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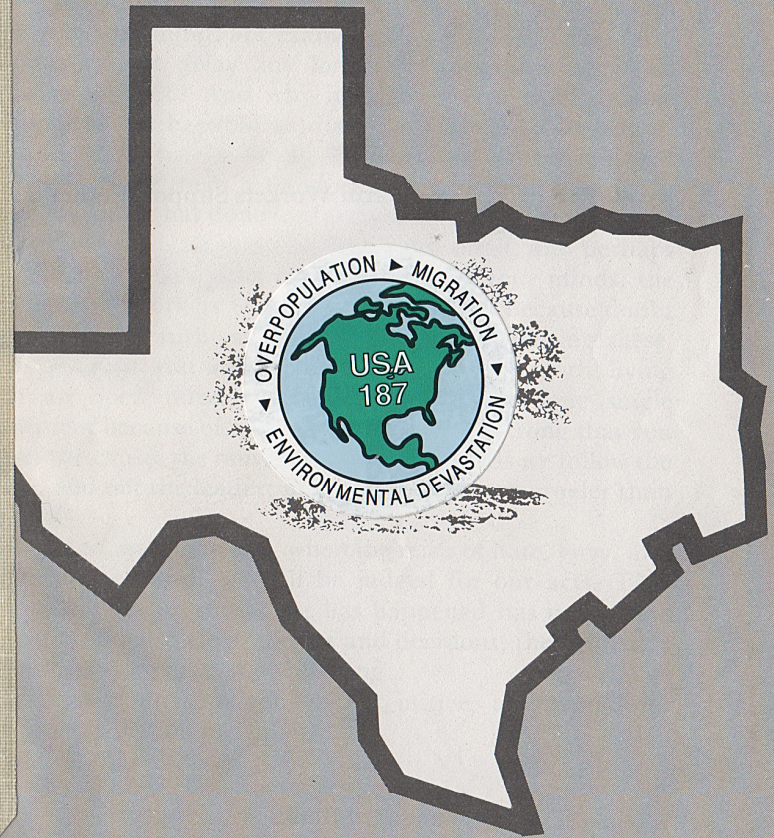
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The Struggle of the Texas Farm Workers' Union



Vanguard Books

This pamphlet was put together by the Santa Cruz, California Texas Farm Workers Support Committee. Any questions, criticisms, inquiries or support should be directed to:

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Foreword

The Truth: Crueler Than Fantasy

In this pamphlet you will confront the events which have occurred, the realities with which we have had to live. As if in a comedy, we have participated in these events or realities without benefit of director, without someone to guide us or correct us, to make our actions more acceptable to the society in which we live.

If you read this pamphlet, you may finish with certain doubts in your mind. For example, how is it that Texas farm workers cannot delay any longer, if they only began to organize in 1966? And why in such a short time, as one religious leader has told us, have we become so desperate? The reason is that in Texas, farmworkers want a law that would open for them a Pandora's box, as such a law, you probably know, has done for farmworkers in California.

I assure you in all sincerity that if this small, and perhaps hastily written pamphlet creates doubts in your minds, the Texas Farm Workers Union will be satisfied, because doubt is the seed of truth; and if we succeed in planting these seeds of doubt, you will be obliged to search the truth, living with an open mind, not being directed to one single movement because of a faith in one leader so strong that you forget the cause, the movement itself. In Texas we follow the cause, and not the leader; perhaps truth here is crueler than fantasy.

We hope that some day, when the mists of hate, envy, and pride have cleared, we will be judged for our acts. That people will realize that what has happened has not always been a product of clear choices and decisions; the brilliance of these movements can be blinding.

With this, we hope simply that justice, understanding, and peace will soon be with us.

Viva La Causa,
Antonio Orendain

Preface

Farm workers in Texas are fighting for their lives. Just as it is in California, where we have seen the United Farm Workers Union (UFW) wage a heroic struggle against the agri-business establishment and its bribed political servants, the battle in Texas is also between farm workers on the one hand and landlords, *patrones*, corporations and government repression on the other. Most of the farm workers of Texas, numbering in the hundreds of thousands, are Mexican and Chicano. Each year their labor harvests millions of dollars worth of citrus fruits, melons and vegetables. Nevertheless, the standard of living for these Texas farm workers is one of abject poverty. Since many lack "legal" documentation, they also lack political and civil rights. As workers, they are further oppressed; Texas has no farm labor contracts.

Yet, in spite of what seems only a dismal portrait of wage slavery, the Texas farm workers are organizing and fighting back. This pamphlet tells the story of the Texas Farm Workers Union (TFW), discusses the political implications and lessons of their struggle and stresses the urgency of our support for that struggle.

Introduction

In 1966 the United Farm Workers Organizing Committee (UFWOC) sent Antonio Orendain to the Lower Rio Grande Valley of Texas to begin the first serious efforts in the history of the state toward winning recognition of farm labor by agricultural employers for the purpose of negotiating better living and working conditions. Despite a protracted strike in 1967 and a historic march of workers and supporters from the Rio Grande Valley to Austin, the early efforts in Texas were unsuccessful in gaining contracts between the workers and growers.

During this period of 1966-67, these first attempts by the UFWOC to organize Mexican-American farm workers in Starr County led to harassment of union organizers by the Texas Rangers. More than a hundred arrests were made of farm workers and union sympathizers on charges such as trespassing, unlawful assembly, secondary boycott, illegal picketing, and abusive language.

For nearly ten years afterwards no further strikes ever materialized. A federal court panel ruled in 1972, several years after a civil rights suit was filed, that the Texas Rangers had in fact sided with the growers and that several of the laws cited to halt the picketing were unconstitutional. Justice delayed is justice denied, however, as time was working against the farm workers' attempts to organize.

Since that time, however, Orendain (who was a long-time organizer with Cesar Chavez and the UFW) has been building support for the union among farm workers on both sides of the border with regular radio broadcasts, publications, and speeches. The years of grass-roots organizing in South Texas gave strength to the farm worker movement that started once again in Starr County in 1975.

On May 26, 1975, organizers were leafleting green card workers who cross the International Bridge at Hildalgo, Texas each day to board trucks for the Valley farms. In minutes, 1,500 people had gathered around them, ready to participate in a strike. A march was organized to the nearby El Texano Ranch where a number of workers were persuaded to leave the fields and join the strike. Shortly thereafter, ranch supervisor C.L. Miller arrived and opened fire on the demonstrators for allegedly trespassing on his property. Miller was neither arrested nor indicted by local

authorities for his actions although a grand jury later indicted a number of the strikers and again refused to charge Miller. "I'm going to make sure my melons get to market," a local newspaper reported Miller as saying, "even if they have a little Mexican blood on them."

