

# VCR Reporter

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## Home to roost

Fidel Fernandez's reinstatement at Ventura's PictSweet Mushroom Farms plant holds a lot more significance than just his back pay—although the total can't be insignificant after all this time.

Fernandez, a harvester who had been fired 14 months ago for his part in a labor-management dispute, recently returned to work to the clamor of red-shirted supporters. A decision in early June by the Agricultural Labor Relations Board ruled that Fernandez had been unfairly fired because of his affiliation with the United Farm Workers (UFW) union.

The finding also contended that Fernandez had engaged in a protected union activity when he came to the defense of a co-worker allegedly harassed by his supervisors.

"You are hereby offered immediate reinstatement to your former position," UFW President Ruben Franco stated in a letter of confirmation, "without prejudice to your seniority or other rights and privileges of employment."

PictSweet was also ordered to issue Fernandez back wages.

Fernandez was rehired, he contended, through a time-honored union precept—strength in numbers.

"The other workers," he said, "saw something that you almost never see—that a worker in the fields gets fired and one day returns to work is not an easy or common thing, because when a worker struggles alone to get back his job, it will never happen.

"When we organize ourselves and have the support of the UFW," he said, "we make sure that the laws are enforced. We defend each other and protect ourselves."

The community at large was a source of aid as well, Fernandez reported. Friends helped with the bills while Fernandez's children offered to get jobs. The local Commission for Farmworkers' Rights office held fund-raisers, and his wife received food and money from a local church.

All the while, Fernandez did his share, traveling and continuing to organize and speak on the Ventura matter—the demand for a labor union pact, safer working conditions and a system of arbitration to address grievances like his.

He visited a mushroom plant at Watsonville, where conditions are reportedly much improved following implementation of a contract there.

Things slowly seem to be taking a similar turn at PictSweet, Fernandez added. Workers are now issued gloves for picking and head lamps for light. Utility rooms are cleaner and newly ventilated, and new drinking water filters have been installed.

"The company has seen our strength," Fernandez declared. "They realize that we are not going to abandon this struggle until we win the contract we deserve."

PictSweet laborers have been working to effect a contract since 1988. In addition to the union activities in which they have taken part, they've urged with some success that consumers and commercial firms boycott PictSweet purchases.

—Leah Wells