive because such a zone could better compete with the projected unified market in Europe as the concept of a worldwide market continues to evolve.

There is no likelihood that an agreement would create a truly unfettered free-trade zone. Like the Canadian agreement, existing tariffs would likely be phased out over a period of years and could be reinstated, called a swap-back provision, in case of a sudden drop in prices on either side of the border.

Morrison wants to consult with commodity groups in his district before he takes a position on the

TOTAL APPLE SHIPMENTS BY CARLOTS (1,000 BOXES)



agreement. "We will have to look at it from each commodity's point of view. We will have to reach a balance," he said. "The general feeling is in this kind of world we are headed into there will be a lot of open-market competition. There is no place to hide anymore."

"Ultimately," Morrison continued, "The countries with the better technology will produce a better product at a competitive price."

The Washington-Oregon Asparagus Growers Association hasn't taken a position on the trade agreement. Manager Mike Harker said the association is reviewing the ramifications with a trade specialist.

"If the agreement is structured properly and includes better access to other markets, Harker said, asparagus growers might not be damaged.

"If we were comfortable about gaining generally better access overall, I don't think we would have a problem with other countries being granted access to our markets. What we get anxious about is when

access to our market is a trade-off in the war on drugs or some other sort of thing."

Some in the apple industry are more than guardedly optimistic about the prospects of open markets in Mexico, where domestic growers produce 20 million boxes of apples per year that do not approach the quality of this state's fruit.

The problem for Washington marketers has been the existence of Mexico's licensing system. Importers must obtain a government license to import apples. Although such licenses have been advertised as being available, they haven't been issued.

With Mexico's membership in GATT, the barrier has begun coming down, bringing dramatic results in some areas.

There has been a marked increase in Washington pear shipments to Mexico over the last three years. Figures for the trade year through Feb. 1 show exports to Mexico have increased from 14,916 cartons during the 1987-88 season to 436,100 cartons by Feb. 1 during the 1989-90 season.

Full-season sales more than doubled between the 1986-89 and 1988-90 seasons to 1.1 million cartons, said Keith Mathews, manager of the Yakima Valley Growers-Shippers Association.

Limitations imposed by the licensing system have put a lid on apple imports. Sales have grown to 95,000 cartons so far this season, compared to slightly more than 2,500 cartons three years ago.

Terry Elwell, Washington Apple Commission Export Manager Terry Elwell said our southern neighbor has the potential to be our largest export market. It likewise would dwarf Japan.

"The good news is it's a hell of a market. The bad news is it's not a done deal," Elwell said. "For the sake of the growers, I'd love to see it happen; nothing would please me more. The commission has done the reconnaissance."

Chris Schlect, president of the Northwest Horticultural Council, said the fruit industry would be a net winner "by a large margin" if a free-trade agreement were to be negotiated.

CENTRO CAMPESINO

NORTHWEST CHICANO RADIO NETWORK

P.O. BOX 800

GRANGER, WASHINGTON 98932

(509) 854-2052

January 9, 1991

Washington State Apple Commission
Washington Horticultural Association
Washington, State:

On behalf of the farmworker community in this State and our Hispanic friends and families in the United States, we are asking for a direct meeting with your organization's representatives in order to discuss in good faith the issues and requests cited in the farmworker's community open letter to your organization (See attached copy). Since your organization has decided not to respond to the valid concerns and problems of the apple industry's workforce, and since the signal you may be giving is simply that you don't recognize or perhaps even care about the obvious suffering endured by farmworkers who labor and toil in this state's orchards, we strongly believe that it is imperative that a face to face meeting be conducted in order to obtain a committment from the industry that they will address in a positive manner the wage and working condition problems faced by the workers who labor in one of this state's largest industry's.

All of us know first hand the problems encountered by farmworkers who labor in the orchards, and many of us have committed our lives to assisting farmworker and Hispanic families. Consequently, we have serious problems with the industry's policy of benign neglect towards its workforce. It is simply a brute fact of life in the farmworker community that working in the apple orchards takes its toil on the worker's health and results in an impovershed life style. Although the workers must endure constant pesticide exposure, the ever present threat of injuries, the long term health effects from pesticide exposure, and constantly climbing and working on ladders during all kinds of weather, they still are paid wages which are not comensurate with the dangerous nature of this work as well as the skills required of such work.

It seems that the industry's only responses to the worker's plea for improvements is simply denial, silence or empty platitudes. Why is it that an industry which raises and spends over \$18,000,000 a year in order to advertise and promote the

Washington apple can refuse to support an increase in the State's minimum wage, and even deny its workforce hygiene protections from pesticide exposure which all professionals are saying are necessary to have in the orchards. How can we view the Washington apple as a desirable and healthy product when the production of the apple causes so many health and financial problems for farmworker families.

The Hispanic population is the largest growing population group in this country, especially in the West and Southwest. Many of us have our roots in these Southwestern areas and are still working with many organizations and individuals in these States on issues common to the Hispanic community. Many businesses like yourself are trying to tap the buying potential of this fast growing market. In fact, the apple commission is spending \$500,000 dollars a year in order to promote the Washington apple to the Hispanic community. What are we to tell our friends and families about the Washington apple and its effect on the Hispanic and farmworker community in this State when apple workers are not being paid a livable wage and are endangering their health working in the orchards producing a product which is promoted as being conducive to good health?

Quite frankly, we are beginning to feel that one less apple a day will keep the doctor away from farmworker families. This is the message we feel we may have to tell our Hispanic friends. We would like to tell them a different story but the industry's current practices and policies towards its labor force leaves us at this time with little else to say. However, we hope a fruitful meeting with the leaders in the apple industry will enable us to also extol the virtues of the Washington apple.

We would like to meet with you by April 1st in order to resolve the problems stated in the worker's open letter. Specifically, we are requesting the industry to committ to the following:

- Support the worker's request for hygiene practices which all hygienist say must be provided in places like the apple orchard which use so many toxic chemicals.
- Adopt and implement pesticide reduction policy.
- Support increase in state minimum wage.
- Support collective bargaining act proposed by farmworker community.

These requests are very reasonable, and given the fact that the industry can raise over \$18,000,000 a year to advertize and promote the Washington apple, they would not put an undue financial burden upon the industry.

Respectfully Submitted,