After the shooting incident, sentiment in favor of the strike grew with numerous demonstrations. For three weeks, over 200 families maintained a strike against four of the Valley's largest farms. From May to September 1975, workers in moderate numbers went out on strike during the melon crop season, not only in the Valley but also in the Trans-Pecos and Texas Panhandle growing areas. As in 1967, growers ignored calls for negotiations, and local and state law enforcement officials succeeded in stifling the effect of the organizing campaign by mass arrest of strikers for "Trespassing" violations — even on public roads and rights-of-way.

In California, meanwhile, the United Farm Workers, deeply absorbed in preparations for state-supervised union elections brought about by the Agricultural Labor Relations Act passed that May by the California legislature, was then, more than ever, unable to take on an organizing campaign over two thousand miles away.

In order therefore, to ensure the continuity of the effort in Texas within a legally constituted framework, the Texas Farm Workers Union (TFW) was formally created on August 14, 1975. The motives for incorporating were twofold: (1) To form a viable structure through which to continue the rising movement toward self-organization among the Texas workers, and (2) To establish a legal entity, accountable to the farm workers of Texas and to the State of Texas, which, as a non-profit organism, would qualify to receive financial support in aid to the farm workers' struggle in Texas.

In Texas, as in every other jurisdiction in the Union except the state of California, agricultural workers are excluded from the right to union elections guaranteed to most other workers under NLRA and numerous state statutes. During the summer strike activity of 1975, after Valley growers succeeded in gaining state district court injunctions against farm worker picketing by claiming that the TFW did not represent a majority of their workers, the Union tried to get the same courts to order elections as an alternative measure. Those efforts to obtain the right of the farm

workers to organize and to help determine their own destiny as members of a working class failed. Again the voice of the farm workers was ignored by the courts.

Efforts to organize have continued through 1975-76. Peaceful picketing has continued in the fields. The growers in the so-called "Magic Valley" have continued to refuse to negotiate because farm workers do not have a legal right to collective bargaining or to representation elections. The Texas Farm Workers Union hopes to continue to inform the people of Texas of the conditions under which the farm workers and their families live and work, and to influence public opinion in the direction of state legislation which would grant Texas farm workers the same rights enjoyed by nonagricultural workers since 1935. The TFW's over-riding goal is identical to that of California's Agricultural Labor Relations Act of 1975: "To ensure peace in the agricultural fields by guaranteeing justice for all agricultural workers and stability in labor relations."

The "Valley of Tears"

Route U.S. 83 runs along the Rio Grande River and is the main artery of the migrant stream flowing from South Texas through New Mexico into Arizona and California, or up through the Texas Panhandle into the Rocky Mountain states. Presently one of the most fertile river valley regions in the United States, it was not always so rich. The area remained scrub-covered range land until the turn of the century when, with proper fertilization and irrigation, a 100-mile strip of land lying along the Rio Grande was made to yield excellent vegetables and citrus fruits. Labor was cheap; Mexican workers were lured from Mexico to work in the stoop-and-pick fields.

The TFW's base is precisely in these valleys of Southeast Texas irrigated by the Rio Grande and, more specifically, in the three easternmost border counties of Hidalgo, Willacy and Cameron. Here, many workers from Mexico cross the river at the height of the picking season and are contracted by the "troqueros" (contractor agents) for a day's work. Some workers are issued "green cards" which allow them to "legally" cross the border for a day; others cross "illegally."

It is precisely here, in the border towns and crossings, that the TFW conducts its daily organizing activities.

On both sides of the border the TFW is consciously organizing those farm workers who work in the United States. Whereas in the past the growers have made use of the Mexican workers to break strikes of those who work on the U.S. side, workers residing in Mexico are now beginning to support the TFW. Says a TFW organizer:

We *have* to unite. Here at this bridge is where the most mistrust exists. There is only one way that we can struggle to change the life of the farm worker—organizing ourselves, uniting ourselves, talking together, joining the union so that the union can continue working.

TFW leader, Antonio Orendain, speaks to the organizing of so-called “aliens”:

The people already understand that a worker is not the enemy of another worker, but it is the system. The system of free enterprise sounds beautiful, if you have money, a profession or an education, but for the workers who don't have them, the only free enterprise is if I'm hungrier than you, I have to work cheaper than you. So who is hungrier than ourselves? The people living in Reynosa, and that's why they're being forced into working cheaper than us.

So that's why I think, under union contract, no matter where you are living, if you and I are doing the same kind of job, we are entitled to the same payment, and not because you are from Mexico you have to work cheaper than the way it is at the present time. The growers like to create a big surplus of labor so that the prevailing wage can go lower and lower; that's why we have to get our collective bargaining rights.

Unionization is urgent. Oppressive working conditions, murder and repression, so-called “right-to-work” laws, lack of political and civil rights and human misery have converted the plush and green valleys of the Rio Grande into what the farm workers call “El valle de lágrimas” — the “Valley of Tears.”

How Much Longer?

The state minimum wage is \$1.30; the federal minimum wage was \$1.80, then \$2.00, and now \$2.20 an hour. But the farm workers in Texas end up with much less. Says Orendain:

There is a case here where the worker made \$10.20 in three days, and they deducted a \$2.00 loan and that leaves \$8.20

If you are picking green peppers, for example, you might get only \$2.00 or \$3.00 a day. Sometimes, even if you make a good payment per hour, because there are so many people working on a small crop, you work only two or three hours, and so you make only a few dollars. So really, the hourly wage doesn't count because there are so many workers around here and not enough work, so the growers can set any price they want, and by getting the workers to do piece work they can get away from paying the minimum wage. You see, they have a lot of ways to cheat the working people.

Without the protection of unionization, farm workers and their children have often been sprayed with poisonous pesticides which in the blazing sun have caused severe skin rashes and infections. Forty-two percent of migrant farm worker families are children under sixteen years of age. Children are always present in the fields because their parents have no place to leave them, and also partly because, given the general starvation wages, families can earn a few pennies more when their children help out. Since children are paid less, growers encourage their “forced” labor. Child-labor wages also serve to drive wages down for all farm workers.

The education level in the valleys is 7-8 years; of those who graduate from high school, only 7 percent enter college. For example, of the 55,000 Chicano children participating in the Texas Education Agency's Child Migrant Program, only 1,000 students were ranked in the 12th grade. Aside from the well cited figures on the difficulties migrant children face in the field of education, lack of “legal” status and poor nutrition and clothing in Texas often make it impossible for children to go to school at all.

