Eliso Medina, "The Farm Workers Movement."

I want to talk to you today on what I'm involved in, primarily the Farm Workers Movement in this country today. A lot of the people that I talk to feel that in this country the people who are producing the food are just simply little farmers who wear overalls and straw hats, and get up early in the morning and milk the cows and mend their fences, have a big hot cake breakfast in the morning, and what have you. always try to explain that the situation in this country is not at all like that. There are very few small family farms left in business who are-still making a living. Many farmers today have a small farm but they also have a second job in a steel mill or in some other type of industry in order to make a living.

Agriculture today is dominated by huge corporations. In California today for example, 7% of the farms control 75% of the land. That many percent control about 80% of the labor. I'm talking about Standard Oil, Bank of America, United Fruit, Purex Corporation, Cades Rubber Co., Coca-cola. These companies in 1969 spent 7 million dollars conserving the soil, couldn't get what Senator Eastland got.

Most of our people here should be familiar with the Senator. His family received something like \$650,000, in 1969 for conserving the soil. So it's not a little farm. It's a huge corporation. What we're trying to do is unionize farm workers and change the condition of their lives.

Some of you may also have seen some of the many documentaries

that have been done. They all show the problems that farm workers have. I will very briefly tell you about some of them. Average wages for farm workers are \$1,500 a year. With his entire family working in the fields he'll be lucky to make \$3,000 a year. That's with husband, wife and three or more children working in the fields. So many of them have to migrate about the country and never get a formal education. The average farm worker's child drops out after sixth grade or never gets beyond the eighth grade. He has to migrate to every state in this country to keep picking the crops to stay alive. Even when they do go to school in some of the communities they are pushed out because the growers have the philosophy to keep them stupid so they'll work for lower wages. If they get an education, then who's gonna do our work?

This and everything else is dominated by the growers because they have the money and the power. This is what we're trying to change. American Friends Service Committee has just finished studying the big deal with child labor in agriculture. In California, which had a model child labor bill, they found in 7 countries that they visited 229 children working. Out of those, 19% were under 12 years of age; 17% were working without a social security card. Wages range from \$1.04 to \$1.79 an hour. They estimate that out of 400,000 field workers in the state about 100,000 are children. It's not that the families don't want the children to get an education. It's a case of whether to get an education or to survive. They need the children in order to get an amount to hold themselves together They found, for instance, the infant mortality rate among farm workers is 125% higher than the national rate.

There is nowhere in this country where you could find such a high

mortality rate. The reasons for this are many: 1) the wages don't make for an adequate diet. 2) the housing even here in the state of Illinois around the Chicago -- there's about 4 to 6 thousand They're living in converted railroad cars with no farm workers. heating or plumbing. In Elk Grove -Village a year and a half ago there was a fire where a family lost two of their children. had only one heater in the house and barricaded themselves in that They were able to get out and rescue only. two of the children. The city fathers of Elk Grove Village got terribly upset. We can not tolerate bad housing in our Village. The next thing they told them to get out. They had bulldozers outside the door. Then they went from poor housing to no housing at all. Right across the street were the 50 and 75 thousand dollar homes. The great American nightmare is what it is. So, that adds a Lot to the children getting killed.

No medical facilities. They will not treat children or adults or anybody who can not afford to pay them. Some of you who have ever been unfortunate to be in Cook County hospital you think that's bad. You haven't seen anything yet. They make close to 13 dollars a day -- when they're working. Out of that they have to pay rent for a dilapidated run down house. They simply can't afford to go to a doctor. They have no medical insurance. The local hospitals charge between 50 and 70 dollars for using a corner of a room. The only time they ever go to the doctor is if they're really afraid they'll die. Farm worker's wife gets pregnant. She can't go to see doctors. Babies are usually born by midwives and as soon as they're able to walk and get around they go back into the field. They have another mouth to feed. They make cradles

out of crates and drag them along the rows as they're picking. They have to take their children to the fields. They contract disease.

One of the main problems is the misuse of pesticides. I don't know how many of you are familiar with even Richard Nixon and all the politicians, all these people are talking about DDT and mercury and all this stuff. But never, never do they talk about people who are poisoned. They always talk about 30 years from now what it'll do to our environment. In California they have dumped 100 million tons of pesticides every year. The California Department of Health estimates that about 100 people die every year from pesticides. When you're in the fields, they spray, then you go back in, it gets into your skin. Others breathe it all the time and get lung cancer. You know when they spray pesticides you're supposed to go 30 days before going into the fields. Let's say they spray today, and the crop is ready to be picked next week. The growers won't wait 30 days because his entire crop will rot.

