

Keep the Union at Bay

The Racial Dimensions of Anti-Union Practices in US Agriculture and the Long Fight for Migrant Farm-Labor Representation

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6 The Affective Dimensions of Farm-Labor Organizing

Summary 6.1 The Union Is Us. – 6.2 The Affective Dimensions of Farm-Labor Organizing.

We're privileged to be part of this great organization that helps us defend our rights. I know that each season we get closer to realizing our dream for a better quality of life for ourselves and our families.

Eli Porras, FLOC Board member

6.1 The Union Is Us

Over the past decades, FLOC has tried to oppose the subaltern status of migrant workers in agriculture with social awareness and solidarity at the grassroots level. This endeavor has created a wide basis of social support constituted by thousands of consumers, students, labor and church groups throughout the nation. Over the years, thousands of people on both sides of the border have started supporting the union. Ken Berger and Ernesto Reza (1994) argue that there are several fundamental causes for the success of a social movement. In the case of FLOC, the subaltern conditions of migrant workers played an ambivalent role in this sense. While on the one hand below-poverty wages and sub-standard living conditions made many workers "cautious about doing anything that would cause them to lose the meager subsistence they already have", on the other hand "they also provided a reason for actively seeking reforms" (Berger, Reza 1994, 131). In fact, the union itself is composed of migrant farm-workers who consider union organizing as sort of a mission. FLOC President Baldemar Velázquez is member of a Mexican farm-worker family who grew up watching his parents suffer the injustices of migrant workers. Inspired by the work of Cesar Chavez, Gandhi, and Martin Luther King, he vowed at an early age to change the living conditions of his community. Like Baldemar, many FLOC organizers were born into a farm-worker family. Roldan came to the United States as an undocumented worker during the 1980s when he

was in his mid-thirties. After working as a farm-worker for many years, he obtained amnesty in 1986 under the *Immigration Reform and Control Act*, and became a union organizer. Santiago shared a similar story. Santiago paid a coyote to cross the border and worked as a farm-worker in Ohio for three years to pay off his debt. Eventually he became an organizer with FLOC, crucial in enforcing recruitment standards for farm-workers. L. had also been working in the fields since she was just four years old.

I was born in Mexico, with two brothers and two sisters. My dad had been coming to the States since he was young, since he was 16. After he got married he would come to the States to send money home. When I was born my mom left and she came to the states with my dad. She was insecure about what my dad was doing here. She thought 'well, if he can earn enough money then the two of us can earn even more money.' So she left and for the first year and a half she was in the States. My grandmother took care of me and my sisters for that time. Then she came back because she couldn't stay away from her children. It was too hard for her. But then when I was older we had the necessity again. My mother wasn't willing to separate the family anymore. Neither was she willing to let my dad come by himself. So she said we put up with what we have in Mexico or we all go together. So we did. We crossed the border with me and my sister. That was before my mom had another baby. My little brother was only eight months old then. Me and my sister, we crossed the river. We had a coyote [that] smuggled us. He was a friend of my dad and he smuggled us from the river to - I don't remember where because I was too young. My mum had my baby brother in her arms and we walked across the river. And of course the smuggler had... My dad had Dora. Dora is my sister's name. My dad had Dora on his shoulders holding on to a rope where I was and my dad was holding up mom too... We got across and we landed in a very dark place where I guess people welcomed people that crossed and... We crossed the big river and we landed in Harington Texas. My older sister and my middle brother came later. They borrowed papers from another two kids that were around the same age group so they crossed like that. We were in Harington for a while but we didn't have much work. So we run up to Ohio for the first time to pick cucumbers and tomatoes. [...] We used to... back then there was no daycare program in Ohio so my mom would take us all and she would just take a sheet and put two sticks on the ground and she would make like a cover for the sun and that's what we did, while we were working my little baby brother would stay there. He was five then and he used to say "I'm not working" and so his job was to take the water to us while we were working. I was out there all day and of course I'd sit down a lot... [laughs] It was hot but I started receiving my first paycheck when I was 12 and I was going to school.

The difficulties that many organizers experienced when they were farm-workers became their strongest motivation for changing the conditions of farm-labor. As L. said: "When you grow up like that, you grow up angry". The union is a way "to turn that anger into motivation". In general, this motivation was vital to overcome a number of obstacles in guest-worker organizing. In fact, farm-workers are traditionally considered as one of the hardest categories to organize. "Dispersion [of employment] is no doubt one of the principal reasons for the failure of hired farm-workers to organize into unions" (Morin 1952, 34). Unlike union organizing in the industrial sector, organizing in the countryside has to deal with the geographical distance between workers. Workers live far away from each other and have very little mobility. Therefore talking to the workers requires long hours spent driving just to reach a handful of remote camps and speak individually with a dozen workers. While this is "just" a logistical difficulty, farm-labor organizing is also characterized by several psychological barriers. As Alexander Morin has explained (1952), farm-workers are typically identified with farm-owning, rather than farm-working. The hope of escaping wage employment in agriculture often results in a general hostility towards union membership. Generally speaking, "joining a union with fellow farm-workers" is not one of the main "long-term aspirations for farm-workers", argues Morin (1952, 43). In the case of Mexican farm-workers, resistance to union participation was made even harder by "pride", a national trait that FLOC national coordinator often mentioned as being one of the main deterrents to union membership. As L. explained, pride had been a problem with a number of workers, including her father.