Working conditions for both children and adults in the Texas fields are among the most abhorrent in the nation. Workers are herded into trucks and crammed into vans for transport to the fields. In many fields there are no toilets;

therefore, many women workers have to wait until they return home at the end of a 12-hour work day. There is a subsequent high death rate from kidney infection among women farm workers in Texas.

Most farm workers have no access to health care. Many have no access to drinking water. Typhus, typhoid, amoebic dysentery and leprosy are more prevalent in Hidalgo County than anywhere else in the United States. The rate of many diseases in Hidalgo County is 200 to 250 percent higher than the national average. Infant mortality (125 percent higher than the national average) is the highest in the nation. Life expectancy for a farm worker in Texas is 49 years, the lowest in the nation!

Housing is subhuman. Mexican farm workers who do not live in company shacks, live in rural barrios, or "shantytowns," and *colonias* (areas of land divided up into small parcels and sold or rented to farm worker families). Seventy percent of farm worker families live in over-crowded conditions and about 30 percent lack adequate plumbing. Most of these dwellings lack running water, access to drinking water, sewage connections and electricity.

Job security is nonexistent. Harassment and physical abuse, as a result, are a matter of course. Mr. Guadalupe Barbosa, age 52, is a 12-year employee of Sharyland Farms and works an average of 52 hours weekly. His weekly take-home pay is \$89.00. He is the father of 6 children. Mr. Juan Navarro, 52 years old, works principally as a generator operator for Sharyland Farms. His take-home pay is \$75.00 weekly. He has 5 children. Mr. Lucio Ybarra, age 37, earns \$2.20 an hour as a tractor operator. He has 7 children. Recently, Sharlyand Farms laid off a worker after 41 years of employment. He was told to vacate the company house he had been using for years. When he refused, the company came by and shut off the water and electricity.

The over-all statistics are shocking. The Department of Commerce recently named the McAllen metropolitan area of Texas "the poorest in America." Personal income per capita is \$2,343 annually against a U.S. average of \$4,492 and a state-wide figure of \$4,045. About 145 miles to the west, Laredo ranks as the nation's second poorest area; per capita income is \$2,516 a year. The Citizen's Board of Inquiry into Hunger and Malnutrition in the United States reported the percentage of poor families in Starr County was 71.4 and its newborn death rate was 9.7 per 1,000 in com-

parison to the national rate of 5.9 per 1,000. The situation is so bad in Texas that Jorge Zaragoza, a TFW organizer, has said:

Texas is the key. When we organize Texas we can organize any state in the Union. Many of the workers in California and other places, thousands and thousands come from here, from El Valle.

Many of the nation's almost two million farm workers migrate from Texas. It is only natural, therefore, that the state is one of the centers of organizing.

In the past, the Teamsters Union led a limited and partially successful organizing drive around Crystal City, to the north of Laredo. Franklin Garcia of the Amalgamated Meatcutters Union has organized workers in the Lower Rio Grande Valley in canneries, shrimp plants and dehydrating plants. The Meatcutters Union and the Teamsters both have come to see that to win union representation elections, they would have to organize not only the workers involved but the communities in which they lived as well. This is an important historical lesson for TFW organizers as well.

In these communities one comes up against the power structure which supports agri-business exploitation in the Southwest. The power structure in these counties and towns is almost always the same: one-party (Democratic) politics, with a small group of predominantly Anglo businessmen and growers in control. Many judges, police, county officials and newspapers are extremely hostile to unions, to "agitators," and to "Meskins." For any kind of workers organization to survive in South Texas, it must fight these anti-democratic forces which would deny the workers a voice in the control of their own destiny.

The logical place to begin organizing farm workers in Texas is in the Lower Valley, where the main agricultural and farm worker communities are located. In 1966, Eugene Nelson was sent by the UFW to organize in Texas. The melon pickers in Starr County were already talking about a big strike for the upcoming June harvest. The strike was nationally covered by the news media and caused the growers a real scare. Finally the Texas Rangers and local so-called officers of law and order ended the strike, but not after a real feeling among the workers for unionization had been launched. Many workers had been hesitant about joining the struggle unless they could be convinced that the "green carders" would not be able to scab. This preoc-

cupation and the fact of mass migration across the border every day have been major concerns for farm worker organizing for the past decade. Texas farm workers have taken the issue head on—fighting Texas' right-to-work law, organizing on both sides of the border, and encouraging "green-carders" to join with them in the fight for unionization.

“Right-To-Work” Laws: Right to Exploit

“Right-to-work” laws have become the scourge of all workers in this country. They are the corporations' legal weapon to crush the organization of workers and to weaken the unions that do exist. All states in the Black Belt of the South, for example, have these laws. A right-to-work law was passed in Texas in 1947, as part of a nation-wide, anti-union campaign led by the National Association of Manufacturers (NAM). It has been fiercely enforced. While supposedly giving any worker the “right” not to join a union, this law is actually being used by growers like this: workers in the field walk out for union recognition, or for better working conditions, etc.; the boss, at this point, has the “right” to bring in nonunion workers to break the strike because these nonunion workers have the “right” to work, that is, to strikebreak. Actually, the law gives the boss the right to prevent workers from joining unions and to break strikes. When a union pickets because a field is nonunion, or because nonunion workers have taken away jobs and broken a strike, the boss can go to court and stop the picket.

“Right-to-work” laws are made possible by section 14(b) of the Taft Hartley Act, which gives individual states the right to enact laws prohibiting compulsory union membership and the “closed shop”. They have been enacted primarily in the states of the South and Southwest where labor is cheap. Such laws attract industry and agri-business, which are eager to develop and concentrate in areas with depressed economic conditions and a guaranteed pool of cheap labor. The growth of such investments is largely due to “run away” shops, companies that transfer from the Northern states as union laborers resist more and more militantly the squeeze for profits and subsequently worsened

working conditions. As long as there is no united call for wage parity in the North and South and for the repeal of the “right-to-work” laws that prevent the equalization of wages, the phenomenon of runaway shops will continue to grow and threaten the standard of living of all.

The National Right to Work Committee (NRWC) and its legal-aid arm, the National Right to Work Legal Defense and Education Fund, are disguised as champions of individual rights who “take the employee's side when his rights are abused by compulsory union.” The big union bureaucrats themselves provide the ammunition for NRWC attacks. Their abuses of power, extravagant life styles and salaries distance them from union members whose dues and assessments keep them in luxury. Illegal use of union funds, contract sell-outs imposed on the rank-and-file membership without a vote, and rank-and-file funded campaign donations for politicians open the unions to attack by the NRWC.