Last year I was talking to the parents of a little girl and her brother who had been taken into the fields to work with the parents, they were playing tractor. They were spraying parathion. Parathion is a nerve gas. It was used in Germany to exterminate the Jews. In the US, they've found it kills bugs. Parathion is so deadly that one drop can kill you if taken through your mouth. The kids were playing around and put her finger finger in her mouth and she started vomiting. In a few minutes she was dead. Her brother had to be taken to the hospital. There are many more dead than are ever reported. This is one of the most important issues of the people.

The consumers are being poisoned as well. All of you. Anything that you eat today is contaminated with pesticides. The water, fruit, vegetables and meats, everything. It doesn't matter' how many times you it, it's still there. The companies won't do anything about it because they're too interested in making money. The federal government isn't going to do anything because Standard Oil, Shell, and all those may be contributers to their campaign.

So, what we're trying to do is organize a union to change all these things. Now the farm workers are simply, powerless. They've been working all these years, under all this misery to keep America fed. Farmers are specifically excluded from workman's compensation, disability insurance, unemployment insurance, child labor laws, school attendance laws, collective bargaining laws and discriminated on minimum wage and social, security. Now, our union "was founded in 1962 to change these things.

Our first major strike happened in 1965 when all of us walked out of the grape fields. I was busy picking grapes along with the rest of my family. When the strike, started, we all came running down. I, for one, thought the revolution had started and I sure as hell didn't want to be left out of it. In our treasury we had 76 dollars. We were either very brave or very stupid. You can't feed or clothe 5,000 people with 76 dollars. We were so sick and tired of the injustices.

One of the things we were particularly upset about was racism.

Now all of you have heard or know about racism, I suppose. In the field you can see it even more than you can in Chicago. In the labor camps, the sections were divided. One black, one Puerto

Rican, one white, Japanese. The whites, incidentally were the old people from Grapes of Wrath, the ones left 'from the depression and all that jazz. They had the best housing of any available. The Filipinos maybe got a nickel more per hour. The Mexicans had the best transportation. The Blacks got better food. Each one had something that the other didn't have. The growers would come and say; "Those Filipinos are very good workers. If you don't hurry up we'll have to lay you off and hire more Filipinos." Then they go over to the blacks and say, "You know what the Mexicans are saying? They say you're really a bunch of no-good so and so's: So there was conflict between the groups because we were separated and never got together. We were so busy fighting one another that we never saw who the real enemy was. If we weren, 't so busy hating each other we'd see that the grower was using this to keep the wages low, the housing bad. And when the strike started he was thrown in the pickle bin together, miles and miles from the nearest town. So we get together and started talking.

We're all people, who have the same problems. So, things started working. They saw that we weren't going back to work so they brought people from Mexico to take our jobs. They weren't told that there was a strike on, even though by law they had to. But you know as well as I that law and order was never invented for the rich. The poor are always the ones who break the law and are a menace to society. So the growers got away with everything. The athorities are temporarily blinded. Some of our people were shot at, beaten up, they looked the other way. The growers were beating them, trying to trick them into fighting back with pistols themselves. Then they say this mob's out of order, bring the

national guard in. We refused to give them violence back, so they got more people. We talked to them, they left, and the growers got more people. They left until finally they got people who wouldn't leave; they were too poor. When you're hungry you have to work. Some man said, "No matter how much dignity a man has, he loses it all to fill his stomach."

So we started an international boycott of grapes. We finally won last year. Throughout the country there were people involved in boycotting grapes and supporting the strike. We're now involved in a boycott of lettuce. Last year when we won the grape strike, we sent telegrams to all the lettuce growers asking for negotiations and a contract. They say that we are a Communist organization bent on taking over the food supply of this country and turning it over to Russia. So that way America will be helpless to do anything. So, what they're really saying is, "We don't want to sit down across a table with people who were always considered slaves, these blacks, browns, and poor whites." So, what they did is they went running off to a meeting with the teamsters union. They said, "Sure." Two hundred growers signed a contract. The workers found out about it over the radio. The growers went to the fields and said if you don't sign up with the teamsters you're out of a job. So on August 24, 1970, 7,000 farm workers walked out on strike. The Los Angeles Times called it the biggest and most significant farm workers strike in U.S. history. It was the first time that no one came from Mexico to break the strike because we'd been doing a lot of organizing there, too. So they went to the black ghetto to try and get people to come, but they told them where to go, too. So they went to the courts. They got an injunction

forbidding all. leafleting and picketing on any of the growers' property. Penalties were immediate imprisonment, a \$25,000 fine and for 7 days, \$1,000 a day fine. Under the law they said it was a jurisdictional dispute, a fight between two unions. It didn't matter that the teamsters were trying to break our contract. It didn't matter that the workers didn't want them. All that mattered was the growers were losing their crops. So we started a boycott. By then, we had three big companies of lettuce growers trying to sign contracts. So it was going to be a lot easier. People didn't have to just buy no lettuce. They could get union lettuce. So one company which was affiliated with Dow Chemical Corporation went to court again and got an injunction prohibiting us from boycotting any of these products. My coming and talking to you about boycotting their lettuce is to be considered a violation. While I was here I could be charged with conspiracy. We could all be prosecuted. I could be charged with crossing state lines to incite a boycott.

