

Baldemar Velasquez: A Man With a Strong Constitution

By Veronica Dahlberg

Baldemar Velasquez insists he's not tired. Though he admits he gets discouraged "at least once a week." He's been fighting 40 years to improve conditions for farm workers and immigrant laborers through the organization he founded in 1968, in Toledo, Ohio, known as FLOC (Farm Labor Organizing Committee). At 58-years-old, he likes to say the word "retirement" is not in his vocabulary. Velasquez recently won a major victory in September of 2004 when FLOC signed an agreement covering 8,000 workers in 1,000 farms in North Carolina. The agreement was with the Mount Olive Pickle Corporation and the North Carolina Grower's Association, which every year brings in 8,000 workers from Mexico through the H2A guest-worker program, many of whom are contracted on Mt. Olive farms. In 1995, when Velasquez began looking into the

cucumber industry, workers were earning as little as 55 cents for every 33-pound bucket of cucumbers, and lived in dilapidated housing

reach Maya. Arrangements are made to visit members of Congress in Washington D.C. on the National Day of Action. A rally is planned for a park near the White House, as well as a press conference. FLOC recently learned the so-called "Minutemen" of Arizona, a group of anti-immigrant vigilante border watchers, would be going to the rally, as well as the extreme-type radio talk shows. "When we heard these groups were going, there was a lot debate—'Should we go? Shouldn't we?'" Maya said. "So it was decided we would write a letter to the Congressman, letting them know who these groups are. We won't let ourselves be distracted. We've planned for



Photo by Alejandro Rivera

Baldemar Velasquez, 58, the tenacious founder and leader of the Farm Labor Organizing Committee (FLOC), based in Toledo, Ohio. Velasquez is standing inside Cresencio and Vicenta Velasquez Memorial Hall, the FLOC meeting room named after his parents.



Cesar Chavez, American hero, leader of migrant farm workers, and recipient of the Presidential Medal of Freedom, was a close associate of Baldemar Velasquez. Photo courtesy of Baldemar Velasquez.

provided by the corporation. In 1997, FLOC began a two-year quest to negotiate with the company to improve conditions, using strategies such as letter writing, rallies, prayer vigils and even a four day march from the town of Mt. Olive to the state capital in Raleigh, North Carolina. With no success, FLOC called a national boycott of Mt. Olive pickle products in March of 1999. The September 2004 agreement ended the five-year boycott and led to several improvements in housing, healthcare and other issues for workers, including a 10-percent wage increase, and at least a half-day off every week in a "Freedom to Worship" clause.

The FLOC office is located in the heart of the Latino barrio in Toledo. On a recent Friday in April, Velasquez and his longtime organizer, Beatriz Maya, were making plans for a bus trip to Washington D.C. for the National Day of Action for Immigrant Rights on April 27. A dance was held in Toledo on April 17, with the group *Tormenta Musical*, to help raise funds for the trip. At the FLOC offices, the phone rings all day. Callers are instructed by the voicemail system to "press 3 for organizing and boycotts" to

them to provoke us, but we won't respond."

Maya is accustomed to adversity. She is originally from Buenos Aires, Argentina, where she was active in fighting against the military dictatorship. She moved to Toledo in 1992, and applied for a job with FLOC. "I love the work I do, I love it," she says. But agrees the work is discouraging at times. "The conditions are better for workers, but there is still a lot to do," Maya says. "There are still labor camps licensed by the Ohio Department of Health that are in poor condition; dilapidated," she adds. "We try to educate people about what is the Latino reality; the reality of farm workers."

The farm worker reality left a permanent imprint on Baldemar Velasquez. It's what drives and continues to motivate him. His campaigns have led to contracts for improved conditions covering thousands of workers on farms in Ohio, Michigan and now North Carolina. He recalls when he was five-years-old, migrating with his family from Pharr, Texas, to Port Clinton, Ohio, for a sugar beet company. "We got stranded there actually," Velasquez says. "We didn't make enough money to go back. We had to

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borrow money from the farmers just to eat. It was around 1952 or '53. We got so far in debt that winter that we had to work for free all summer for the farmers just to work off the debt my dad got just to buy food," Velasquez said.