However, the primary target of the NRWC is clearly the right of workers to organize, strike or otherwise collectively defend their interests. Says UFW organizer, Eliseo Medina:

Right-to-work is one of the holy cows in the South. Actually, right-to-work is a phrase that was coined by the employers to undermine the labor movement. It doesn't give workers the right to a job or a decent wage. It creates an open shop which makes it possible for the employer to drive a wedge between workers, keeping them divided along union and nonunion lines to weaken their potential power.

The NRWC is a front for agri-business in its efforts to undermine the right of farm workers to organize and strike. In the states that now possess and enforce “right-to-work” laws, agri-business is still fighting against any kind of union and using the facade of “workers' rights” in hopes of keeping them out. Proposed “right-to-work” laws have been challenged and smashed in the Northern industrial states. The fear that the writing on the wall may soon signal the end of “right-to-work” laws in the South and Southwest as well has made agri-business step up its anti-worker activities. These activities—intimidation, beatings, deportations, torture and murder—have been met with growing resistance on the part of farm workers who are fighting a life and death battle for survival. Says Orendain:

A farm worker on strike has to find a way to survive after 8 or 10

days without food, without money, but for the growers, it's easy because they have a lot of money in the bank.

In the courts, the growers always want to get all kinds of injunctions, phony injunctions, and they know the law is on their side and they can get injunctions right away against us. But when we try to find a way to get justice for ourselves, it's hard to do so.

I don't believe in this kind of law, because the law is made by the few rich people to protect themselves and to keep the poor down, the majority of poor workers. So you see, it's a kind of funny society, but that's the way it works.

TFW Organizes

It is only in the last decade that a unionization movement has organized this growing resistance of farm workers, both in Texas and nationally. The UFW paved the way, with organizing struggles in California, and the struggle in California led to the organization of farm workers in other parts of the country. In the Northeast, the Asociación de Trabajadores Agrícolas (ATA) was established in 1973. It is now affiliated with the UFW. Organizing in Florida and Ohio is also taking place.

The farm worker's unequal standing in organized labor dates back to 1935 when, in the enactment of the Wagner Act by the 73rd Congress, agricultural workers were explicitly excluded from the definition of "employee." Since then they have been systematically barred from basic federal labor laws.

During the Korean War an emergency measure, known as Public Law 78, was passed by the U.S. Congress. This law permitted the temporary importation of Mexican nationals (known as *braceros*—day laborers) to work in the fields of the Southwest during harvest time, when sufficient numbers of domestic workers were not available.

The history of the *bracero* versus local worker in California has deep implications for the TFW in Texas, and for farm workers everywhere. *Braceros* were never organized in California and subsequently they formed the hard core of the agricultural labor force, forcing indigenous workers to compete for jobs which were offered on the basis of below-subsistence *bracero* wages. To the single-minded interests of agri-business, "braceroism" was a cheap labor wind-fall—it

drove wages and working conditions below rock-bottom and kept them there. Equally important, *braceros* were for all practical purposes a captive labor force that could be shuttled wherever needed, thus preventing local workers from organizing. Agri-business fought hard for the retention of the *bracero* program, knowing that unionization would surely replace the *bracero* should Public Law 78 be dropped. A watered-down, but similar *de facto bracero* program—"green carders"—has existed in Texas. Texas agri-business has used the green carders in the same way California agri-business made millions off the *bracero* program. Rising public opinion and a long, hard farm worker struggle eliminated the "official" *bracero* program in California. But in both California and Texas, *de facto* "braceroism" still exists.

The TFW has begun organizing in Texas on both sides of the border, eliminating, in the long run, the conflict between domestic and "alien" workers. To a certain extent, U.S. agri-business has actually made multi-national organizing a TFW strategic necessity. Says Orendain:

We tried to make a strike on the American side but the entire American side near the Rio Bravo is private property—something new for us. . . The only way we could talk with people was on the Mexican side.

The scenarios of TFW organizing, in the context of the long history of farm worker struggle in the United States, is international and, as a result, horrifying and threatening to the agri-business interests of Texas and the country at large.

Organizing began in Texas in 1966 when the UFW sent organizers to support and build a farm worker strike in Rio Grande City in southeastern Texas. In that year, the UFW under the leadership of Orendain (former Secretary-Treasurer of the National UFW) and Gil Padilla (a leading UFW official) led strike activity in "El Valle" which was frustrated by the intervention of the Texas Rangers, who made mass arrests of farm workers, threatened and mistreated reporters and assisted the growers in breaking the strike. Orendain, 45 years of age and originally an "illegal" farm worker from Jalisco, Mexico, has spent 23 years of his life in the struggle for farm workers' demands alongside Cesar Chavez.

The organizing was interrupted, however, when several leaders of the UFW in Texas were assigned to coordinate the

grape and lettuce boycotts in northern cities. When Orendain was asked to leave Texas to work in the North, he refused:

I think I prefer to stay in Texas. I am choosing to stay not because I'm such a great organizer or anything, but because we made a lot of promises to people here when we began organizing. When I was first sent here in 1966, I was told to organize, to build the union and eventually sign contracts with the growers. We also worked on the boycott, and to support the people in California.

Although Orendain and other organizers chose to stay in Texas, organizing efforts did not take off again in Texas until 1969 and were not in full force until 1971. Orendain's desires to raise the organization of Texas farm workers anew and press for a law more comprehensive than the recently defeated Proposition 14 Law in California, have caused him to break ranks with the National UFW strategy. The Texas Farm Workers Union (TFW) was formed in August of 1975. Most of the organizers were veterans of the 1966-67 union campaigns organized by Orendain and Padilla on behalf of the UFW.

A weekly Spanish language radio program, "La Voz del Campesino," speaks to workers on both sides of the border. A newspaper, *El Cuhamil* ("cuhamil" refers to the neglected and discarded hillside land left for the Indians in the early colonial period — and up until today), is published bi-weekly in English and Spanish. And a service center for organization projects was built in 1972 with volunteer labor and donated materials.

In May, 1975, a large strike among workers in the melon fields began under Orendain's leadership. During the strike, however, differences over policy and tactics led to disagreements between the UFW leadership in California and the UFW Texas organization. These differences involved:

First, organizing priorities — should the Texas farm workers be organized right away or should the union be solidified through the boycott already in effect nationally?

And second the position on so-called "illegal aliens" — should workers who enter the United States from Mexico be organized also or should they be considered, according to unofficial UFW policy, to be threatening to union activities?

The UFW in 1975 clearly tended to subordinate organizing drives throughout the country to the organizing

of boycott-related activities primarily to support farm workers in California. During the 1975 melon strike in Texas, UFW leaders from California came to Texas and told Orendain and other organizers of the Texas workers that the strike should be called off because of limited national resources. In spite of the fact that the strike was being supported mostly by local fundraising efforts. The California leadership also criticized the Texas organization for being violent and adventuristic in their melon-smashing retaliation for the shotgun shooting of 11 pickets by a Texas rancher.

