

A Brief History of the Farm Labor Organizing Committee (FLOC) & NFWM's Support

FLOC was founded in 1967 by Baldemar Velasquez, who, with his father, began organizing migrant farm workers in Ohio. The Velasquez family, from Texas, followed the Midwest migrant stream each season. Baldemar organized his first strike at the age of 12, early recognizing, and not accepting, the injustices farm workers faced.

Under the leadership of President Baldemar Velasquez, FLOC has set important precedents in labor history:

- the first farm worker organization to negotiate multi-party collective bargaining agreements;
- establishment of the Dunlop Commission to act as a "private labor relations board;"
- the first union to represent H2A guestworkers under a labor agreement.

The Campbell Soup Boycott (1978-1986)

Fighting to improve conditions for migrant farm workers in the tomato fields of Ohio, FLOC recognized that the power to change things was not in the hands of small and medium sized growers but in the corporate processors who purchased from those growers and dictated the terms of their contracts with them. In 1978, FLOC organized a strike by 2000 workers on farms contracting with Campbell Soup Co. and announced a boycott in 1979.

NFWM provided staff to support the Campbell Soup boycott, helping to secure boycott endorsements around the country (including the National Council of Churches), raising awareness in churches and in public demonstrations, often doing human bill-boarding as 7-foot cans of Cream of Exploitation soup. For the historic 560 mile march in 1983 of farm workers and supporters from Toledo to Campbell's headquarters in Camden, NJ, NFWM staff, including Sr Pat Drydyk, Cruz Phillips, Mary Anne Haren, organized food and housing on stops along the way. And NFWM Board members, including Olgha Sierra Sandman, participated in the march. Also, NFWM organized churches and supporters to buy Campbell Soup stock so that farm workers could attend the shareholder meeting in 1985, where 50 folks interrupted the meeting by standing to encircle the audience and holding up banners with silk-screened images of farm worker conditions.

In 1986, FLOC signed an historic three-way contract with Campbell Soup and its tomato and pickle grower associations in Ohio and Michigan. FLOC then signed agreements with Aunt Jane Foods, Dean Foods, H. J. Heinz Company, and Vlasic Pickles. The corporate processor campaign FLOC first initiated with Campbell soup is a model used by other farm worker groups.

FLOC's Campbell Soup campaign established another significant innovation – the establishment in 1985 of the Dunlop Commission (John Dunlop had been Secretary of Labor in the Ford administration) to act as a labor relations board to settle any grievances that the parties in the contract could not resolve on their own. This mechanism was essential since farm workers remain excluded from the National Labor Relations Act (except in California which created its own Agricultural Labor Relation Act in 1975.)

Mt Olive Pickle Boycott (1999-2004)

In the 1990's, FLOC began organizing farm workers in North Carolina, the second largest producer of cucumbers/pickles. After attempts to get Mt. Olive Pickle Company to enter into negotiations toward another 3-way agreement failed, FLOC called a boycott of Mt Olive Pickles in 1999.

As with the Campbell Soup boycott, NFWM placed staff in North Carolina to support the campaign. Along with the tireless work of Joan Preiss, founder of the Triangle Friends of Farmworkers, NFWM staff, led by Lori Khamala, made hundreds of presentations in churches, organized pickets at Kroger and other grocery stores, took the boycott national as Mt Olive grew its sales territory and garnered boycott endorsements from the NCC and other national church bodies. The turning point in the boycott was the endorsement of the United Methodist Church; Mt Olive CEO Bill Bryan is a Methodist. The endorsement effort was led by NFWM and our member organization, UMC Board of Church & Society.

The 5-year boycott ended in 2004 with the signing of an agreement between FLOC, the Mt. Olive Pickle Company and the NC Growers Association. The agreement covered approximately 8,500 H-2A guest workers working cucumbers, sweet potatoes, tobacco, Christmas trees, and other crops on about 1,000 farms. The agreement was the first farm worker union contract in North Carolina, a Right to Work state, and the first covering guestworkers.

