

Standing with farmworkers still important today

Mary Ann McGivern | Oct. 7, 2013 NCR Today

In August, the National Farm Worker Ministry held a gala to honor executive director Virginia Nesmith's retirement. Virginia spoke in the afternoon. She said when she began to work for the group in 1972, the ministry was linked to United Farm Workers.

"We were so sure the workers would be organized and there would be a national union," she said. "But people marshaled such forces to oppose it, and there were so many poor people. They just kept coming."

Virginia said because farmworkers keep working dangerous jobs to put food on our tables and because they keep organizing for our benefit as well as theirs, we must keep our feet on the ground and go forward with them.

The ministry still supports the United Farm Workers, but it also supports the Farm Labor Organizing Committee (FLOC), the Coalition of Immokalee Workers, and Pinos y Campesinos Unidos (PCU) in Oregon. FLOC President Baldemar Velasquez, PCUN President Ramon Ramirez and United Farm Workers Vice President Erik Nicholson all attended the gala to recognize Virginia's work, and they spoke about organizing efforts and accomplishments.

United Farm Workers has initiated the Equitable Food Initiative. Nicholson said farming today is vertically integrated, meaning canneries, giant restaurant and grocery chains, and international distributors get more of the profit than the growers. Additionally, there is less state regulation and oversight of working conditions and payroll today. Finally, U.S. food goes around the world; we eat food grown in dozens of other countries; and farm workers who grow our food live everywhere. So the old method of striking one grower or one product is less effective.

The initiative, which is only in full force on a few farms today, promises to guarantee restaurant and grocery chains quality produce with no waste in return for high enough pay that the laborers can afford to reject the overripe fruit that would spoil a whole container. Nicholson says it's like the auto manufacturers coming to see that benefits outweighed the costs of airbags. Companies like Costco recognize the benefit of paying fruit pickers for quality. The new initiative has the potential of bringing justice to the entire food supply chain.

The gala decorations committee created a spectacular setting -- campaign T-shirts strung along two walls; two giant quilts of labor history displayed on racks; large photos and posters; banners; notecards for sale; and on the tables, centerpieces of candles surrounded by eggplant, carrots, radishes, red potatoes, red onions, green peppers, tomatoes. It was beautiful. And at the end, the leftover food as well as the centerpieces went to the Catholic Worker. The night knocked all of our socks off -- and raised \$30,000 for the ministry.

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