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Don't Waste Time With Politicians-Organize!

Baldemar Velasquez

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Don't Waste Time With Politicians-Organize!

Abstract

[Excerpt] From the beginning of our nation's history, we have witnessed economic expansion unfettered by any moral standards. The right to exploit resources and people has gone relatively unchallenged, from the Southern states' reliance on slave labor to the stealing of land and the public policy of genocide against the indigenous people, known as Manifest Destiny.

This process of predatory capitalism has continued throughout this century. The foreign policy surrounding the Cold War had as much to do with economic dominance and making areas safe for U.S. investments as it did with containing communism. American workers and organized labor were often complicit in this policy, even though it ran contrary to workers' own interests.

Keywords

labor organizing, labor rights, NAFTA, capitalism, corporations



Don't Waste Time With Politicians – Organize!

■ *Baldemar Velasquez*

From the beginning of our nation's history, we have witnessed economic expansion unfettered by any moral standards. The right to exploit resources and people has gone relatively unchallenged, from the Southern states' reliance on slave labor to the stealing of land and the public policy of genocide against the indigenous people, known as Manifest Destiny.

This process of predatory capitalism has continued throughout this century. The foreign policy surrounding the Cold War had as much to do with economic dominance and making areas safe for U.S. investments as it did with containing communism. American workers and organized labor were often complicit in this policy, even though it ran contrary to workers' own interests.

Now we are reaping what we sowed. Corporations are free to move, to avoid worker standards and community obligations that interfere with the maximization of investment returns, while American workers complain about unfair competition and disparity in wages. There is no doubt that labor must now attempt to undo the damage caused by allowing capital free reign. But these attempts must focus on uniting workers' struggles, not on complaining about "unfair" competition.

Today, working people have little or no influence over the continuing trend toward a one-world economy. Capital is on a rampage, and legal documents like the North American Free Trade Agreement and the ***General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade*** are merely the culmination of policies which politically and publicly condone the pitting of worker against worker.

How will Americans as working people have their roles defined in the new economic order? How should we as union and community activists go about attacking the growing reality of multinational capital?

We at the Farm Labor Organizing Committee (FLOC) believe that we must treat the internationalization of the economy as an organizing issue, not a legislative one. America's electoral politics are woefully inadequate to address the broad international issues facing workers around the world. FLOC considers political and legislative maneuvering to be a dead-end response for labor in this country. Why attempt to negotiate with politicians? Why not organize the industries run by the multinational corporations, and negotiate directly with the people who are going to make a difference?

Some labor activists focus their attention on free trade agreements. However, in the case of NAFTA we got very few real labor protections written into the agreement, and predictably, they aren't being enforced any better than existing labor laws. In general, legislation may involve important philosophical concepts, but it will not make a difference in favor of working people in this country. The NAFTA accord cannot protect workers' interest in side-bar agreements because neither the U.S. nor Mexico has the political will and apparatus to effectively enforce worker rights under existing legislation.

Instead of funding politicians, our unions ought to fund and help organize community groups around the world that will be part of the future organizing environment. The internationalization of the trade union movement is now an absolute necessity. Negotiating and cooperating in these struggles with other unions and organizations threatened by the same corporations and forces in power is the only way we're really going to gain better conditions. We all know that organizing workers is what gives us real political control because of the direct economic pressure we can bring to bear. Then, out of that organizing will come laws that we hope will institutionalize what has already been built by the unions through organization. An organizer can't depend on trying to go about it the other way, with legislation guiding the way.

This approach to organizing is very hard work and usually doesn't pay off right away. In many ways, we organizers have to think of the new challenges before us in the global economy as a time of analysis and rebuild-

ing our unions. It's essential to understand that the actions needed right now are simply not going to make our unions any bigger or even stronger at first. But FLOC's experiences with U.S. and Mexican workers have demonstrated how organizing provides empowerment, contracts, and, in our minds, is the only way for unions to really win in today's world situation.

CAMPBELL'S VICTORY SETS STAGE FOR INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZING

FLOC's breakthrough in the Midwest set some important precedents for organizing without collective bargaining laws, and challenging the archaic structure of sharecropping. After an initial strike of over 2600 workers in 1978, FLOC continued strikes, a boycott and a corporate campaign against Campbell Soup for eight years. Arrests, beatings, violent attacks, a cross burning from the Ku Klux Klan, and intense harassment from the sheriff's department were resisted with nonviolent sit-in demonstrations, marches, and strikes. The central issue in this fight was Campbell's refusal to bargain with our membership because they were not Campbell employees. Indeed, they were not, as they worked on their contracted supplier farms. Twenty independent family farms grew their supply of tomatoes where our people were employed. In 1986, a miraculous breakthrough occurred when Campbell signed a contract with FLOC and a hastily assembled association representing the 20 tomato growers.

