

Farm worker victory: Mushroom farmers lead the way

by [Leon Howell](#) in the [January 5, 2000](#) issue

When United Farm Workers organizer Frank Curiel answered the phone in mid-December, he had just come from Quincy Farms, which each year produces 25 million pounds of white button mushrooms and 500,000 pounds of giant portobellos. He had attended the weekly “workers board” meeting, at which a union representative, five workers and five company managers discuss working conditions and productivity at the Southeast’s largest mushroom grower.

Less than two years ago, such a meeting would have seemed improbable. As I described in these pages (see “Picking a protest,” March 4, 1998), the workers were struggling to get organized. And such a meeting would have been an almost unimaginable idea in December 1996, when Curiel arrived in Quincy, a run-down former tobacco-growing town in Florida’s panhandle, 40 miles northwest of Tallahassee and hard by the Georgia and Alabama borders.

Curiel had come at the request of Quincy Farms workers who had run into a brick wall in their efforts to talk with management. The company had dismissed 84 workers (after arresting 24 of them) in March 1996 for staging a lunch-hour demonstration. They sought safer working conditions, greater respect from supervisors and higher wages.

But on July 20, 1999, Quincy Farms and the UFW signed an 18-month union contract. It is the only such agreement among Florida’s 300,000 farm workers. About 450 harvesters (mostly Hispanics), who pick the mushrooms in moist air-cooled rooms, and packers (mostly African Americans), who prepare the mushrooms for shipment, are covered.

The once hostile sides agreed to cooperate with each other to increase workers’ income and company productivity. Hourly wages went up. A profit-sharing program is in place. Health care is more affordable. All of those who lost their jobs and wanted them back have them back. The *New York Times* reported a festive

celebration by workers and management after the contract was signed.

“We’ve come a long way,” Curiel says. “The workers, the company and the union are working in a participatory way. The supervisors treat the workers with more respect. The personnel office now has someone who speaks Spanish. I think production is up, quality is up, job security is up. It’s like Esperanza Rodriguez, a 16-year worker, told the National Farm Worker Ministry meeting last week, ‘For the first time ever, I like to go to work.’”

Greg Verhagen, plant manager since March 1999, echoed Curiel’s views. “Things are going very well. The contract has forced us to communicate with our workers, which we should have been doing all along. We’re making changes in our operations. Our goal here is not to fight but to have joint prosperity.”

Time will tell how well it works. But for now it is a victory to savor. Farm workers, the *Los Angeles Times* wrote on Thanksgiving Day, “are the poorest and most marginalized of laborers in the U.S. They earn an average of \$6,500 per year, and more than two-thirds live in poverty. [They] have consistently been denied the legal protections provided to other workers.”

The Quincy Farms contract did not happen through a sudden burst of good will. Confronting power creates conflict. The contract was signed after three harsh, risky years of give-and-take, a masterful organizing effort, a boycott, picketing of the plant and stores that sell Quincy Farms mushrooms, and strong support from a variety of church groups, the NAACP, Florida Legal Services and others.

Quincy Farms vigorously resisted the union. It called UFW organizers outside agitators; pitted the African-American packers against the Hispanic pickers; hinted that the plant, the largest employer (with 660 total workers) in a poor county, might close if the pressure continued; refused to meet with nationally known church personalities; and did such things as give \$10,000 to Henry J. Lyons, then president of the National Baptist Convention, U.S.A., now a convicted felon, who publicly supported the company.

The turning point came in September 1998. Several small grocery chains had stopped selling Quincy Farms mushrooms. A lawsuit brought on behalf of the fired workers by Florida Legal Services threatened to cost the company millions of dollars. Some evidence pointed to diminished income, although the company publicly denied it. Then a national chain, Pizza Hut, announced that it would no longer purchase

Quincy Farm mushrooms.

Fred Morris, executive director of the Florida Council of Churches, had written to the president of Pizza Hut, asking that the company use its “obvious commercial and moral influence with Quincy Farms management to encourage them to allow the workers to organize a union of their own choice.” Others figures wrote such letters or visited with Pizza Hut executives. Neither Morris nor anyone else received a reply. But a week after Morris’s letter went out, Pizza Hut canceled its contract with Quincy Farms.

A week later, Dennis Zensen, chief executive of Sylvan Inc., Quincy Farms’ parent company, met privately with UFW president Arturo Rodriguez, who is Cesar Chavez’s son-in-law. Zensen has said they “agreed in principle” to a settlement. Soon the hardline manager, Rick Lazzarini, who told me two years ago that “the overwhelming majority” of the workers did not want a union, was out of his job. (“He has retired” is all Quincy Farms says.) Verhagen, a Canadian used to working with unionized labor, took over. Verhagen accepted a union after 68 percent of the workers signed cards saying they wanted the UFW to represent them.

“People are proud of what they have done,” Curiel said. “What has happened here is much bigger than the plant itself. It has pulled the whole community together—African-Americans, Latinos, Anglos. I have been an organizer for 28 years and this is the most interesting, exciting and satisfying experience I’ve ever had.”

The successful effort gives the UFW—which is gaining strength after a fallow decade—a welcome boost. Most of the union’s 27,500 members are in California. It now has a foothold in Florida, although no plans to organize elsewhere in the state have been announced. Curiel has his hands full in Quincy. “It’s important that this succeed so other growers can’t say, ‘A union will cost us too much.’ And the new contract here is just over a year away.”

In November, seeking to build on the Quincy Farms success, organizations such as the Florida Catholic Conference, the Florida Council of Churches, Religious Leaders Concerned and the National Farm Worker Ministry created the Florida Alliance for Farm Worker Justice. It recognizes the need to support other farm workers, such as the 1,700 migrants picking tomatoes in Immokalee on Florida’s southwest coast who went on strike in mid-December, claiming that the price they get for a 32-pound bucket of tomatoes is the same as it was 20 years ago. The aim of the alliance, says Patricia Chivers of the Florida Catholic Conference, is to “help raise justice issues

concerning farm workers now and for the next generation.”