"And that went on for seven years. It took us seven years to get out of debt and get back to Texas." It was a childhood of hard work for Velasquez, his parents and siblings. "I can tell you about strawberries and tomatoes and cucumbers, apples, oranges

and grapefruit, picking cotton with those long sacks," Velasquez says. "I did all of that." His worst memories are harvesting potatoes. "You got to stoop down and fill a basket that weighs 30-40 pounds when full," Velasquez says. "You've got to lift it and dump it in the wagon, and then you've got to bend down and fill it up again. Whew, all day," Velasquez recalls. He grabs the office wastebasket and places it between his legs and stoops way over, demonstrating the technique he has never forgotten. "The third day on the job, you can barely walk. You get paid like \$30 an acre."

"I saw the misery and the cheating, the robbing of our wages, the verbally abusive field men from the company," Velasquez

said. "You know, when they insult your mom and your brothers and your sisters, all of that— you get angry," Velasquez said. "I vowed then that when I got older, if I could do something about it, I was going to do something."

Velasquez began organizing at the age of 19. "I didn't really know what to do. I didn't know the terminology for the ex-



Migrant farm workers like these on Virginia's Eastern Shore, still suffer from low wages and deplorable housing.

periences I had. I just knew something was wrong," he said. FLOC began as a civil rights organization, inspired by the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. "I was watching how the African Americans were fighting for their rights and I said, well, why not us?" Velasquez said. He was not aware of Cesar Chavez and the United Farm Workers in California. "When I heard of Cesar, I went to see him in the winter of 1968. I wanted to meet this guy. When I heard what he was doing, it gave us hope that we could do it here, too," Velasquez said. "We spent a lot of time together from that point on over the years." Chavez came to Ohio several times, including spending the final two days in a 560-mile march with Velasquez and

100 supporters from Toledo to Campbell Soup headquarters in Camden, New Jersey, in 1983. The protest led to an agreement for wage increases and benefits for 800 Ohio farm workers in 1986. "Cesar and I spent a lot of time talking about how to overcome this or that problem," Velasquez said. "You knew he was a man who was sold to the cause regardless of the consequences to himself. When he passed, he left a big void."

Like Chavez,

placing himself at the forefront of challenging the *status quo* for migrant farm workers has been dangerous for Velasquez. The walls of the FLOC offices are lined with photos and framed newspaper clippings detailing decades of struggle. There is a signed photo of Cesar Chavez hanging on one wall, and photos of Velasquez being arrested, being beat with police batons. He was arrested at least 37 times during protests in the past 40 years, bitten by law enforcement dogs and beat up several times. A yellowed clipping from an old Latino newspaper in Toledo, *Nuestra Lucha*, is laminated and set on a desk. A front page article and editorial decries immigration raids as a tool used by the government to terrorize Mexican laborers and keep them from asserting their rights. It describes a raid on Sept. 28, 1976 at Maag Farms in Ottawa, Ohio, where men, women and children were arrested and taken away from the fields where they worked. In the FLOC meeting hall, a large photograph of Velasquez's parents, Cresencio and Vicenta, hangs prominently in the front. Banners carried in protests lean against the walls.

Velasquez says he doesn't see himself as a Chicano leader, or even a labor union



One of the first FLOC-led rallies to improve conditions for farm workers in northwest Ohio.



Beatriz Maya, longtime organizer at FLOC and advocate for immigrant's rights.

leader. "I see my role as a person standing up for righteousness. I can best explain the life of a migrant, because I can say it in a language the *gueros* understand and need to hear," Velasquez said. "Having grown up mad about these things that happened to me and my family, that's what happens to people when they get stepped on all their life. They get mad," Velasquez said. "I'm not mad anymore. God took care of that at one point in my life. He translated it into a constructive channel. That's why I don't get tired."