We went to court to appeal it. The judge said, "We'll accept your appeal but you'll have to post 2 3/4 million dollars before the appeal can be held." We don't have money lying around in shoe boxes. So the judge said, "Unless you post that 2 3/4 million dollar. bond, you'll have to call off the boycott." We weren't about to call off the boycott; that would mean losing everything we wanted,! so Chavez went to court in 1970 and the judge charged him with two different counts of contempt of court. He fined him \$10,000 and sentenced him to 5 days in jail for each count. But then our lawyers pointed out to the judge that the maximum allowed in California law for contempt was only \$500 on each count. It was illegal for him to pay \$10,000. The judge then dropped it to

\$1,000, but he said -- 10 days in jail, \$1,000 fine, but you are going to remain in custody until you obey the courts order to call off the boycott. He spent 20 days in jail, he was finally released on December 24th by order of the state's Supreme Court. They just held a hearing and found the injunctions unconstitutional.

So, we kept boycotting. The Department of Defense then came in. They started buying a lot of grapes during the grape strike. They agreed to purchase the grapes by over 350% to send to South Viet Nam. So little South Viet Nam became the second largest importer of California grapes in the world. It added up to 8 lbs. of grapes per soldier. The Department of Defense purchasing agents were saying that the soldiers developed a craving for grapes.

Now, they increased their purchase of boycotted lettuce by over 472%. What is even worse -- they're paying 16.06c per pound while the average wholesale price is 12.9c per pound. They're paying them a higher price than they would get in the open market. It's obviously intended to break the boycott.

On March 26th we finally came to an agreement with the Teamsters. They agreed that they had no business trying to organize farm workers. They got out. They told the growers, "You've got your problems, we're getting out." We, in turn, called a 30 day moratorium on the lettuce boycott to give the growers enough time to sign with us without saying that they've got a gun at their heads. But, the moratorium runs out Sunday. Meanwhile we've been boycotting companies that never signed contracts with either ourselves or the teamsters. This is pretty much where we're at. Let me stop now and answer questions.

- Q. Clearly you had solidarity in the grape strike. What kind of explanations do you offer for the sucess of that strike?
- A. The boycott.
- O. Yes I realize that, but how did you successfully boycott it?
- Well, basically what it boiled down to is that the union had no Α. funds. We're affiliated with the AFL-CIO and they gave us \$10,000 a month but it cost like \$50,000 a month to run a corporation, so what they did was they got me a car, they liberated from one of the AFL-CIO organizers and we came to Chicago and started boycotting. They gave us a name in Phoenix, another one in St. Louis, etc. Enough money to get to the first point and from there we borrowed and begged and stole. We got here and we just started making the rounds of everybody. Our job was then to get people turned on to the fact of the farm workers boycott. The farm worker issue had long been a favorite liberal cause. But, unfortunately the liberals only think about, spending. Here we were talking about something concrete. We went and we talked to labor and to churches and everybody. Once we got support, our job was to channel that support into pressure against the stores or whoever was selling the grapes. We kept that up so the pressure kept building, but we were very successful.
- Q. I was wondering why this was so successful, why other attempts at boycotting just haven't been?
- A. Because they never tried. The AFL-CIO called a boycott. But to them a boycott is -- phooey on them. We do not patronize them.

 A lot of other organizations call boycotts but they don't do anything, they just talk. Operation Breadbasket is a good example of another boycott that worked. They went out and picketed A & P.

They stuck with it and they picketed and got people to stop patronizing A & P. When the money stopped coming into the A & P, they got real warm. They had to be persuaded. We had to do the same thing. We don't let go until we get what we wanted. Too many organizations are not consistant. They work at it for 2 months and get discouraged and quit. Results don't come because they're right and just. They come from being consistant, wearing down the enemy. Obviously we don't have the resources or power of a big corporation. So we have to make up with consistancy and our numbers.

- Q. How much education did you get?
- A. I graduated from 8th grade and then went to work in the fields, "The school of life."
- Q. You said that you organized and then the teamsters came in?
- A One of the reasons we're fighting the teamsters now. They asked us to join them. We thought about it and said -- well, we know that the problem with farm workers is more than just insufficient money.

 Now, under the Teamsters we would be part of the Teamsters, truckers union, not a farm workers union. We would not have our own union.

