Foreword

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Many years of hard work, debate, and caring activity have yielded six master agreements that presently cover five thousand workers on almost 120 different family farms in Ohio and Michigan, representing a significant change in employment practices and putting thousands of extra dollars in workers' pockets. It is easy to rattle off a long list of accomplishments of the union, some of which are precedent setting and historic. Nevertheless, in this era of union busting, a call needs to be issued to organize for radical changes in the infrastructure of how the agricultural industry does its business. Empowering the farmworker community has been an elusive struggle for twenty-four years. Finally, FLOC has hit on a cornerstone strategy that has culminated in this nation's first multiparty collective bargaining agreements. While many liberal supporters backed the small family farmers' movement, many danced around the fact that these farmers actually exploited the farmworkers who worked for them. In fact, it was the profits from labor-intensive crops such as cucumbers and tomatoes that offset the low and marginal returns from corn, wheat, and soybeans, thereby providing a key asset in helping the family farm. What FLOC did, however, was to bring the food processors to the negotiating table; negotiate a master agreement that applied to their contracted farms; and insist that they bring their growers to the negotiating table and sign one agreement as a third party in a collective manner. Campbell Soup and Vlasic Foods have since allowed associations of their growers to

Baldemar Velásquez, founder and president of the Farm Labor Organizing Committee (FLOC), addresses a rally of supporters in 1982. He and other FLOC leaders were able to mobilize the active support of both midwestern farmworkers and other segments of American society to achieve farm labor reform.

accommodate this process. After five years of collective bargaining, these associations have learned from FLOC the significance of collective action. In fact, some growers now support FLOC's organizing campaigns. The reason is simple: the small family farmers used to think they were of the upper class, when compared to the farmworkers. It was a counterfeit status that was as much emotional as fact, gained by marginalizing an impoverished community of color. They have learned at the bargaining table to look upward at the real decision makers and real conditions that influence industry prices and therefore, their livelihood, along with farmworkers.

It is also our desire to usher in a new era of relationships with the agricultural industry. This is one of the few areas of the country where the industry has accepted the notion that farmworkers have legitimate concerns about their families and their roles in the workplace. We hope to use this opportunity to secure our livelihood and improve the areas that have been overlooked.

Let us continue our prayers for a healthy industry in which all its workers, from top corporate officials to the last of the field workers, can make a living that is decent and conducive to raising a healthy family.

Yet, all that has been achieved has to be attributed to the quality of individuals whose commitments are cornerstones to any successful struggle. If FLOC is to have a long future, much will depend on the continuous acts of love, sacrifice, and unselfish giving that staff, members, and supporters have demonstrated over the years.

Let me be specific. For the first eleven years of FLOC's twenty-four-year history, no one was paid, not even for expenses such as gasoline. Many of us who were the first organizers had to find part-time jobs to support our organizing. Many members donated constantly in many ways, including taking us into their homes for meals. Supporters kept us on the road by helping get us to our next meeting. The spirit of this exciting volunteerism continues, always pressing toward the next history-making breakthrough.

Since the early days, things have changed, and FLOC can now pay travel expenses and offer a modest living budget to its staff. However, FLOC still needs to enlist in the cause individuals whose commitment and character are not unlike those of the people who began the organization. It is these special people that FLOC still needs now and in its future.

We must not forget to build on those relationships that have been keys to the success we have had thus far. For the most part, the thread that has woven staff, members, and supporters together into effective action has been the Church. With the Church there has

always been the common point of moral reference that has held us accountable for our actions.

God Moves His People

The powerful words of Jesus calling us to believe in him, to receive and demonstrate the gift of faith, cause us to transcend our puny perceptions of reality and measure the world not within its present parameters but on the promised Kingdom of God.

It has not been unusual to encounter members, staff, and supporters alike whose actions are motivated by what they describe as an “inexplicable impulse.” It is encouraging to us to witness God’s moving of his people. The many donated hours, dollars, and selfless acts are counted to the Lord’s glory, and his grace enables us to lift up humble workers of the fields.

FLOC must continue to encourage the involvement of the Church among staff, members, and supporters alike and seek the next step that God has called us to take together.

There have been rocky times with plenty of problems to frustrate our work, but we all cared enough, not only about the work, but about each other, to hang in and finish what we started. All this reminds me of one hot day when I was a little boy picking cotton in North Texas. I stuffed my cotton bag so full that I could no longer drag it through the rows. My aunt rescued me. She helped me get the bag to the scales, and that night she solved my problem by cutting the bag in half and sewing it so that I could no longer overfill it beyond my strength. She cared, and she helped me do my job. I don’t remember anything about how much cotton I picked or how much money I earned, although I am sure that was the focus of my attention then. Now all I remember is that she cared and she helped me. So, as the victories come and the years go by, I will remember less the details of winning and losing and more the acts of caring and love of the many people who have made FLOC possible. This is the stuff that makes life worthwhile. Let us continue to build on this service to one another through this next decade.