On the question of "illegals," the TFW has actively tried to bring them into the union, and has fought against the Rodino Bill which would discriminate against workers without government issued work and residency permits by forbidding employers to hire them.

These political and tactical differences were further complicated by the uneven distribution of funds within the union. The UFW has always had monies raised throughout the country routed directly to UFW headquarters in California. When the UFW said it would not financially support the 1975 melon strike in Texas, Orendain and the Texas organizers, most of them UFW organizers, began using the money raised in Texas to support the strike there.

It is perhaps a moot point as to whether the TFW broke away on its own or was expelled. What is important is the fact that the TFW is actively organizing in Texas without UFW support.

Bad feelings between the two unions were aggravated recently when a self-styled representative of the UFW ordered the Texas organizers to vacate the farm workers service center that had been built by Texas volunteers a few years earlier. The majority of the Texas organizers voted to have the TFW remain in the center. Today both groups continue to use the center but the TFW clearly outnumbers the dwindling UFW supporters in Texas.

While an early reunification of the two unions seems unlikely for the moment, it is not impossible. Orendain and the other Texas organizers had originally proposed to independently affiliate with the UFW, but that was turned down. There will be more proposals; and there will be more responses.

The TFW is clearly the more active group in Texas. Said

one activist in the Chicano community in Texas:

I don't like to take sides between the UFW and the TFW. I have supported Chavez and the union for years, but when you are here you can see that it is Orendain and the TFW that are doing the work here. They are the ones who do the organizing and are harassed and shot at.

Although Orendain understands the need for a strategic focus for farm labor organizing efforts in California (he spoke in California in September, 1976, in support of Proposition 14), he feels a real frustration at the lack of progress in Texas during the last decade.

Gil Padilla, National Vice-President of the UFW (AFL-CIO), who had worked closely with Orendain in Texas in 1966-67, recently met with Orendain. In the name of the UFW, with whom Padilla chose to remain affiliated, he was supportive of the Texas goals but condemned the violence on the part of the growers and also the violence committed on the part of what he called "agent provocateurs" who he claimed had infiltrated the ranks of the Texas farm workers.

The Rev. Chris Hartmire, Director of the National Farm Worker Ministry, has stated that:

The UFW has never been satisfied with strikes per se, rather the commitment of the union has always been to organize workers, supporting strikes only when necessary, and then back up those strikes so that contracts can be negotiated and a union built. Following through on the strikes and winning contracts cannot be accomplished on too many fronts at the same time.

The issue is clear: Orendain insists, and the farm workers in Texas support him in this, that Texas does not represent "one front too many."

The TFW understands the urgency of California-related boycotts, electoral campaigns and struggles. Nevertheless, Texas farm workers do not feel that they must postpone their struggle until such time as the UFW succeeds in winning contracts and strength in California. The recent failure of the electoral campaign for Proposition 14 in California adds more urgency to the TFW position. The conditions of workers in states with "right-to-work" laws, but especially in southeastern Texas, are subhuman. The Texas Farm Workers Union has decided to fight against those conditions and violent repression even if it means they must fight alone.

An ironic footnote to this discussion can be seen in the following passage from a 1967 article (*Liberation*, August,

1967) on Texas farm worker organizing.

Some people have advised 'pulling out' of Texas, until the time is 'right,' until conditions are more favorable for winning. The Union is still too small, it simply doesn't have the resources to take on Texas at this time, when there is still so much unfinished work in California, they argue. But when the need for the Union is as great as it is in Texas, one cannot wait for an 'ideal situation' or the 'right time.' Though prospects are dim for winning the strike in the near future, and the Union will definitely not want to get involved in any more premature strikes, it must stay in Texas and continue organizing and building, and doing everything it can, short of striking, to improve conditions. One cannot simply turn his back on these people and tell them, 'You are not ready.' As Cesar Chavez said, 'We are here because of the need. And we will stay here. . . We will stay here until we win.'

"Illegals" And Internationalism

Organizing support on the Mexican side of the border is a vital and controversial part of the TFW. On June 15, 1976, Orendain and workers from Texas participated in a rally in Rio Bravo, Mexico, sponsored by the Central Campesinos Independiente (CCI). Says Orendain:

Under the present system it is a divide and conquer philosophy that tries to separate workers of the United States and Mexico. There is a damaging separation between classes and groups that work against the interests of all workers. With meetings like these, we are trying to join workers who have a common interest. . . You are poor in Mexico; we are poor in the United States. We are both exploited by the rich and the government. It is also true that these governments are fronts for the rich. In both countries there is a 'free enterprise' system exploiting the poor of these nations.

"Illegal alien" is a big-business and U.S. Government term used to brand those workers from other countries who enter the United States without "proper" documentation. Yet, it is precisely the U.S. big-business devastation and plunder of many of these "foreign" countries, like Mexico, which are responsible for driving thousands and thousands of campesinos off the land in their native countries. The unemployed and dispossessed in Mexico, for example, number about 40 percent, and the United States agri-business interests have played no small part in that devastation and robbery. The deteriorating conditions of the people of Mexico, made worse by the peso devaluation, are forcing

thousands of Mexican workers to cross the border in a desperate search for jobs. The U.S. Government gives some of them "permission" to work here while at the same time denying papers to others. This conforms exactly to the specific and seasonal needs of the growers and ranchers, who can pay starvation wages during the harvest season and then deport workers when the season ends. These same workers who pay U.S. taxes and social security almost never see a penny returned to them in benefits or services.

The deepening crisis in the American economy has brought about an increase in raids and harassments of immigrant workers. The media, controlled by the agri-business interests, talks about the "flood of immigrants"—using locust metaphors—who "take away jobs from Americans" and are a burden to the public, implying of course that these workers receive substantial welfare assistance, which they do not. Concurrently, politicians, among them Edward Kennedy, have proposed the Rodino Bill which would give the growers, ranchers and their "protectors" a freer hand to harass and abuse immigrant workers. In addition, organized labor sell-outs have recently gotten into the act by accusing undocumented workers of everything from high unemployment in the United States to strike breaking. An important aim of this increased harassment, abuse on the job and the deportation of active workers is to create a climate of fear and to discourage organization and resistance among immigrant workers. It is a desperate attack on unionization.

Antonio Rodriguez, National Coordinator of CASA (General Brotherhood of Workers), responding to the House Judiciary Committee's recent 25-to-5 vote in favor of the Rodino Bill, has reiterated the TFW position on immigrant workers: "We demand complete and total amnesty for all immigrants and an end to deportations."