It was 1986 when we met the union. My dad was skeptical and proud. He thought that if anything bad happens we should be strong enough as a family to go through it on our own. We don't need other people to come through our businesses and lives and things like that. So they had a hard time convincing him to become a member. Every year after the pickle season ended we went down to Florida for the oranges and the strawberries. The stream was like that: from Ohio to Florida. For 12 years we did the stream. Eventually after working under union contract and working in camps that were not under union contract my dad could see the difference. My dad could see the difference in pay, in housing, in everything. So after a while he was convinced that the union was a good thing, and he eventually he explained and asked for support from his fellow workers. He grew really strong and was a camp representative for 5 years. The camp representative works like a union steward. At every camp they have their representative, he is the one that talks to the union and that talks to the workers. My dad was the first person that a union came to when they needed to communicate something.

Another problem was fear. "A work force that has so little to gain and so much to lose from talking about their workplace problems with 'outsiders'" is very difficult to organize (Riley, Hogan 2002), explained former FLOC organiser Nick Wood. It is necessary to establish a relationship of "trust" with the workers, but such a relationship is often difficult to achieve due both to the high rates of turnover amongst the workers, and to the fact that very often the season is over by the time such a relationship is established. Commenting on the many difficulties facing farm-labor organizing, Harvard economist John Dunlop declared in a 2001 interview that helping FLOC to establish Collective Bargaining relationships with cucumber and tomato processors and farmers in 1986 was one of the three major challenges of his career, the other two being dealing with a student strike at Harvard in 1969 as acting dean, and resolving a jurisdictional dispute in the construction industry in the 1950s (Kaufman 2002, 332). Proud, vulnerable, politically and geographically isolated, and accustomed to being "used by everyone since coming here" (Riley, Hogan 2002), farm-workers constitute a challenge for unions. Given the obstacles that characterized the campaign, the successful achievement of a labor contract required total commitment on the part of the organizers. In fact, as B. explained during his interview, FLOC's secret is very simple: you have to give "every ounce of yourself".

6.2 The Affective Dimensions of Farm-Labor Organizing

Fear and pride are not the only affective dimensions of farm-labor organizing. Courage and self-sacrifice are just as important. As B. said,

They [the workers] have to see that you are there and that you are not going anywhere. [That] you are committed to them. When the workers don't trust you, when they don't trust your intentions or what you are doing, then you're fighting a lost battle. You have to earn their trust. You have to earn it by being there every day and by giving them every ounce of yourself. Just giving yourself. It's about showing people through action and through, through action, and then getting results from that action, that it's possible. You have to show people that when they do get together and they do something and they win it then it's possible. Step by step the people realize that they can: they can do anything, they can do what they want, they have the power in their hands. If you give yourself to it, when you give yourself to it, it's just a matter of time. Just a matter of time. [...] It's a process.

In contrast to a common utilitarian model that grants the emergence of a movement in terms of the basis of opportunity, FLOC's lack of resources



Figura 21. Boycott, North Carolina. *Boicoteo, Carolina del Norte*

pushed the union to create a model that is characterized “more by solidarity and principle than by individual self-interest” (Fireman, Gamson 1979, 10). As Bruce Fireman and William Gamson argued (1979, 10), self-interest models cannot explain why ideologically committed movement participants may be willing to sacrifice their time, their welfare, sometimes even their lives, to a cause. In fact, the organizers spoke of self-sacrifice rather than self-interest. Throughout the campaign, the organizers worked tirelessly, from early in the morning until eleven or midnight every night, seven days a week without a break. As Berger and Reza argue (1994, 134):

Over the years there has been some self-selection in the people who have been at the core of FLOC. We have observed a pattern of self-sacrifice in their commitment to the cause. They have also had a high level of tolerance and patience in following their vision throughout the long struggle with many obstacles.

This was precisely the case anytime I was visiting the camps. Each day they would drive for hours and hours, trying to reach the greatest possible number of camps, in every county of North Carolina. In this sense, organizers endured any discomfort for the campaign, putting their personal needs after the needs of their mission, in a practice that often resulted in sleep deprivation and an unhealthy diet. At the same time, union representatives were exposed to political challenges – arrested or threatened with detention, when not explicitly intimidated by violence. In this sense, the conditions of farm-labor are undeniably difficult not only for the workers, but also for the organizers themselves who experienced high rates of exhaustion and burnout. The ability to work through these challenges created a strong bond of solidarity and commonality with the workers. As B. said, that is what a union is about.

