

Boycotting pickles: A labor strategy in North Carolina

by [Leon Howell](#) in the [January 3, 2001](#) issue

Forty years after *Harvest of Shame*, Edward R. Murrow's great documentary on the exploitation of migrant workers, the shame endures. Now overwhelmingly Spanish-speaking, the nation's estimated 1.5 million farmworkers, are the most vulnerable laborers in the U.S. federal legislation excludes them from many rights most other workers have, such as a minimum wage, overtime pay and the ability to engage in collective bargaining.

North Carolina farmworkers are currently in the spotlight. An estimated 100,000 migrant workers are brought to the state each year to pick cucumbers, sweet potatoes, watermelons and tobacco on 22,000 farms. An organizing effort by the Toledo-based Farm Labor Organizing Committee (FLOC) includes a boycott of Mt. Olive Pickle Company, the Southeast's largest pickle producer.

Teams sent by the Agricultural Missions Office of the National Council of Churches, the National Farm Worker Ministry and Human Rights Watch have visited the area and reported on fear, mistreatment, intimidation, wage manipulation and illness among the workers. "I think dogs are treated better than we are," one worker told the NFWM team.

In late October *New York Times* reporter Somnia Sengupta visited a labor camp stuck behind a hog pen at the end of a dirt road on a private farm. "The rooms inside these tin-roofed, cinder-block cabins were lined with four or five beds each. Some of the mattresses had lost their springy entrails. The laundry space was no more than a metal wash basin outside. And the concrete floors were strewn with dirty boots left behind, and brochures that promised dreams on these hot bountiful fields. 'Your dollars working in Mexico,' a brochure from the North Carolina Growers Association that recruits laborers . . . read in Spanish."

Edgardo Valeriano, a Honduran-born physician and an outreach worker for the area Primary Health Care Association, told the *Chapel Hill Herald-Sun* (March 19) that only

about five of the 150 labor camps he had visited treated the workers properly. "I've seen people sick from pesticides, people working at noon in 100-degree weather with no shade," putting in 14-hour days with no overtime and one 15-minute break. "People who really believe they are Christians cannot condone this situation," Valeriano told the paper.

Few serious people deny that problems exist. The question is what to do about them. That's where FLOC, headed by the charismatic Baldemar Velasquez, comes in. After successfully organizing farmworkers in Northern Ohio, FLOC turned its sight to North Carolina several years ago. It recognized immediately the difficulty of unionizing growers in a state the *New York Times* called "famously inhospitable to unions."

FLOC brought with it an innovative and successful model worked out in Ohio after eight years of testing and struggle with Campbell Soup, Campbell's Vlasic pickle subsidiary and, later, H. J. Heinz. In a now classic story (it was the basis for a 1986 Wharton School of Business case study), FLOC bypassed the growers and concentrated on Campbell Soup, which is highly protective of its family image. The extended boycott embarrassed the company perhaps more than hurt its income.

The result in Ohio was the creation of a three-way contract settlement. Campbell and Vlasic agreed to raise the prices paid for tomatoes and cucumbers, asked the growers to participate in an association, and told them to allow the farmworkers to vote on whether to be represented by FLOC in a labor union. More than 7,000 workers now are. A commission chaired by former U.S. Secretary of Labor John Dunlap oversaw the transition.

Tom Sachs participates in the Fremont (Ohio) Pickle Growers Association that sells cucumbers to H. J. Heinz. After initial skepticism 15 years ago, he now sees the arrangement as a win-win for all sides. The prices went up, the growers' income went up, the workers' wages went up. The workers agreed not to strike. The farmers agreed not to lock them out. Housing is considerably improved, in part though state subsidies obtained by FLOC.

"Communication is much better. We had little skills in dealing with labor," Sachs said over the telephone. "The workers did not know they could lodge complaints . . . Now complaints from either side can go through the FLOC representative on-site."

In North Carolina FLOC has chosen to concentrate on Mt. Olive Pickle Company, which employs 500 people year round and 800 in peak season. Located at the intersection of Cucumber and Vine, it has been for 75 years “the company” in Mt. Olive, a town of 4,500 about 70 miles southeast of Raleigh.

According to its Web site, Mt. Olive Pickle contributes \$250,000 a year to civic and social causes. It buys 100 million pounds of cucumbers and peppers each year, about 35 percent from North Carolina growers. It sells pickles under its own name in 30 states and produces pickles for Food Lion and Harris-Teeter supermarkets under their brands.

Mt. Olive Pickle has been asked to do what Campbell Soup had done: increase its prices to entice growers into an association that would allow their workers to choose whether they want to be represented by FLOC.

Mt. Olive Pickle has said repeatedly that it does not employ farmers and that it cannot and should not dictate whom the growers must hire. Which is precisely what Campbell Soup initially said.

“Mt. Olive controls everything else,” says Ramiro Sarabia, FLOC’s North Carolina staff person, who worked in fields elsewhere for more than 20 years. “They set the price before the growing season. They supply the seeds. They dictate the pesticide. They sometimes inspect the fields. Why not take on the labor issue?”

Company president William Bryan told me that Mt. Olive can’t force its growers, who harvest cucumbers only in June and September (for four weeks each time), to accept unions. But Mt. Olive buys some cucumbers from a grower in Ohio with a FLOC contract. “We try to identify farm suppliers who meet or exceed North Carolina’s legal requirements for workers. We require our suppliers to buy from growers who are registered and have been inspected by the North Carolina Department of Labor.”

Raleigh Catholic Bishop Joseph Gossman, who joined with Toledo Bishop James Hoffman to endorse the boycott, has talked with Bryan a couple of times. “He has a reputation for taking good care of his employees,” Gossman reflects. “He takes no responsibility for those who gather our food from the ground.”

