



Farm Labor Organizing Committee, AFL-CIO
1221 Broadway Street, Toledo Ohio 43609
(419) 243-3456
www.floc.com/

A New Campaign in the South

Baldemar Velásquez
President of FLOC
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It always gives me a heavy heart when I write about the necessity of organizing farmworkers. The first thing that comes to my mind is the widows and children of the workers who are deceased. Workers who died for no good reason by totally preventable causes. The tragic deaths of at least 4 workers, that we know of, who died of heat stroke this past summer in North Carolina sadly means more forlorn faces of children who will no longer have a father who will help nurture, support, and provide the necessities of life to grow, learn, and teach them to survive in this unforgiving world.

The deaths this summer bring to mind the death of Urbano Ramirez. Perhaps you have not heard me speak about Urbano. On June 26th, 2001, Urbano Ramirez Miranda, a 34 year old farmworker from Guerrero, Mexico died while picking cucumbers on Jake Taylor's Farm in North Carolina. Suffering symptoms of heat stroke, he sought help from the field supervisor. While the rest of the workers were transferred to a tobacco field, Urbano was told to sit under a tree. He was left there as the supervisor didn't bother to look for him when he loaded the bus to return workers to the labor camp. Two weeks later, co-workers found his decomposing body under the same tree.

Urbano's story painfully illustrates the inhuman working conditions and outright disregard that migrant workers face every day. Every ounce of food that is on our tables, that feeds our families, that provides the nutrition for our children to grow up healthy and strong, is made available by the toil and sweat of these men and women. Yet, while they pick all the food that we eat, they go home and fall asleep with empty stomachs. They struggle with working conditions and living conditions that any decent person would agree no human being should be forced to endure. Over the last thirty years, with the help of supporters like you, the Farm Labor Organizing Committee has devoted itself to organizing farmworkers to end this injustice.

Many of you are aware of our breakthrough agreements with Mt Olive Co and NCGA. While these agreements are important vehicles to avoid the tragedies and deaths by neglect, we are called upon to challenge the deplorable conditions of the broader workforce that remains voiceless, powerless, and invisible to mainstream America. This is an area where “angels fear to tread,” forgotten by the Civil Rights movement, left unorganized by the labor movement, and essentially neglected by the Christian church with its moral voice and prophetic ministry. These conditions scream out for righteousness and the rising up of all people to proclaim “freedom for the captives.” We must have the courage to walk together, hand in hand, carrying the message of justice, manifesting the freedom God has promised with His sacrifice on Calvary.

The challenges we face are large. We must see this new initiative in the south through the lenses of the immigration crisis. We must throw ourselves into the broader struggle of all immigrant workers. We need to bring the deplorable status of the nearly 400,000 undocumented people in North Carolina and the perhaps 2 million more in the Deep South to the attention and scrutiny of the

eyes of the nation. We must share with the nation how these conditions are inhuman, immoral, and therefore must end!

If you look at the photos of Urbano’s children above, I pray and hope that they will not grow up with such bitterness and hatred of Americans and that they learn that there are Americans who do care and want to take up the banner of righteousness and justice on their behalf and those who are like them. With the continued help of good people like you, FLOC can march forward with a new campaign that stops the senseless death of fathers and mothers and organizes migrants into a collective voice that demands to be treated as human beings.