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The Reynolds American Tobacco campaign (2007 – Today)

Recognizing that one of the richest and most powerful agricultural corporate processors are the international tobacco companies, whose presence in North Carolina is significant, and that some of the worst conditions farm workers face are in tobacco, FLOC turned its attention to ending the human rights abuses suffered by tobacco farm workers in the Southeast. In 2007, FLOC announced a campaign against Reynolds American Tobacco and called upon Reynolds to meet with FLOC to improve conditions. For the first five years of the campaign, Reynolds refused.

NFWM's NC staff Alexandria Jones provided campaign support in many ways, including making presentations, hosting delegations to labor camps and organizing actions. During 2008, NFWM secured 190 signatures of national and NC religious leaders on a letter to Susan Ivey, Reynolds CEO and the board of directors, urging them to work with FLOC. NFWM gathered 3000 (of 6000) postcards to Reynolds, co-coordinated the delivery event at Reynolds headquarters and helped organize hand deliveries of copies to Reynolds board member in various states.

In 2009, FLOC launched the Reynolds Shareholder meeting strategy. NFWM mobilized the purchasing of shares so that FLOC and supporters could attend the meetings. The Reynolds shareholder meeting action in May was the major annual action of the campaign until 2017 when Reynolds cancelled the regular meeting because the company was purchased by British American Tobacco (BAT) for \$54.5 billion. From the first action in 2009, a NFWM Youth & Young Adult network delegation from Orlando, FL traveled each year to participate.

In 2011, Chase Bank, a major lender to Reynolds, developed as a focus. NFWM organized 27 bannered & leafletting actions around the country (no Chase banks in NC). Highlights included the emergence of YAYA's "Three Fat Bankers." Also that year, Oxfam America & FLOC made public their report, "A state of fear: Human rights abuses in North Carolina's tobacco industry." We passed out copies to attendees at the 2011 shareholder meeting.

A turning point came at the 2012 Reynolds shareholder meeting when CEO Daniel Delen announced that Reynolds would engage with FLOC via a multi-stakeholder approach. While that effort, now called the Farm Labor Practice Group, has resulted in talks, it has not made real progress toward effectively changing the power imbalance, which is the foundation for the abuse of farm workers, in the industry. And so the campaign continues.

In 2013, the convenience store strategy heated up; Reynolds products are mostly sold at convenience stores. Over the next 3 years, NFWM's YAYA network, especially in central Florida, was instrumental in putting pressure on Kangaroo, WAWA and 7-Eleven.

In 2014, two YAYAs (Bianca Soloman & Nataly Azcurra) were recruited to join the AFL-CIO Summer Organizing Internship with FLOC to organize workers at labor camps. Also that summer, two Members of the British Parliament completed a fact finding tour of tobacco farm worker labor conditions and held a public hearing in Raleigh and reported to the Parliament in relation to BAT's involvement. Also, a 2014 religious leader sign-on letter to Reynolds resulted in a NFWM delegation of 12 NC faith representatives meeting with two Reynolds representatives.

The campaign has expanded globally, involving BAT, Philip Morris Intl., Altria and others. The objective is that the tobacco companies will negotiate with FLOC the implementation of a practical mechanism within their supply chains to guarantee freedom of association and collective bargaining rights. The preferred mechanism would be modeled after FLOC's successful agreement with the NC Growers Association using the Dunlop Commission as the labor board by private agreement. Also, this August, the IUF (International Union of Food, Agricultural, Tobacco, etc) adopted FLOC's resolution that calls on these international unions to come together in a global fight to pressure tobacco companies to assume responsibility for the working conditions in their supply chains.

NFWM also provides accompaniment support for FLOC's worker organizing and advocacy support for some worker grievance problems, such as with NC Sen Brent Jackson and the blacklisting of workers on his farm and at Hudson Farms. This July, NFWM filed conflict of interest complaints with the NC Legislature's Ethics Committee against two legislators who pushed through egregious anti-FLOC amendments in S615. Next steps are in process now.

But the fight still focuses on big tobacco. A fight we must win for tens of thousands of farm workers in the southeast.