

United Farm Workers launches reactionary “Take Our Jobs” campaign

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The United Farm Workers of America (UFW) last month launched a campaign dubbed “Take Our Jobs,” which supposedly aims to prove that unemployed American workers would never enter the farm labor workforce. Unemployed workers are encouraged to go to the campaign’s web site and submit their information to the UFW, which will then assist in connecting them with potential employers.

The challenge serves, UFW President Arturo Rodriguez explained, as a tongue-in-cheek method of refuting the myth that immigrants, undocumented or not, are “taking the jobs” of American citizens.

In fact the campaign only lays bare the disdain with which the UFW bureaucrats view their own members, farm workers, and the American working class in general. This is a “union” that revels in the miserable conditions confronting those it ostensibly represents.

Rodriguez recently appeared on Comedy Central’s *The Colbert Report* to make light of the working conditions of farm workers and to use these as a justification for the argument that immigrants are not taking the jobs of Americans. Rodriguez told Colbert: “Americans do not want to work in the fields. It’s very difficult work, it requires a lot of expertise. And the conditions are horrid. I mean I was in the fields on Tuesday with grape workers out in Delano, California, in the San Joaquin Valley, it was over 100 degrees ... people don’t want to work in that.”

The UFW’s web site further elaborates on the conditions facing farm workers: “[farm workers deal with] miserable conditions—inadequate shade and water, dangerous pesticide exposure, extremely low wages, and disrespectful treatment.” Previous studies have shown that nearly 75 percent of farm workers earn less than \$10,000 a year and 90 percent lack health insurance.

These dire conditions are further evidenced by numerous worker deaths due to heat exposure each year. Farm workers are forced to work in many cases under a piece-rate pay system (meaning they are paid for how much they pick),

which is a source of life-and-death pressure under conditions of extreme temperatures that often exceed 90 or 100 degrees Fahrenheit in the summer. (See “California: Charges brought in death of teenage farm worker”)

Inquirers who visit the campaign web site are met with the warning: “Job may include using hand tools such as knives, hoes, shovels, etc. Duties may include tilling the soil, transplanting, weeding, thinning, picking, cutting, sorting & packing of harvested produce. May set up & operate irrigation equip. Work is performed outside in all weather conditions (Summertime 90+ degree weather) & is physically demanding requiring workers to bend, stoop, lift & carry up to 50 lbs on a regular basis.”

While the UFW attempts to portray “American” workers as incapable of doing strenuous manual labor in a taxing environment, its real condescension is reserved for those it claims to represent: farm workers. The campaign fully acknowledges the deadly conditions farm workers labor in, implicitly arguing that only immigrant workers should be subjected to such conditions.

When Rodriguez told Colbert of the “horrid” and “miserable” conditions facing farm workers, he conveniently failed to mention that the UFW has done nothing for decades to improve the situation. Indeed, the current campaign signifies that union officials have no intention of improving the working and living standards of farm workers.

The UFW no longer exists as a “union” in any meaningful historical sense. Founded in 1962 by Cesar Chavez, the UFW’s membership once reached a high of 100,000, but has since dwindled and remained around 5,000 for nine consecutive years.

It long ago gave up any pretense of fighting for farm workers, instead converting itself into a consumer protest group and a money-making business venture. It urges “consumers” to “raise their voice,” stating: “Consumers in this country are the ultimate power when it comes to requiring higher standards from companies—as we can always vote with our dollars.”

Consumer pressure tactics like the reactionary “Take Our Jobs” campaign have their origins in the middle class protest politics style developed by Chavez in the 1960s and 1970s. Basing its defense on appeals to consumers and sections of big business, the UFW’s outlook openly rejects the power of the working class.

Like the US trade union movement as a whole, the material fate of the UFW bureaucracy is not at all tied to the well being of its membership. Financial records from 2009 indicate that the UFW has more than \$2.1 million on hand, money secured through “member” dues and a semi-criminal web of business relationships that were revealed in 2006 article in the *Los Angeles Times* in 2006 by Miriam Pawel.

“Chavez’s heirs run a web of tax-exempt organizations that exploit his legacy and invoke the harsh lives of farmworkers to raise millions of dollars in public and private money,” Pawel wrote. “Most of the funds go to burnish the Chavez image and expand the family business, a multimillion-dollar enterprise with an annual payroll of \$12 million that includes a dozen Chavez relatives.

“The UFW is the linchpin of the Farm Worker Movement, a network of a dozen tax-exempt organizations that do business with one another, enrich friends and family, and focus on projects far from the fields: They build affordable housing in San Francisco and Albuquerque, own a top-ranked radio station in Phoenix, run a political campaign in support of an Indian casino and lobby for gay marriage.”

For the UFW bureaucrats the old union standard, the red flag with black Aztec eagle, has become a corporate logo. The marketing campaign is topped off with the trademarked phrase “si se puede!,” which provided the inspiration for Obama’s 2008 campaign slogan, “Yes, we can!”

This is not simply a story of corrupt individual bureaucrats. Globalization has rendered labor unions obsolete and reactionary. Where they still represent workers, UFW officials, like their counterparts in other unions, have collaborated with corporate farms and the government to ensure that farm workers remain exploited as a cheap source of labor—and in doing so have continued to ensure themselves a place at the table.

The reactionary character of “Take Our Jobs” is further revealed by the campaign’s aim to “[spotlight] the immigrant labor issue and [underscore] the need for reforms.” The immigration “reforms” that the UFW alludes to, as it none too shyly indicates on its web site, are those being proposed by the Obama administration, the Democratic Party, and sections of big business.

Obama has seized on the recent anti-immigrant legislation passed in Arizona to promote his own repressive “comprehensive immigration reform,” which he said would be along the lines of a plan pushed by Republican senator

Lindsey Graham of South Carolina and Democratic senator Charles Schumer of New York earlier this year.

That legislation included a requirement that undocumented workers “admit they broke the law[,] pay their debt to society by performing community service and paying fines and back taxes” and then “pass background checks and be proficient in English before going to the back of the line of prospective immigrants to earn the opportunity to work toward lawful permanent residence.” From there immigrants would be funneled into a “guest worker” program where they would have virtually no rights and would work entirely at the mercy of their employers, according to the Schumer and Graham scheme. A central component of this so-called reform would be the further militarization of the US-Mexico border and more militarized workplace raids, both of which have already been stepped up under Obama.

Obama intends to keep the immigrant labor force in a limbo-like position so that it can continue to be used as a super-exploited segment of the working class.

The UFW supports the Democratic Party’s comprehensive immigration reform for just this reason. Since the 1990s, over 50 percent of farm workers were not legally authorized to work in the US. If legal status were applied to farm workers, regardless of whatever democratic rights were taken away, the UFW would have easier access to a sizable membership base from which they could collect dues.

In this regard the “Take Our Jobs” campaign serves as just another tactic by the labor bureaucracy to subordinate the working class to the Democratic Party. The Democrat’s calls for immigration reform do not serve the interests of the working class, immigrant or not. Only the destruction of national boundaries and the unification of the international working class will set the stage for the realization of workers’ true interests.



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