

JIM HIGHTOWER

As American as Apple Pie

The Powers That Be constantly try to keep the progressive majority divided: workers against environmentalists, enviros. against farmers, farmers against consumers, consumers against workers, and around and around it goes. As we squawk and squabble with each other, they scoot off with ever more of our money and power, laughing all the way.

It's when we break this self-defeating circle that we put a little progress back in "progressive," much to the consternation of those Powers That Be, as we've seen recently with coalition efforts to pass everything from living-wage ordinances to public financing of elections. It's never easy to forge such coalitions—about like trying to load frogs in a wheelbarrow—but it's essential to the development of a true progressive movement that can be stronger than our separate parts.

If you were to map out a rational coalition strategy for a movement, you probably wouldn't start by trying to link farmers and farmworkers, two groups that have a long history of animosity and conflict. But organizing a movement sometimes has less to do with rationality than it does with creativity and opportunity, and, as Guadalupe Gamboa puts it, "In times of trouble is when people are open to new ideas."

A Different Way

■ Lupe Gamboa is a regional director of the United Farm Workers of America (UFW), and from his base in Washington State this grassroots union leader knows plenty about times of trouble. The number-one crop there is apples, mostly produced around the central Washington towns of Wenatchee and Yakima. The apples are picked and packed by some 60,000 farmworkers, of whom 95 percent are Mexicans, averaging only \$7,000 a year in pay, with no benefits. They live in cramped and often squalid housing, are constantly exposed to pesticides and suffer everything from ruined backs to early death as they toil in one of America's most dangerous industries.

So, time to strike against the apple growers, right? *¡Huelga!*

No, says Gamboa and the UFW, we need a different way, because family farmers are not really the power in this multibillion-dollar industry. Indeed, farmers are suffering too, typically getting less money for their apples than it costs to produce them, which means they're being squeezed out of business. It's not that they're inefficient producers but that, ironically, both the apple farmers and workers are literally at the bottom of a food chain controlled by massive, monopolistic middlemen dictating prices from far-away corporate headquarters.

In the big-business fresh-apple economy, those who do the most get the least, which is perverse since, after all, an apple is an apple. From tree to you, very little has to be done to it. Yet only a pittance of what you pay in the supermarket trickles back to the actual producers. Here's how today's apple dollar is sliced: Workers get 4 cents, the farmer gets 7 cents, wholesalers and transporters take 21 cents and then comes the hog. The retailers, dominated by Wal-Mart and Safeway, grab 68 cents of every dollar.

These powerhouses have consolidated and nationalized their purchasing operations, eliminating regional buyers that dealt with individual growers. This further concentrates the big chains' buying power. Wal-Mart, now the largest grocery chain in the United States, proudly proclaims that it offers "Low Prices, Always," but those low prices (and high profits) are derived from its ability to bully the last dime from suppliers and extract the last ounce of toil from labor. Someone down the line always pays for Wal-Mart's cutthroat practices, and in apples those someones are the hard-hit farmers and the oppressed farmworkers, neither of whom Wal-Mart's ruling billionaires have to look in the eyes.

"Up to now we've been fighting with the employers," says Lupe Gamboa, "but it's time to take on the retailers." Taking them on, however, includes a positive and creative initiative that UFW is proposing: Fair

Trade Apples. Rather than surrender to the top-down restructuring of the industry, the Fair Trade campaign creates an economic partnership among the union, willing growers, retailers and consumers.

A Nickel's Worth of Fairness

■ At the heart of the plan is a Fair Trade price premium that would come back to the growers and workers. Retailers would pay a bit extra per pound, either eating this small increase or passing it along to us apple buyers. Fair Trade Apples would bear stickers with the UFW's black eagle symbol, certifying to consumers that these fruits allow the farmer to earn a fairer return and workers to earn a fairer wage. As little as a nickel-a-pound premium could make the difference, a negligible sum on a high-volume, highly profitable grocery item.

The Fair Trade process begins in the orchards, where growers would agree to a union contract assuring better wages, a small pension and safety and health protections for apple workers. In turn, the farmers get an able and stable work force, a certified UFW label on their apples that carries special clout with consumers, and a premium price. Grocers get a premium product that can generate extra sales and a ton of community goodwill.

The key is you and me. As retailers have learned from organics, fair trade coffee and no-sweat garments, there's a growing market of consumers who care about how products are produced—care to the point that they'll pay more if necessary. UFW is betting that we'll also be there for apples, and it's planning a grassroots campaign through churches, campuses, unions, consumer groups and other networks.

One grower of organic apples is on the verge of signing the first contract, and some two dozen co-op grocers on the West Coast and in Minnesota are prepared to be the first retailers to market them. If it works with apples, it can work with other crops, solidifying the farmer/farmworker coalition and bringing a measure of progress to fields long barren of justice. To offer your support, contact the Fair Trade Apple Campaign at (206) 789-1947 or apples@ufwmail.com.