

Sour Southern Slaveships

by Bob Krzewinski

When it came to southern farmworkers, one North Carolina grower summed up the situation as he saw it. “The North may have won the war on paper but we confederates actually won because we kept our slaves”.

Modern Slavery

For southern farmworkers, working conditions are brutal. Deaths to due pesticide poisoning are commonplace. Normal workdays are 14 hours or longer, six or seven day a week. “Housing” could be a cardboard box or a sheet of plastic. Health care is almost non-existent, with malnutrition, infant mortality and infectious/chronic diseases well above national levels. Education for the children of farmworkers seems to be of no special concern to growers, as children are often out working alongside their parents. Farmworkers objecting to poor treatment or those sympathetic to unions are harassed, fired or blacklisted.

For many years growers employed people that were mostly U.S. citizens. While these workers were treated badly, they had at least some legal rights. These rights did not include, however, most child labor laws or those dealing with basic labor rights. Always looking to cut costs, some in the agriculture business discovered that if foreign workers were brought in, they would be eager to work for extremely low wages. Also, if these foreign workers started to cause “trouble”—by demanding fair treatment—they could be deported from the country, most often at government expense.

Bowing to political pressure from farmworker-dependent agribusiness, the federal government established the “guest farmworker” program, commonly know as H2A. Under H2A, industries claiming to have a hard time finding domestic workers to hire are allowed to bring in foreign citizens, most often from Mexico, Central America and the Caribbean. While things for farmworkers were bad in the past, under H2A they became worse as foreign workers started to be treated as virtual slaves. If present day farmworkers don’t do as the “master” says, they can be punished severely.

Three Ring Circus

By far, large multi-national corporations dominate the agriculture product industry, and their policies and operations are designed around annual corporate production and profit goals. Each winter, these corporations sign contracts with individual farmers specifying the type, quantity and selling price of crops. In turn, farmers arrange through crewleaders to obtain field workers to harvest the crops. In this “trickle down” process, in

which the multi-national corporation pays the farmer who pays the crewleader who pays the farmworker, the money reaching the individual farmworker is very often minimal.

To make matters worse, farmworkers are commonly paid at a “piece” rate (i.e. a set price for a basket of tomatoes) rather than an hourly wage. Farmworkers are also treated as “independent contractors.” This means that the farmer and/or crewleaders do not provide benefits such as workers compensation or social security contributions. It also means that workers are put into a special tax classification. Since most are not aware of the tax complexities of this status, many farmworkers come under the scrutiny of the IRS, and many discover they have to pay huge back-tax bills plus penalties, which further erodes their meager earnings.

Power Discovered

Following in the footsteps of the legendary United Farmworkers Union, a group of midwest farmworkers formed the Farm Labor Organizing Committee (FLOC) in 1967, hoping to gain modest improvements in the lives of farmworkers.

FLOC approached the Campbell Soup Company to request that when contracts with growers are established, farmworker interests be included. Campbell balked at any such agreement with farmworkers, saying that growers and/or crewleaders were responsible for farmworkers wages and working conditions.

Reaching a dead-end, in 1978 FLOC decided to strike against all Campbell’s tomato operations in northwestern Ohio. Campbell countered with strike-breaking scabs and mechanical harvesters. FLOC then launched a boycott of all Campbell Soup products, a move supported by religious groups, labor unions and concerned individuals. In 1983 FLOC organized a 550-mile march from Toledo, Ohio to Campbell’s main office in Camden, New Jersey. In 1984 FLOC began a “corporate campaign”, seeking to gain support for resolutions at stockholder meetings that would benefit the farmworkers’ cause.

Feeling intense and growing pressure, Campbell agreed to sit down with FLOC and in 1986 a historic agreement was reached among the union, Campbell and growers, covering 800 tomato and pickle workers in Ohio. A new contract substantially increased their pay, offered health insurance, gave workers a legal conditions-of-employment document (i.e. pay rates, work activities, maximum work hours allowed, etc.) and even a paid holiday (Labor Day).

After that groundbreaking first agreement, other farmworkers organized, obtaining contracts that included language indicating that workers were employees, not “independent contractors”. FLOC contacts also included the right to worker’s compensation, unemployment insurance and social security. Field sanitation standards were stipulated, as were protections against pesticides. Workers with

FLOC contracts gained the right to file legally binding grievances, giving them a real sense of job security. FLOC contracts also prohibit child labor.

Southern Deja-Vu

Following its major impact in the Midwest, FLOC is now trying to bring attention to the plight of southern farmworkers, and attempting dialogue with major agriculture companies in that region. FLOC approached the Mt. Olive Pickle Company asking them to participate in three way negotiations between agriculture corporations, growers and farmworkers. As Campbell Soup had over two decades ago, Mt. Olive denied any responsibility for farmworker wages or working conditions.

Besides rebuffing FLOC, Mt. Olive Pickle Company is lobbying Congress to weaken whatever weak legal protections foreign “guest workers” presently have under the H2A program.

Using tactics learned in the Campbell Soup actions, FLOC has called for a boycott of all Mt. Olive products. FLOC is also increasing its media presence and supporting marches at various locations, primarily in the south, to bring the plight of farmworkers to the public. And for true Michigan fans, FLOC points out that two Ohio State University coaches, John Cooper and Jim O’Brien, agreed to participate in Mt. Olive commercials, something a Michigan coach would hopefully never do while a boycott is in effect.

Support the Farmworkers

Boycott Mt. Olive Pickles! – While Mt. Olive is primarily a southern brand name, the company is trying to increase sales in the north. If you see Mt. Olive pickles in a store, don’t buy them.

Send A Message – A boycott becomes twice as powerful when supporters send a message to the target company. The boycott needs letters, telephone calls, emails and faxes sent to Mt. Olive President Bill Bryan, telling him that farmworkers don’t deserve to be treated as slaves. Ask him and his company to negotiate with FLOC, informing him of your decision to boycott until such talks occur. Mt. Olive can be contacted at P.O. Box 609, Mt. Olive, NC 28365, phone (800)672-5041, fax (919)658-6296, email bbryan@mtolivepickles.com. Ask your friends, church or student group to send similar messages.

Buy Union Pickles – Vlasic, Heinz, Green Bay and Aunt Jane pickle companies have all signed contracts with FLOC and in the process helped increase the quality of life for farmworkers.

For More Information – Contact the Farm Labor Organizing Committee (donations are always helpful, too) at 1221 Broadway, Toledo, OH 43609, phone (419)243-3456 or web site www.floc.com