

## A day in the life of a FLOC organizer

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Frank Velásquez ended the call on his cell phone and breathed a heavy sigh. He looked across the table at Diego, another staff member from the Farm Labor Organizing Committee's field office, and spoke in Spanish in a tone that expressed pure exasperation. Diego then turned to me and translated what Frank had said. "Angel," an undocumented tobacco farmworker, had informed Frank that the labor camp where he and co-worker "Eduardo" had resided for five weeks had been cleared of immigrant workers. Thirty tobacco workers had allegedly been forced to live inside three dilapidated mobile homes in a makeshift trailer park on the outskirts of Goldsboro. Crew boss Jose Velásquez had moved those 30 workers to a different location, Angel said. Word of the move came directly from one of Angel's former colleagues still living inside the camp.

Frank Velásquez pushed the plate of fajitas away. He no longer had an appetite. I peered outside the window of la Cuarta Restaurant, a converted mobile home, and could see Angel and Eduardo standing in the parking lot of la Tienda on the opposite side of US Highway 117. They were waiting for a ride from Angel's cousin in the afternoon heat. A day that had seemed to hold the promise of justice for Angel and Eduardo ended abruptly, with yet another disappointment and even more frustration for FLOC.

Less than an hour prior to Angel's call, Frank Velásquez and I had spoken directly with Regina Luginbuhl, bureau chief at the NC Department of Labor. We both described for Luginbuhl the living conditions that we had seen for ourselves earlier that day at the makeshift trailer park adjacent to the old Coastal Plains Cotton Gin off Highway 581 outside Goldsboro. We related to Luginbuhl the testimony of Angel and Eduardo, who said they came forward to tell their story because they felt they needed FLOC's protection. Angel and Eduardo said they had confronted crew leader Jose Velásquez after he refused to pay them their wages. Velásquez threatened their lives, they said, and they left the camp. Angel said they hoped that FLOC could stop a man like Jose Velásquez from abusing their fellow workers. Angel described horrific living conditions: 30 people sleeping on the floor of three trailers with no beds or bedding; no working appliances; one shower; no operating toilets; no way for workers to wash their clothes. The workers were being treated like animals, Angel said.

As if that wasn't bad enough, Velásquez charged \$50 a week for food and \$20 for rent. Since the workers only got three days of work per week at \$6.50 per hour, there was very little money left after they paid their expenses. When Velásquez communicated the death threats, Angel and Eduardo filed criminal complaints against their former crew leader with the Wayne County Sheriff's Office. Their court date is currently set for May 25. Luginbuhl listened closely and expressed great concern over the workers' plight. Velásquez then got on the line and recounted a confrontation he had with Jose Velásquez on May 8. Frank had picked up Angel and Eduardo and brought them back to the camp.

Frank said Jose rushed up to the driver's side window and told him he was trespassing on private property. Frank explained he was delivering the workers back to their residence so it was lawful for him to be on the property. The confrontation ended without incident, but it became clear to Frank that Jose didn't want anyone from the outside to see the living conditions of the farmworkers. Luginbuhl appeared moved by our statements and said she would direct one of the bureau's field agents to go to the FLOC office to meet with Frank before heading out to the camp to investigate. The conversation with Luginbuhl offered the first glimmer of hope on a day filled with bad news.

Five hours earlier, two agents from US Immigration and Customs Enforcement had interviewed Angel and Eduardo for more than an hour. Around 9:15 a.m., Special Agent Frank Gomez emerged from the office where the interview was conducted and announced no arrests would be made that day. Gomez said there was not enough evidence at this time to arrest Jose Velásquez.

Detective CB Congleton of the Pitt County Sheriff's Office also participated in the interview. Congleton, a human-trafficking investigator with Pitt County, spoke with FLOC president Baldemar Velásquez for several minutes after Gomez made his announcement. Congleton ended his conversation and passed the cell phone back to Frank, who handed it to me. "It really upsets me. Here's their chance to nail this guy," Baldemar said. He thought it was problematic that the FLOC staffers were not allowed inside the room with Angel and Eduardo during the interview. Baldemar then told Frank to contact the Wayne County Sheriff's Office and ask for them to be present when Frank confronted Jose about the stolen wages.

The sheriff's office informed Frank that he needed a "claim of delivery" form signed by the clerk of court before they could escort someone onto private property.

So the five of us — Frank, Diego, Angel, Eduardo and I — drove down to the Wayne County Courthouse to get the form. A bureaucrat in the clerk's office told us that the only way Angel and Eduardo could recover their belongings and their final pay would be to file a claim in small claims court. The cost to file a claim: \$91. The cost of a writ to compel a sheriff's deputy to accompany the workers: \$40. The clerk said it would take at least a month for them to retrieve their belongings.

"This is the injustice of the entire system. The rules are stacked against you," Baldemar said on the phone afterwards. "This is the way Reynolds grows their tobacco."

On May 6, FLOC staged a protest against Reynolds American in the streets of Winston-Salem during the cigarette maker's annual stockholder meeting.

FLOC is demanding that Reynolds put more resources in its production chain to help improve the conditions of immigrant farmworkers.

"You see that we are all alone," Frank said. But then we got an idea. If we could find out the name of the person who owned the trailer park, we could find out the owner of the tobacco farm and tell them about the conditions of the workers. That person might know the name of the grower, and we could then contact that person. A quick check of tax records gave me a name and an address. I made the call and got an answering machine. Five minutes later, my cell phone rang. A woman, who identified herself as the wife of the property owner, said she had no knowledge of a group of tobacco farmworkers living on the property.

She said I must have written down the wrong address. She claimed she had never met anyone named Jose Velásquez.

When I described the trailer park — five old trailers beside an old cotton gin — she said it sounded like her property. The tax records were clear. The woman I was speaking with was the owner. And it was hard for me to believe she had no knowledge of 30 immigrant farmworkers crammed inside three trailers on her property. She denied knowledge of the labor camp for 10 minutes, presenting FLOC with yet another dead end. This 10-minute conversation revealed another aspect to the immigrant farmworkers' situation I had not previously realized.

These injustices do not occur in a vacuum. People could stand up for these exploited workers, but instead it seems some would rather profit from their suffering.

At the end of the day, it was hard to say if Angel and Eduardo were any better off for coming forward. Undoubtedly, it took great courage to do what they did. Angel and Eduardo said they were going to try to find work, but weren't sure how. In the meantime, they plan on staying with Angel's cousin. Eduardo said they came to FLOC because they believe the labor union will ultimately bring them justice.

As I turned north onto US 117 around 3 p.m. that day, they were still standing in the parking lot of la Tienda, staring down the two-lane blacktop, waiting.