 If we were to go with them and it would ever become necessary for us to take economic sanctions against an employer, the teamsters wouldn't like that because that would put the truckers out of work. Our problem is more than, just economics. We need leadership and an organization that recognizes that. We know that we're being exploited, not just by the growers but, the community at large.

 The banks, hospitals, finance companies, the schools, by everybody. That type of unionism is not relevant today, particularly to members of minority groups. It doesn't do you any good to go into

a factory or the field and get better wages and working conditions and improve-their lives there, if when they leave they have to go to bad conditions. So consequently we have another union. We have the United Farm Workers Organizing Committee. Then we have the National Farm Workers Services, you see. Under it we have our own clinics. We have co-op gas stations, we have credit unions and building programs. We have retirement villages where all the old farmers can retire. We have our own printing shop. We have a clothes truck. People can buy things very cheaply or use them for free until they can afford to get new ones. All of these things -- we're using our own resources. We are replacing with a co-operative, stores, banks, everything workers have to deal with. This is our own money. It's called community control. Another project we're beginning is our own school. That's very worthwhile and just barely beginning. We know that these schools especially for labor workers are totally irrelevant. The teach you to read and write but beyond that they teach you to become an employee of General Motors or DuPont Corporation. When I went to school they told me that Pancho Villa was a bandit. own union we are free to take up other issues that are important to us. The Teamsters, or any other union that I know of just simply is not interested in this kind of situation,.

- Q. They are not sympathetic with you?
- A. Oh yes. We're not ruling out cooperating with them.
- Q. If the Defense Department, keeps buying up all the lettuce you'd think you'd want to get the Teamsters not to ship it to the railroads.
- A. Well, you see they can't do that right now, because no union could help us out by not handling a particular product, to stop cargo or

whatever they could be sued for every penny they've got. So they couldn't even help us that way. They help us with money etc. If you want to know something that I just found out when I talked to a meatcutters union the other day, remember the Iowa beef cutting strike they had? The Department of Defense purchased the Iowa beef. So, by my talking to other labor people, I know that we're not unique. But, rather than that the government tends to help the corporations every time there's a big, major strike in labor.

- Q. What can be done though?
- A. Continue to build power. We cost the Defense Department and raised so much hell with them, we've noticed, that they've been going down again. I don't know if any of you are familiar with the American Serviceman's Union. It's a union being organized for soldiers.

 In all the major bases of the country the soldiers conducted their own boycotts. They held fast-ins, lettuce throw-ins. We got Congressmen to yell. We got petitions. We have such a hell-kicked up, that the government doesn't want to be openly caught.
- 0. I don't think many people know about it though.
- A. Well, we make enough key people aware. It's very difficult to really get it out in front of the press. Say, in Chicago, the Chicago Tribune runs an editorial saying we're a bunch of Communists. The Sun-Times doesn't want to advertise it because all the major chain stores are connected with Woolworths and they do a tremendous amount of advertising. They try and keep it down as much as they can but we keep enough people aware so that the protest is growing. I'm talking to you right now. In every major city in the country there's people like myself. We have eight altogether in this city. Every one of us on a one to one basis are making

- people aware . They in turn raise hell. You know, we have meetings here. It's pressure. We first keep the pressure on and it works. The Department of Defense can't buy all the lettuce.
- Q. I heard that about \$3,000 a year is the minimum wage . How has that increased for farm workers.
- A. You mean now that they have a contract?
- O. Right.
- I really can't tell you, in terms of average. The lettuce pickers Α. get \$2.00 per hour, compared to \$1.60 before the boycott. We have one grower putting 10c per hour per worker into a medical fund. We have 3c per hour for an economic betterment fund. That is used to set p pension funds, retraining programs, clinics, anything else we 'feel is necessary. We have the banning of various pesticides. And a committee set up to help ban all other pesticides which create human danger. The rent! is free and the board and food. I think the gains they made are not so much the important thing as the gains they made within themselves. Five years ago I was really scared of a cop. It's like I'm in a different country. I'm a #1 rated U.S. citizen because I live here, I am right. It is no longer necessary for me to be scared. It is no longer necessary for me to be ashamed of who I am. I've learned to fight for my rights, and there are thousands of farm workers who'll never go back to the old ways. It's amazing isn't it? We can no longer go back. We ,are being replaced by more farm workers who are also learning. Throughout this country today they're catching strike fever. Coca-cola is next -- in Florida. Throughout the country the farm workers are learning that uniting is the most important

thing a union can accomplish.

- ${f Q}_{\cdot}$ I was wondering about the workers in tobacco in Maryland.
- A. No, we haven't gotten every place. There's so much throughout the country to be done.