The Rodino Bill, named after its sponsor, Rep. Peter Rodino (D.-N.J.), has been hailed by its supporters in government as increasing jobs for "U.S." workers by calling for fines for employers who "knowingly" hire "undocumented" workers. The bill also provides a partial amnesty for "aliens" residing in the United States for the past 7 years (June 30, 1968 to June 10, 1975). This has given it the support of such liberals as Kennedy. Nevertheless, we must expose its liberal cover and see the Rodino Bill for what it is: a chauvinist attack on minority nationalities and a weapon to divide the working class struggle.

In 1975, some 865,000 people were deported without trials. The Rodino Bill adds fuel to this racist kidnapping. Although the bill is worded so it appears that employers are subject to imprisonment for hiring aliens, no case has yet been reported where an employer was punished. That word "knowingly" and the fact that many immigrant workers will sign statements saying they are legal residents mean that the "criminals" under the enforcement of the Rodino Bill will be the immigrant workers and *only* those workers. But there is really no practical need for the passage of the Rodino Bill other than the *de facto* liberal sanction of deportations which go on day after day, with or without a new racist law.

The most recent case of the anti-deportation fight and government harassment is presently taking place in San Antonio, Texas, where Mario Cantu, a San Antonio restaurant owner, has been arrested for not cooperating with immigration agents when they attempted to raid his restaurant and deport his workers and patrons. Cantu has defended himself and immigrant workers as well with his cutting and accurate description of how agri-business is trying to blame the immigrant for U.S. unemployment:

American corporations operate in Mexico and cross the border at their pleasure. If they can go there for profits, I believe workers should be able to come here for work.

More and more information is being uncovered concerning the corrupt and repressive activities of the Immigration Service and the Border Patrol. These racist agencies, known as "La migra," are charged with the task of policing the Mexican border. The border has existed since 1848, when the U.S. defeated Mexico. The peace agreement, The Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo, provided for free passage across the border to Mexicans. These rights have been systematically violated. Migra officials in Texas have a cozy relationship with local ranchers. Ranchers allow border officials to hunt and fish for free on their property. In return, their ranches are considered "off limits" to inspectors. The Border Patrol also has the power to "lease out" to its rancher friends Mexicans it has captured without papers. They are given the choice of going to jail or working for \$4.00 a day, about one-third the going rate for ranch hands. Mexican women are freely allowed to cross the border every day to work as maids for \$10.00 a week in U.S. houses. The border exists only for the profit and pleasure of the rich.

“The entire border from Tijuana to Brownsville is stained with the blood of Mexican and Chicano workers who were tortured and assassinated.”

—TFW

Cases of harassment, torture and murder by police, the notorious Migra, the border patrol, the Texas Rangers and wealthy ranchers against farm workers in the Southwest have been on the increase. They have prompted vehement protest by farm workers and the Mexican government as well. In August, 1976, several incidents were widely exposed.

One of them was the beating and murder of a Mexican farm worker, Cornelio González, by U.S. immigration agents in Texas. According to his family, González returned bruised and very weak to his home in Tamaulipas, Mexico, after a trip to the United States. He told his family that U.S. Immigration agents had apprehended him in Texas and tortured him before setting him free. González' family took him to a clinic where he died from the beating on August 26. The Mexican press carried articles calling González another victim of the United States. Mexican Secretary of External Affairs, Ruben González Sosa, has called on the Mexican consuls in Brownsville and San Antonio to investigate the killing.

Earlier that month, a similar incident occurred in which 3 young immigrant workers, Eleazar Ruelas Zazala, 24, Manuel García Loya, 25, and Bernable Herra Mata, 21, were kidnapped and tortured by a rancher, “allegedly” George Hanigan, and his two sons on the Hanigan ranch near Douglas, Arizona. According to the County Sheriff's own report, the 3 workers were picked up at gun point, tied down, stripped, burned with hot poker, dragged across the desert, and shot with birdshot by the ranchers before they were able to escape almost two hours later. Although the Hanigans, well known in the area, were not immediately arrested, protests from the Chicano community and farm worker groups, and from Mexico eventually forced the calling of a grand jury investigation. On August 27, the grand jury returned indictments for 14 counts of kidnapping, conspiracy, assault with a deadly weapon, and rob-

bbery. But indictment is a long way off from conviction and sentencing.

El Cuhamil reports still another recent case. The victim of murder this time was 16 year-old Juan José Trinidad of Donna, Texas. On August 6, Trinidad was gunned down by a grower for allegedly attempting to break into the grower's house in broad daylight.

Relating this killing to the whole climate of violence against Mexican farm workers, El Cuhamil stated:

Since last year, when C.L. Miller shot and wounded 11 farm workers (9 of whom were ‘illegal aliens’), a precedent has been set in the (Rio Grande) Valley, which says that any farm worker on private property can be legally shot and even killed by a grower.

The incident refers to the shooting in June of striking farm workers who had marched toward the big ranch “El Tejano” to speak with the many “green carders” employed there. Besides the 11 farm workers wounded in the murderous assault, another foreman of the ranch was shot as well. The farm workers say they were walking along a public farm road. Chester Moore, owner of “El Tejano,” claims they were trespassing on private property. A property owner under Texas law has the right to use “a reasonable amount of force to protect his life, property or loved ones.” Of the 11 workers shot, 9 were Mexican nationals. The Mexican Consulate made it immediately known to the Hidalgo Sheriff that his government was very much concerned for the welfare of its citizens and insisted that due process of law be followed and just penalty administered. The Sheriff arrested Miller for the shooting, but later released him on a bond of \$1,500 for each man shot — cheaper than the fine for a deer shot out of season. Forty angry businessmen collected \$10,000 in a weekend and gathered to organize a defense committee for Miller, to plan a public relations drive, and to demand the intervention of the Texas Rangers.

Shortly afterwards, on May 30, nothing short of a serious attempt at murder was made against Armando Acosta, 43, a farm worker strike leader. He was carrying 6 passengers in a car to the Farm Worker Center in San Juan when a shot from a truck speeding past shattered his windshield and cut Acosta and 2 women about the face. Antonio Orendain has been threatened with death several times.

These are not unique occurrences. The entire border

from Tijuana to Brownsville is stained with the blood of Mexican and Chicano workers who have been tortured and assassinated. To TFW complaints, the police only respond: "It's a free country." The Union expects to meet with more and more such incidents as the vigilante organizations like the KKK grow more bold.