This was the first multi-party collective bargaining agreement in labor history. Part of the negotiations process included the establishment of an independent commission, chaired by former Labor Secretary John Dunlop, to oversee representation procedures and collective negotiations.

One piece of Campbell's bargaining strategy was a threat to import more tomato paste from their suppliers in Mexico. Campbell was resistant to raising wages from \$3.35 (then the minimum wage) to \$4.50. Out-sourcing from Mexico represented an attempt by Campbell to apply external pressure as we approached negotiations. In 1987-88, FLOC began to develop a relationship with Mexico's Campbell workers. Our message to Mexico's unions was simple: we told them that we wanted to help get them the best agreement we could, because the better it was, the better negotiating position we would be in. After a number of cross-border visits, a large church symposium in Mexico, and a demonstration at Campbell's Sinaloa tomato paste factory, the Mexican union won its best contract ever. Subsequently, in our negotiations with Campbell in 1989, not one word was spoken about cheaper tomatoes from Mexico.

FLOC'S LATEST INTERNATIONAL CAMPAIGN

Today, we face a similar situation with Ohio and Michigan's major pickle and cucumber companies. Vlasic and Dean Foods do the same type of contracting with small family farmers for pickles as Campbell does with tomatoes. They also contract pickles in North Carolina and the Mexican states of Michoacan and Guanajuato. Organization of their contracted farms was more daunting because of the larger number of farms (about 90 farms) and more than 5,000 workers split into units of 30 to 60 workers. Additionally, these sharecropping workers were technically independent contractors with no protection under the Farm Labor Standards Act, workers compensation, or unemployment compensation. They were also taxed the full 17 percent self-employed Social Security Tax.

Using the multi-party tomato agreement as a precedent, we were able to organize that mess relatively quickly: Heinz USA and Vlasic in 1987-88; and Dean Foods subsidiaries, Aunt Jane Pickles and Green Bay Foods, in 1992. Three separate grower's associations were set up to accommodate these multiparty agreements. Sharecropping was wiped out from the entire pickle industry in a single orchestrated step in 1993. These workers now enjoy employee status for the first time.

Now that structural changes have been achieved, we have begun to negotiate for standard benefits in our contracts. As we increase wages, the pressure begins from the cheaper sources in North Carolina and Mexico, where some acreage has already shifted. As part of our Mexico work, we negotiated an agreement with Mexico's largest farm worker union, calling for the establishment of a U.S.-Mexico commission to oversee joint organizing, negotiations, and other forms of collaboration among common workforces for the same multinational corporations.

In the midst of the intense political warfare that rages throughout Mexico, this commission is helping us connect and establish relationships for action with the common worker. This effort brought home to FLOC the realization that what we were attempting to do was build a borderless community of workers.

If we succeed, it is possible to see a breakthrough in signing an international agreement that would cover a corporation's workers in more than one country. As we move toward this goal in the pickle industry, FLOC has finished the protocol work with Mexico's unions in their related production areas. Only when we organize workers and communities, wherever a particular corporation does business, will we be in a position to stop companies from pitting us against each other for the cheapest labor. Organizing an entire industry is not a radical idea; it's

just that we have to do it internationally. This will turn the downward spiral of competition into an upward spiral of worker collaboration.

FLOC's U.S.-Mexico Exchange Program has been used as a model for future unionism because of its successful communication, joint action, and development of leadership across borders. For unions that are interested in doing international work with a focus on organizing, here are some practical points:

- Investigate and learn to understand the relationship between local production and the global economy. Don't expect immediate dramatic gains or victories. Take the time to make an analysis of the international industry and lay a new foundation.
- Find out where the workers around the world are located. Arrange to have workers in your area visit them, and get to know their needs and concerns. Develop real relationships and friendships.
- Establish international agreements of solidarity and collaboration with these workers and their organizations.
- Put in the hard work it takes to organize the whole industry.
- Determine your allies among other groups, including management groups, who can apply pressure on international corporate management, and meet with those allies to establish your common interests and need for cooperative alliance.
- Negotiate directly with the industries that have the money and power to make changes, rather than spending time with lobbying politicians.

We believe these organizing steps are critical to challenge the global financiers scavenging the earth for speculative opportunities. America's trade union movement can play a key role in reshaping the economic landscape and bringing democracy to corporations who would otherwise have financial and economic hegemony over peoples and communities. ■