

National Farm Worker Ministry

* an interfaith organization supporting farm workers as they organize for justice

* member organizations include nearly 40 national, state and local religious bodies

BACKGROUND FLOC CAMPAIGN and REYNOLDS AMERICAN

Conditions for Tobacco Workers in the Southeast

Each spring tens of thousands of workers arrive in North Carolina and other parts of the Southeast to begin preparing the fields and planting tobacco.

These farm workers are routinely exposed to pesticides in the fields, but are rarely provided with protective clothing. Further, housing often lacks adequate shower and laundry facilities to wash off pesticide residue. Farm workers have little or no access to basic health services, or access to a telephone to seek assistance for pesticide poisoning. The majority are not covered under Workers' Compensation Insurance.

In addition to pesticide exposure, low pay for long hours in the hot sun, substandard housing, and lack of access to health care, the workers who pick tobacco also suffer work related illness from the toxins in tobacco.

Green Tobacco Sickness (GTS) is a highly prevalent occupational illness whose symptoms include nausea, vomiting, headache dizziness, abdominal pain and difficulty breathing. GTS also raises body temperature, increasing susceptibility to severe dehydration. In the past several years nine farm workers have died working the fields of North Carolina, most due to heat stroke. Several of those deaths have occurred in the tobacco fields.

Farm Labor Organizing Committee (FLOC)

With the help of concerned consumers and people of faith, the Farm Labor Organizing Committee (FLOC) won the first union contract for farm workers in North Carolina in 2004 when they signed an agreement with the North Carolina Grower's Association and the Mt. Olive Pickle Company. The contract covered approximately 8,000 workers who pick cucumbers, sweet potatoes and tobacco. However, the great majority of North Carolina farm workers have not yet attained basic workplace rights.

FLOC began a campaign in the fall of 2007 to win a similar agreement for the thousands of workers who pick tobacco for RJ Reynolds. The goal is to improve wages and working conditions and provide the workers with a process that enables them to enforce those improvements themselves through a labor contract.

Farm workers are excluded from the National Labor Relations Act, and there are no laws in most states compelling companies to respect their right to organize. Thus public support has been critical to the success of farm worker campaigns for justice.

RJ Reynolds Tobacco Company

RJ Reynolds Tobacco Company is the second largest tobacco company in the United States, manufacturing about one of every three cigarettes sold in this country. Reynolds American is the parent company of RJ Reynolds Tobacco. In 2007 Reynolds American had revenues of \$9.02 billion.

RJ Reynolds has the economic power to change the conditions for workers. Big tobacco companies have a monopoly on the procurement system for tobacco, as well as the marketing and distribution of their products. They determine what price they pay farmers, which directly affects the pay and conditions of farm workers. While profits are increasing for tobacco companies, partly due to international sales, prices paid to tobacco growers have decreased. US growers previously received seven cents of every dollar spent on cigarettes in the US. Now they receive two cents or less. With the growers' facing a shrinking economic pie, RJ Reynolds itself must be involved to effect improvements for the workers.

At the May 6, 2008 RAI shareholder meeting, a resolution was introduced which would require the company to set up a human rights protocol for the workers in all parts of its supply chain in the countries where it does business. The resolution received 13% of the votes, a very significant percentage for a company opposed resolution. At the meeting, Ms. Ivey, Chairman, President and CEO of RAI, who had thus far refused to meet with FLOC, said they were continuing to evaluate the situation but would not commit at that time to a meeting.

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