Another victory for racism and legal repression was won on July 6, 1976 when the U.S. Supreme Court decision authorized the Border Patrol to reestablish highway checkpoints near the Mexican border. At these checkpoints all traffic is slowed down for scrutiny and those travellers judged "suspicious" are held aside for interrogation. This unconstitutional intrusion at these checkpoints is often minimal for Anglo-Americans, but those with brown skin are asked to present identification and proof of their "right" to be here. The racist abuses by the Border Patrol authorities include insults, molesting, physical violence, torture and murder as a consequence. Even the Supreme Court's 2 dissenters were moved to recognize the reactionary, racist character of the ruling. Justices Thurgood Marshall and William Brennan declared the searches "a dragnet-like procedure offensive to the sensibilities of free citizens." Brennan added:

Every American citizen of Mexican ancestry and every Mexican alien lawfully in this country must know after today's decision that he travels the fixed checkpoint highways at the risk of being subjected not only to stop, but also to detention and interrogation. That law in this country should tolerate use of one's ancestry as probative of possible criminal conduct is repugnant.

The 1966-67 strike activities in Texas were frustrated by the brutal intervention of the Texas Rangers, the proto-fascist vigilante-like force of Indian scalping notoriety. These Rangers have been active throughout Texas history, dating from Stephen Austin's organizing and paying the first group back in 1823. Three years after the Texas strike of 1966-67, a three-judge panel ruled that the Rangers had violated the union members' civil rights by siding with the growers and that several of the laws used to arrest the pickets had been unconstitutional. Nevertheless, the Texas Rangers are still an important repressive force for growers' interests in Texas.

Originally, the Texas Rangers were committed to exterminate the Indians and expropriate their communal lands for

the land barons of Texas. They have continued to "protect" these lands, now concentrating their attacks on Mexican farm workers and other working peoples.

The Texas Rangers at present "technically" constitute the enforcement arm of the Department of Public Safety, with regional headquarters in Houston, Dallas, Lubbock, Corpus Christi, Midland and Waco. The remaining Rangers not stationed in one of these centers serve as criminal investigators and work with the highway patrol. The savage beatings and overt racism of the Texas Rangers and their well-documented link with the cattle barons, such as Richard King, have brought many to see them as a legalized Klan, directly loyal to the wealthy and propertied class of Texas.

In response to the violence on the part of growers, the Migra and the Texas Rangers, Orendain has said:

Until justice and the world begin to deal with these people that the law protects for committing these crimes, the TFW will continue struggling until every worker, be they black, white or brown, from Mexico or the United States, will be protected by federal laws, and thereby will be able to have guarantees of being able to protect his life and that of his family.

Legislation Campaign

On September 19, 1976, the TFW announced at the state La Raza Unida Party convention that it was launching a state-wide petition drive to gather signatures backing a proposed state law for farm workers. This law would give farm workers the right to decide whether or not they want to be represented by a labor union. The TFW hopes to have 500,000 signatures on the petition, which it plans to submit to the state legislature when it convenes in January of 1977. The proposed bill will be introduced to the State House of Representative by Rep. Gonzalo Barrientos (D-Austin), who is presently working on drafting it.

The law will call for a Texas Agricultural Labor Board, which will act very much like the National Labor Relations Board. It will certify unions through secret ballot elections. The strategy behind this new law represents a shift in emphasis for TFW tactical practice, from the fields — where the

organized violence of the growers and Texas Rangers has increased to the brutal murderous stage—to the legislature — where the TFW will be able to gain support for a struggle they have been waging by themselves. Aside from the petition, other forms of pressure will have to be exerted on the legislature. Organizations such as unions, churches, and all progressive people's groups will have to actively support the introduction of this law.

Since the 1930's, when the National Labor Relations Board was created, a large segment of the American working class has enjoyed certain limited privileges, one of which guarantees their right to organizing and collective bargaining. The NLRA excluded, however, farm workers, domestic workers and hospital workers among others. In view of this exclusion, workers throughout the country have fought to get their respective states to pass laws that would assure them the same guarantees other workers receive under the NLRA.

The bill to be introduced in Texas can be broken down into four main sections. First, it would define certain conduct as unfair labor practices for both employers as well as labor organizations. For example, it would be unfair for an employer to deny labor organizers the right to enter his property to talk to workers there. Second, the law would also give the right to farm workers to vote in a secret ballot election to decide whether or not they want to be represented by a labor union. Third, the bill would create a state board which would act as an enforcing agent of the provisions of the bill. Finally, the law would specify the extent of the judicial powers of the board in regards to violations of the bill's provisions and would define penalties for these violations. This proposed bill would be the realization of a long struggle begun in its present, organized form in 1966, when the farm workers in Starr County walked out demanding better wages and better working conditions.

The growers argue that their workers do not favor union membership. This is exactly what the growers of California had always argued, and we have seen that the overwhelming majority of California's farm workers voted for a union. This move to the legislative arena is one made after a serious coming-to-terms with the present strength of the union and its strategy for recognition and workers' benefits. The major tactic employed up to now has been one to two-day work stoppages. Although the TFW has 3,000 union authorization

cards and wide popular recognition, the limited material resources of the union have prevented steady, protracted strike activities.

Speaking of the recent campaign in California on behalf of Proposition 14, Antonio Orendain stated:

I have just come back from a trip to California where I saw both the great advances made by the farm workers and the democratic maturity that they are showing in the present political campaign that is developing throughout the state. . . It remains for us here in Texas to write friends and acquaintances in California to go out and make as much propaganda as possible for Proposition 14, and on election day, if some of them cannot vote because they're not registered in California, then they should spend all of election day taking people to the polls to insure that Proposition 14 wins. Because. . . , this is the fruit of many, many years of sacrifice on the part of many thousands of people, . . . and it is and will be an advantage for the farm workers of California, many of whom are our brothers, our sisters and our friends.

The election victories in the fields of California in 1975-76 show that men and women who labor in the fields will vote for unionization. The victories show also that a well organized and determined workers' organization can seize and use a law to accomplish important objectives such as the expansion of its power. Farm workers throughout the United States represent a work force made up, outside the Black Belt, principally of migrants, small farmers thrown off the land or left unemployed in the cities, and immigrants from countries ravaged by United States economic domination. Although these workers represent a labor force similar to the wage earners in large factories (in that, propertyless, they must sell their labor power in order to survive), they are kept in a semi-feudal state in which basic organizing rights are denied them. Like their counterparts in the cities, the agribusiness barons try to maintain a reserve labor force—about 4 to 1 in Texas—to keep wages low, prevent strikes, perpetuate harassments, etc. These bosses try to separate workers by race, nationality, sex and, in the case of Mexican migrants, "legal" status versus "alien" status.