A union is when the people take the power into their own hands when they are highly organized. Taking power into their own hands and using that power to get the things that they need. I don't consider myself to be union smart [...] I didn't even know what a union was before I worked with the UFW. And I don't consider myself necessarily to be 100 percent pro-union, there are a lot of unions that I don't like. But with FLOC, I've seen what it means to be committed to a community, working with a community, building strengths; that's what a union is: sacrifice and working together to do whatever you need to do to make your vision come true, whatever that vision is.

In this formulation, a union is not merely an institutional actor; it is a process of mobilization through which different social groups become one political subject committed to create new social relations of production. When asked what a union is, B. said:

A union is movement: movement, movement, movement! It is not a business. The workers are not commodities. They are everything to me: I learn from them, I learn a lot from them just about what's important and what's not important, about their spirit. They inspire me, they teach me, they school me, they are [pause] my comrades, my friends... everything.

A union is based on principles opposite to those that define capitalism: not utilitarianism but solidarity, not competition but cooperation. Asked what the workers represent, A. said

they are everything to me, you know they are everything. That's what I'm here for. I feel blessed to do this work. My job as a union organizer is always to find new ways for the workers to speak their voice. My job is to be there, open the door for the workers get them in the door and have

them share their truth. So for me it's like the workers are everything. They are the movement. My job as an organizer is to let their voice be heard and amplify their voice. They inspire me, teach me, school me, they are like... My comrades, my friends... all of that.

From this perspective, FLOC seems to be a movement whereby the notion of identity is developed with respect to common needs, common beliefs, and an overreaching commitment to the cause. The element of irrationality that characterizes social movements in FLOC's experience translates into a superior experience characterized by a strong sense of religious faith and ethical belief. In this context, L. defined the union as being almost like a "mission" for social justice. "I was put on this earth for my people, I need to be there. My faith keeps me going", she said. This element of faith ensured FLOC great solidarity at the grassroots level. Inspired by non-violent leaders, the FLOC President believed that consumers' awareness and solidarity could become a catalyst to mobilize popular support in churches, schools and communities throughout the country. In time, FLOC ceased to be merely a union and became a movement, committed to enforce the right to self-determination of all those who have been marginalized and exploited. In this sense, the FLOC campaign was often perceived as a mission for social justice. Asked about how and why the workers became involved with the campaign, their answer largely reflected this sense of social responsibility.

What the workers are doing in North Carolina is they are trying to unite, because if we unite we can bring about a proposal, a proposal for a new code of conduct for the growers and we can interrupt this system of discrimination. We want to educate Americans and teach them that we are humans. We want to change their ideas about racism and the racism in their culture. [...] I never have been afraid because I believe in justice. I believe in justice and I believe in the struggle. The workers are able to defend themselves. It doesn't matter if they speak the language. It doesn't matter if they are being discriminated or exploited. They are able to defend themselves. So I will not stay idle and I will keep working for change. I want to change the economic life of Mexico. I want to change farm-labor in the US, making sure that our rights are respected. I want there to be a change in the way in which I am treated as a worker. That is what I want to change. And as a union I know that this can be done. This can be done together. Now there's a lot to be changed. That's why we will continue. We will continue until we change it. [Alejandro]

In respect to the union my goal is to contribute to eradicating and ending all injustices. Unfortunately in Mexico we don't have ... or I do not consider myself to be someone that can obtain a work without recom-

mentation. If they know me they know that they hire me because I can work 100%. I don't want to be hired by people that give me a job out of charity or want to "help" me. I want to be hired because I can do the job. Whatever I have I have because I've gained it merely with my work, only by my struggle. *Mieramente lucha*. [Maurice]

The reason why I decided to work with the union is that I have a fighting spirit. *Tiengo un espiritu de lucha*. The thing is that it is very hard to work with the growers. It's hard. What we want is for the growers to recognize our labor. Besides paying us a just wage, we want them to appreciate our job. We want them to see that we are working with love and dedication. We are giving them all we can and we want them to recognize this. We want them to see this, we want them to treat us like people, not like animals or machines. Is that too much to ask? I just want my employer to recognize that I am as human as he is. And then we want to have the opportunity to come back even if we get sick, even if we get injured. We musn't live with the uncertainty that if anything unpredictable happens we may be blacklisted or punished. If I am a member of the union and I pay my quota then they have to call me back. I do this because I want to live well. I want to be treated well I don't want to be threatened or intimidated. If I do something bad I want them to tell me not to shout at me. I am tired of hearing constantly that we need to do whatever they tell us because otherwise they deport us. I am tired of hearing this and I want this to change. [Demetrio]

Often times, FLOC organizers and workers use a religious language to define their work with the union. Farm-labor organizing is a mission to them that requires a certain faith and spirit. To some extent, they perceive themselves as an embodiment of historical necessity, individuals called on earth to pursue a greater good.

We will continue struggling and give it all we got, because there is still work to do. We will never forget those that started this, those that made it possible, those workers and leaders who were in the front lines of the campaign and the union. Right now we do it for ourselves and for our families in Mexico, but we also sign this contract for the future generations who will follow us in the coming years. *Hasta la Victoria, somos hermanos en la lucha*. [José]