In the absence of response by Mt. Olive, FLOC proceeded in March 1999 to launch a national boycott. More than 200 groups have signed on, including the North Carolina and Ohio AFL-CIO; the United Church of Christ; the Raleigh, Toledo, Cincinnati and

Richmond Catholic dioceses; the National Farm Worker Ministry; Church Women United; and the Farmwork Ministry Committee of the North Carolina Council of Churches.

Bryan, president of Mt. Olive for the past ten years, is an indefatigable defender of Mt. Olive. He talks to all visitors, initiates phone calls, speaks to church and community groups, appeared at meetings in Florida and St. Louis in the past year. Bryan attended the NFWM board meeting outside Rocky Mount last June. He debated Velasquez before a full house at Raleigh's Pullen Memorial Baptist Church in October.

When asked about the time he devotes to countering what he considers to be unfair attacks, he responds, "I work for a great company that deserves to be defended."

Bryan says the boycott has not hurt the company's income. Since the firm is privately held, it is not possible to check. One industry paper wrote that company profits were up 14.5 percent in 1999. But the boycott clearly consumes time and energy.

"Our company has offered to talk with and participate in discussions about how to improve farmworker conditions with farmers, workers, processors, public officials, church representatives," Bryan said. "We have declined just one demand by the union. Then some people say, we are not for fair treatment of farmworkers. It's not true."

Mt. Olive's Web site says that Velasquez made "two specific demands in order for us to avoid a boycott: 1) increase cucumber prices by five percent; 2) ensure FLOC receives two-and-a-half percent of the farmworker's wage as union dues."

Velasquez says that account twists the facts. "I've been negotiating contracts since 1986. That was not a negotiating session. I would never lay out proposals in such a setting. We have a whole set of issues for which we negotiate. If Bryan wants a proposal, we'll give him one."

While FLOC organizes the workers—Sarabia says more than 3,000 workers have signed cards asking for union authorization—many congregations, civic groups, student organizations and others work to build support for the boycott in the state. People leaflet shoppers at area supermarkets weekly. Farmworkers visit churches. Student groups march. The *Duke Chronicle* had such a lively exchange about the

boycott that Mt. Olive bought a quarter-page ad presenting its case. A march from Mt. Olive to Raleigh, the state capital, in the blistering heat in 1998 garnered considerable attention.

Some church groups do not consider the boycott fair. The Episcopal Diocese of North Carolina turned down a boycott resolution a year ago. Bryan participated in the debate. In April the Commission of Church and Society of the United Methodist North Carolina Conference had a hearing, "Mediating Toward Justice for All: The Pickle Industry," but took no action on the boycott. Some neutral observers say the hearing was loaded with defenders of Mt. Olive, including Bryan.

The New Hope Presbytery has delayed for more than a year endorsement of a grant to FLOC by the Presbyterian Hunger Program, the 30-year-old effort that gives \$3 million a year to national and international groups "working to alleviate hunger and eliminate its causes." A January 20 meeting will bring presbytery and Hunger Program personnel together to discuss the issue. If the presbytery disapproves and the Hunger Program decides to go ahead with the grant, which it can do, an appeal is possible. Interestingly, the Maumee Valley Presbytery in Ohio appealed such a grant to FLOC in the early 1980s. It lost. In 1990 the presbytery supported a second grant wholeheartedly and later gave a peacemaking award to Velasquez, Campbell and the Campbell's Growers' Association.

Last February a Hunger Program hearing took place in the Mt. Hope Presbyterian Church, where leaders from the Mt. Hope community strongly defended the pickle company. Steve Frazier, the pastor, told me he was deeply committed both to farmworker issues and the growing Hispanic community. "But I am not sympathetic to an unjust boycott to achieve a justifiable end." Citing good wages and working conditions for a diverse workforce—49 percent black, 17 percent Hispanic, 34 percent white—he added, "Theologically speaking, the pickle company is an agent of divine justice." (Retired Presbyterian minister James McChesney, from Goldsboro, has urged people to "buy and eat more [Mt. Olive] pickles.")

Bishop Gossman, on the other hand, feels "the cause is just. Mt. Olive, like Campbell's, is a fair target. It would not be easy, but Mt. Olive has the power to make a significant difference."

In the meantime, national church bodies are taking notice. The National Council of Churches passed a resolution at its November assembly supporting FLOC's efforts to

organize a union, calling on Mt. Olive to negotiate with FLOC, and directed a team to visit the area to “facilitate and monitor the status of contract negotiations,” reporting to the February Executive Board meeting “for further action, including endorsement of a boycott if necessary.” Schedule permitting, NCC president Andrew Young will join NCC General Secretary Robert Edgar and others on the trip.

The General Board of Church and Society of the United Methodist Church sent a team, headed by Bishop Joel Martinez, to study the situation. It could endorse the boycott at its March meeting if negotiating progress is not made. John Thomas, president of the United Church of Christ, which endorsed the boycott at its 1999 General Synod, says this is a “classic example of churches standing by those left out of the economy, even during expansion.” He added that “Baldemar Velasquez has the wherewithal, the charisma, the integrity to create justice.”

It figures to be a long struggle. Still, Velasquez, winner of a MacArthur Foundation “genius” grant in 1989, is encouraged by what has happened in the first two years of the boycott. “We are further along in North Carolina than we were in year five in Ohio. There we were starting from scratch and had to prove ourselves. Now we have a track record. People will support grass-roots organizing if they trust the organizers. And know we are going to go the whole way. We are. We say to Mr. Bryan, ‘You’ve got the money, we’ve got the time.’”