One problem that must be cut through is the bickering between workers on who's taking away whose job. Says Orendain:

The workers in California blame the workers in Texas. The workers in Texas blame the illegals from Mexico. The workers from Mexico say that all the bosses say California-born Mexicans

don't like to work, that they're all lazy, that we are good camels, that five American dollars are sixty pesos in Mexico and "what do we care?" Our goal is to end the battle that exists between worker and worker, because the worker cannot be the enemy of another worker. It's the system that divides us.

Divisions are also created between seasonal versus full-time workers, older versus younger workers and between single and married workers. The mechanism for this manipulation is the preservation of the traditional respect for and fear of the *patron* that runs deep in peasant societies, enforced by the crew boss or labor contractor and backed up by the continual threat of loss of job or home or of deportation back to one's homeland. The crew leader or labor contractor, more often than not a member of the same nationality as the workers, exercises immediate control over who will be allowed to work, thereby keeping the workers in competition with one another for jobs. The *patron* or grower keeps the crews in competition for the work. Furthermore, the labor camp and steady migration become the mechanisms that keep the workers isolated from and ignorant of the reality of the political processes around them. The farm worker constantly faces the fear of not finding a job at all or of losing a job to mechanization, "runaway jobs" or of arriving too late for the first good pickings.

When farm workers in the North or West organize and win concessions, the growers mechanize production, slash the work force, and shift nonmechanized production to the South or economically dominated countries where wages are low and unions weak or nonexistent. Like their brothers and sisters in the auto and rubber industries, farm workers are threatened with runaway jobs; in this case, "runaway" crops.

Besides mechanizing agriculture here in the United States, agricultural production is being shifted more and more into Northern Mexico. In Northern Mexico labor is even cheaper than in Texas. At present, 60 percent of all the fresh vegetables consumed in the United States each winter are produced on U.S. owned or controlled farms in Northern Mexico.

In 1869, 26 percent of the total workers in the United States were farm workers. Today, farm workers comprise 2.2 percent of the labor force, while agricultural production and profits soar.

Orendain opposes mechanization of farm work, which has been on the rise. He notes that in Texas 112 ranchers jointly planted 130,000 acres of sugar cane, then purchased 15 harvesting machines which in effect do all the harvesting. If those 130,000 acres were harvested by the hands of farm workers there could have been work for about 20,000 people. Unless the Texas workers can legally compel the state to respect the rights of workers to have jobs and decent living wages, runaway crops will increase. The Texas farm workers cannot fight alone. The fight for these rights can be won with the broad based support of people all across the country.

Realizing the need to join with struggles elsewhere with similar goals, the TFW belongs to the Equal Rights Congress, a national organization which seeks to unite various groups in their common fight for justice. The TFW has sought the support of other workers and progressive people in Texas and throughout the country; the recently formed ERC is important because it serves as a forum for all these peoples. While concentrating on their specific struggles against injustice under this system, the organizations involved can pool their forces when they are most needed. It is clear that this kind of support is vitally needed for the TFW; the kind of attacks the Texas farm workers have suffered cannot be effectively countered in the future if their struggle remains isolated. The ERC is fighting in defense of the TFW nationally.

The TFW is actively seeking material support for their current organizational effort. Says Orendain:

This effort is going to be in the whole state of Texas if possible, in all the rural areas. So if people living in the city, if they want to see this and bring justice not only to be workers in the Valley, but in all the rural areas of Texas, all farm workers in Texas, I think they can do a lot to help us.

I don't want to ask only for money—if they can give us groceries or some other kind of support—leaflets, paper and so on that are necessary to get across to our people what we are trying to do. In the city sometimes it's easier to collect more groceries, to get a mimeograph machine or a typewriter, these are things that we will need.

Justice for the farm workers is good for the workers in the cities.

It is a fight and the union is not made up only of students or farm workers or only old people or only young people. The change is being accomplished when you make a link between old

people, young people, students, non-students, and every human being interested in social change. So this is really where things are moving, and not til we accomplish something like that are we going to have any permanent change here.

Support Committees for the TFW have been active in Texas—Austin, San Antonio, Houston, El Paso, San Angelo, Crystal City, Dallas-Fort Worth, Lubbock and Muleshoe — with food caravans, clothing drives and propaganda work. Recently, TFW Support Committee activities in Texas have included the preparation of the proposed farm worker legislation and the organization of petition drives. (Support Committees are especially active in Chicago and California. In California committees have been organized in Los Angeles, San Diego, Coachella, Modesto, Salinas, San Francisco, and Santa Cruz. The tasks of these Support Committees are first to widen the support for the TFW, raising money and food, providing legal support and solidarity) and, second to inform and educate the populace as to the issues surrounding the TFW struggle for union recognition and decent lives. You may contact these Committees at the following addresses, or you might contact San Juan, Texas for information about the formation of a TFW Support Committee in your own region or city.

In Texas:

Austin:

Douglas Keller
99½ Waller St. #A
Austin, Texas 78702
(512) 477-2485

Crystal City:

Jesus Salas
County Courthouse
Crystal City, Texas

Houston

P.O. Box 18664
Houston, Texas 77023

Laredo

520 Garza
Laredo, Texas

San Antonio

Jorge Zaragoza
562 Overhill
San Antonio, Texas
(512) 435-4813

San Juan

Texas Farm Workers Union
P.O. Box 876
San Juan Texas 78589
(512) 787-5984

Weslaco

P.O. Box 699
Weslaco, Texas 78596

In New Mexico:

Albuquerque
c/o ERC
P.O. Box 26214
Albuquerque, N.M. 87125

In Illinois:

Chicago
180 West Superior
Chicago, Illinois 60622

In California:

Los Angeles

TFW Support Committee
2228 West 7th Street
Los Angeles, CA. 90015

Salinas

Marcial Silva
1010 Acosta St.
Salinas, CA.

Santa Cruz

TFW Support Committee
Student Activities Bldg.
University of California
Santa Cruz, CA. 95064

What You Can do to Help the Texas Farm Workers

1. Relate information on the farmworker situation to your community through the telephone and letters to your friends and through the radio, television and newspapers to the general public.
2. Support those farm worker families who go on strike.
3. If you are in Texas, organize a committee (or committees) in each community to collect signatures for the petition now being circulated by the Texas Farm Workers Union.
4. Send donations to the Texas Farm Workers Union, P.O. Box 876, San Juan, Texas 78589.
5. Keep abreast of farm worker current developments by subscribing to the TFW's bilingual newspaper, **El Cuhamil**, Box 876, San Juan, Texas 78589. (Cost: \$5.00 per year, \$6.00 to foreign countries).

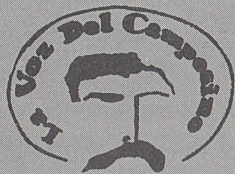
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