

# Rural California Report

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*Rural California Report* is a quarterly publication of the California Institute for Rural Studies (CIRS). CIRS is an independent non-profit research and advocacy group which has studied rural issues and policies since 1977. The institute's goal is to build a society that is ecologically balanced, socially just, and economically sustainable. Toward those objectives, CIRS conducts research and public education projects, and works with individual activists in rural communities.

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## LETTERS

*Rural California Report* welcomes letters from its readers. If you have a comment, criticism or suggestion, we would like your feedback. Address correspondence to: The California Institute for Rural Studies; RCR/ Letters to the Editor; P.O. Box 2143; Davis, CA

# Back in the Fields Again: The Resurgence of the United Farm Workers Union

by Don Villarejo

In the Spring of 1994, after more than a decade of setbacks, the United Farm Workers of America, AFL-CIO, returned to the orchards and fields of the West with renewed vigor. Now, some two years later, it is clear that the UFW is once again a major force in the agricultural industry. Under the able leadership of President Arturo Rodriguez, the UFW has won an impressive string of union representation elections (see accompanying chart). Even more significant, solid union contracts have been signed with a dozen companies, including some of the largest farm employers in the nation.

By the end of its 10-year campaign to pressure the table grape industry to negotiate in good faith, the union was seriously weakened. During this period the grape boycott and political campaign work were the most visible activities of the union; representation elections among farm workers dwindled throughout the 1980s and early 1990s, as did membership and contracts. While the campaign for a boycott of California table grapes educated millions of Americans about the deplorable working conditions in the nation's vineyards, there is no evidence that the boycott had any significant economic impact.

The sudden passing of César Chávez in the spring of 1993 brought up serious questions about the future of the union. However, an unexpected outpouring of tens of thousands of supporters at the public funeral ceremony and march honoring him reminded union leaders that there was still strong interest in the movement he founded. Then, in a little-noticed press conference during the 1994 Delano-Sacramento pilgrimage honoring the memory of César Chávez, President Rodriguez announced that the UFW was planning a new campaign to organize field workers. At the same time,

he indicated that less effort would be expended on the grape boycott.

It was a courageous and bold move, signaling a pragmatism that has become a hallmark of President Rodriguez's leadership. That the grape boycott was in serious difficulty was obvious to knowledgeable observers, but it was not clear what other initiatives could be undertaken.

The spring and summer of 1994 saw a wave of new union representation elections in California's agricultural work places. By the end of 1995, some 13 elections had been held, in which the UFW sought the right to represent field workers. All told, more than two-thirds of the votes cast were for UFW representation. Among significant victories were those at Oceanview Produce, a vegetable and strawberry grower and Dole subsidiary, and E&J Gallo Winery vineyards. However such victories are not always sweet; at Oceanview the company retaliated by shutting down its berry growing, and laying off hundreds of workers.

The California Agricultural Labor Relations Board (ALRB) has responded to the renewed UFW activity with the issuance of more than a dozen complaints against various employers for improper anti-union activities. Most of these complaints involve the firing of workers for their union activities. Equally significant, new ALRB Board President Michael Stoker, has forcefully sought to have prompt elections and decisions.

In the early months of 1996, the UFW embarked on an even more ambitious initiative: to organize strawberry workers throughout the major Central Coast producing region centered in

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Watsonville. The UFW found encouragement for this effort from the overwhelming victory it had won when workers at VCNM Farms, a large strawberry grower near Watsonville, asked the UFW to assist on a wildcat work stoppage they organized last summer. Within a few days, the ALRB conducted a representation election, and the VCNM workers voted overwhelmingly for the UFW. But just a few days later, the company plowed under one of its four major fields and announced that it was going out of business.

With strong financial backing from new AFL-CIO President John Sweeney, the UFW poured its resources into Watsonville, organizing dozens of house meetings as well as meeting workers in the fields. But the strawberry growers have fought back effectively, threatening workers with allusions to the laying off of strawberry workers at Oceanview Produce and VCNM Farms when they supported the UFW. In the middle of this year's strawberry season a food poison-

ing scare struck the industry when cyclospora contamination, causing severe diarrhea and cramps, was mistakenly attributed to California strawberries. Strawberry shipments declined in the wake of the scare, and some growers told workers that a possible UFW boycott would mean the loss of even more work. Growers also organized a "Pro-Worker Committee" and held a march on August 10, 1996, in which as many as 7,000 growers and workers participated, further illustrating the strength of the industry.

At its 13th Constitutional Convention, held in Fresno on August 31 and September 1, the union and AFL-CIO President Sweeney announced a major new initiative in the strawberry campaign: member unions of the federation would join with UFW staff members to conduct a campaign of consumer education in 50 U.S. cities about conditions in the strawberry industry. It is evident that the strawberry campaign will be a long and difficult struggle, but the UFW is back and plans to put up a strong fight.



#### UFW Contested Representation Elections, 1994-95

Company	Location	Crops	Date	UFW votes	Co./Non-UFW votes
Oceanview Produce Co.	Oxnard	vegetables	5/18/94	298	278
Cal Redi Date Co.	Coachella	dates	6/10/94	25	9
Warmerdam	Hanford	tree fruit	6/23/94	220	43
Theodore Jay Fish Co.	Coachella	dates	6/30/94	6	0-
Lewis Farms	Traver	fruit	7/19/94	80	9
Gallo	Santa Rosa	wine grapes	7/26/94	81	21
Ariel	Watsonville	mushrooms	9/2/94	30	4
Bear Creek Prod. Co.	Wasco	roses	12/16/94	648	433
Monterey Mushrooms	Watsonville	mushrooms	4/4/95	302	94
Sunrise Mushrooms Co.	Watsonville	mushrooms	4/28/95	115	10
Chateau Ste. Michelle	Washington	wine grapes	6/2/95	53	33
VCNM Farms	Salinas	strawberries	8/17/95	332	50
CP Meilland	Wasco	roses	12/22/95	175	114

## TIPP: Multi-Agency Effort to Enforce Labor Standards

by Merissa Wright, Rosario Ruiz-Dark, Don Villarejo, and Jennifer Sherman

**T**IPP—the Targeted Industries Partnership Program—began four years ago as a response to concerns about workplace injuries and labor law violations in the California agricultural and garment industries.

The program is a multi-agency effort involving the U.S. Department of Labor (DOL), the state Departments of Industrial Relations and Employment Development (DIR and EDD), and the California Occupational Safety and Health Agency (Cal-OSHA). Working together, these agencies formed a task force to concentrate resources on enforcement of state and federal labor standards.

After working for more than a year to develop a labor contractor and farm labor violations database, several members of the California Institute for Rural Studies (CIRS) office staff were given the opportunity to join the inter-agency staff of TIPP for two days of enforcement sweeps in the San Joaquin Valley.

The first day began at 3:30 a.m., when representatives from agencies such as DOL, DIR, and Cal-OSHA, as well as State Labor Commissioner Roberta Mendonca, and Assistant Labor Commissioner Jose Millan, assembled at a hotel. The TIPP team then drove to a busy intersection in rural Fresno County, where it was met by several California Highway Patrol (CHP) officers. Together they set up a roadblock to stop traffic from all directions, and pulled over for inspection vehicles that appeared likely to be transporting multiple passengers.

From 4:45 a.m. until 6:15 a.m. when

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