

César Chávez' Bittersweet Birthday

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He would have been proud. On the first observance of César Chávez Day as an official state holiday, the movement he founded and built is alive and well and getting stronger. Under the imaginative leadership of Art Rodriguez, the United Farm Workers of America (UFW) has again made organizing workers in the fields of California its highest priority.

César Chávez also would be sad today because of the extraordinary hardships faced by tens of thousands of farm workers. In many agricultural areas of California, heavy rains and floods that followed have destroyed thousands of acres of lettuce, celery, broccoli, strawberries and other crops. Farmers have lost hundreds of millions of dollars of anticipated income. Their loyal employees, who waited patiently for harvest work, are now faced with no work at all - and no income. In and near Watsonville, hundreds of farm worker families not only lost their jobs but also lost their homes as well.

Despite the severity of the tragedy, public and private agencies, including those whose mission is to serve farm workers, have been slow to respond. But this is only the latest in a litany of hardships.

In the past 15 years, conditions among farm employees in California have deteriorated. Real wages are down by 25%, the state Labor Commissioner has annually issued more than 600 citations for labor law violations to farm employers, and more than

40,000 farm employees are injured on the job annually - by machinery, heavy physical labor and dangerous pesticides.

In the last eight months of 1994, agricultural employees at eight of the state's largest farm businesses have responded to these conditions by voting, in secret ballot elections, for UFW representation. The Agricultural Labor Relations Board (ALRB), with Bruce Janigian in charge, did what it is supposed to do: conduct a prompt and impartial ballot, and quickly resolve charges of unfair labor practices filed against the company or the union. UFW enemies in the California legislature who have repeatedly tried to kill the ALRB have been sharply rebuked. The ALRB has shown that it is one of the state's most effective and responsive agencies. It is also one of the few that working people can call upon to protect their rights when irresponsible farming companies run roughshod over their employees.

Even more significant than election victories is the first-ever three-year collective bargaining agreement hammered out by UFW members and a major farm. Some 1,400 workers who tend rose bushes at Bear Creek Production Co. will benefit from a wage and benefit package that amounts to an increase of 22% over the three-year life of the contract. Better known to gardeners as Jackson & Perkins Co., the company ranks as the 25th biggest farm in the state. Its Kern County headquarters are not far from the actual location of the labor camp where Steinbeck's Tom Joad vowed, in "The Grapes of Wrath," to stay in the fight to protect the rights of working people.

Throughout California today, in locations as diverse as Woodland's high school auditorium and a major Los Angeles hotel, tens of thousands of Californians will come together to celebrate the achievements of César Chávez and the social movement he founded. Through remembrances, song and the teaching of his philosophy of non-violence and selfless devotion to community needs, the movement continues to grow. Happy Birthday, César Chávez!