

Farm Workers Resist Trump's Policies

President Trump is touting his aggressive approach toward removing undocumented workers from the U.S. as one of his first-100-days achievements, but resistance is growing, too, reports Dennis J Bernstein.

By Dennis J Bernstein

President Trump's promised purge of undocumented people from the United States is facing resistance from the United Farm Workers (UFW) and other groups in California that reject this rollback of civil rights and workers' rights.

On March 31, the birthday of the late founder of the UFW, Cesar Chavez, the union kicked off a month-long series of activities to fight back against Trump's anti-immigrant policies, which many analysts believe is designed to make life so miserable and difficult in the U.S. that people begin to "self-deport in" in large numbers.

I spoke to Arturo Rodriguez, President of the United Farm Workers, on March 31 about Cesar Chavez's contributions to the Farm Labor Movement and the effects of ICE raids on communities in California and around the country.

Dennis Bernstein: We know that there's a great deal of work ahead of you. We are in the age of Trump. And this possesses interesting and multiple challenges. And I know that the farmworkers are up for that and there are many plans being made. But I really would like to take a moment for you to remind us about Cesar Chavez. Tell us about who the man was, and the significance of the work, because obviously it's going to continue to resonate. And we're going to talk about that in a moment. But, please let's remember him, for the moment.

Arturo Rodriguez: Cesar Chavez, he was like anyone else, he was determined, he devoted his whole life towards working on behalf of the poorest of the poor of the farmworkers. He, himself, his family, they all were a part of the migrant farmworkers stream throughout the state of California, and other areas as well, the state of Oregon, and so forth.

He realized at a very young age that he did not want to continue to see people mistreated, and abused, and exploited, and have to go through what his family did, and what his mom and dad did, and his brothers and sisters. So he made a decision early on in his life that someday he wanted to tackle that, and to do the best that he could do and make a contribution towards bettering the life and the respect and dignity for the women and the men that harvest our fruits and vegetables, Dennis.

DB: And so, here it is, 2017, Trump is clearly... he is like the classical white

supremacist. Not only is he that in theory, but [...] when it comes to imposing the kind of policies that reflect his racism, he hasn't wasted any time. So, could you just talk a little bit about what's been happening in the trenches with the United Farm Workers? How you all have been acting, preparing, planning, and fighting back?

AR: Well, Dennis, it's a very good question, and we're extremely disappointed, in terms of what the Trump administration has done, and the decisions that they've been making, and the way that they call out immigrants in this country and make them feel like they're not here to make a contribution, which is just the opposite. We would not be the nation we are today without the hard work, and the sacrifice, and the contribution that immigrant workers make to our nation.

And so, we have been, along with all of our sister organizations, the Cesar Chavez Foundation, the UFW Foundation and other organizations, have been doing everything we can to, first of all, ensure and educate workers, farmworkers, throughout various states, what their rights are as immigrants, what their opportunities are, how they can defend themselves.

And we've set up a special organization, the UFW Foundation, which has a number of offices throughout the state of California, right now, and Arizona, to go out and to be available, to have representatives that are certified by the federal government, in order to deal with issues around immigration. And we've been working with networks of attorneys throughout all the various rural communities, to ensure that, in the event that farmworkers are picked up, or anyone, any immigrant is picked up in the rural communities, that they can immediately contact us, and we can get in touch with attorneys to be able to assist them. And to provide them the guidance that they need, and the reassurance. And get in touch with their families and help them go through the process. And, hopefully, avoid them being sent across the border. And so, that's been a major part of our work these last few months.

But, in addition to that, we know, at the same time we need to bring people together, Dennis. And, we need to continue to demonstrate to the federal government, to demonstrate to the Trump administration, that we are continuing the fight, to make sure that farmworkers, that immigrants are protected in this nation. And so, we decided to celebrate the anniversary of Cesar Chavez's birthday with a series of events.

And we're [...] coordinating activities in seven different states: Florida, Texas, Arizona, California, Oregon, Washington, and Nevada. To get people engaged, to get people participating, and making sure that, again, everybody is aware what their rights are, but demonstrate the unity that exists with us.

And we're bringing together our sisters and brothers from the Muslim community, and many of the other immigrant communities, so that we can all act united, especially throughout these rural communities which, oftentimes, they're not taken into account because of all the activities that take place in our urban centers. But it's very, very important for us to do that.

[...]

We want to send a strong message to Donald Trump that we are here to stay. That we make a contribution to America, and that's why we came here to begin with, as immigrants, as farmworkers, to be able to ensure that we have a viable agricultural industry that continues to dominate the world in the production of fruits and vegetables, throughout our nation, and throughout our state.

DB: Now, it's really important that we come to you to make sure we keep a human face on this story. And we know in your position as head, President of the United Farm Workers a lot of stories are coming through your desk. And can you just share a couple of stories that can help the people who aren't experiencing this understand how dangerous it feels now? And the kinds of pressures—it's sort of this pressure, it's this policy of "brutalize them so much, hit them so hard, come at them from so many different directions, that they will, as they like to say 'self deport'." You want to just keep that human face on it, for a moment?

AR: Sure, of course, Dennis. I think about, right now, in terms of what happened in McFarland, California, it's about three weeks ago now. Where workers were going to work, early in the morning, and they noticed that there was a car that was parked along the side. And it wasn't marked. And the next thing they know that they were being stopped and it turned out to be ICE agents. And there was four individuals there in the car. And, as a result, the ICE agents asked them all for their papers, and whether they had legal status here in the country or not. And immediately, obviously the workers... no matter how much you try to share with them the importance of not saying anything, it's a difficult situation when somebody approaches you with a gun, and you don't know exactly what to do. And you feel the intimidation and the coercion, and a sense of fear there. And so, they were very honest and upfront with the ICE agents.

And, as a result of that, before we knew it, within 24 hours, two of them had already been deported to Nogales, Mexico. And so we never got a chance to really help those individuals, but we were successful in helping two other folks.

And we've set up in Kern County, the third largest agricultural county in the United States today. And that's where Bakersfield is at, Dennis, and McFarland, and Delano, and many of the other rural communities are, and Lamont and so

forth. And so, we're working there with a network of attorneys, and they have a group of about twenty attorneys that are there helping and assisting anybody that needs legal help. And they're going out and doing these information sessions across the county, to really remind people, in terms of what's happening. But, again, that was an incident that just recently happened.

We have another situation in Delano, California, where a worker was taking his daughter to school one morning and, again, an ICE agent stopped him on the way and asked him for his papers and so, immediately, he had to call someone to pick up his daughter, because they were going to take him in. And as a result, again, we had to step in and assist that particular worker in regards to the situation he was confronted with there, with the ICE agents.

DB: How old was his daughter?

AR: She was in the elementary school, so about nine, ten, at that age.

DB: There's an experience, right?

AR: It's a very, very scary situation. And we constantly hear people telling us, "Look, we don't want to go out. We're fearful about going any place other [than] work." And so, folks are making other arrangements, for their children to be picked up from school, or from babysitters. They're not going shopping like they used to anymore. There are a lot of things that they are staying away from, Dennis, because of the fact that there's that fear there right now that exists. And, the life in these communities, especially in these rural areas where farmworkers live and work at, it's just completely different from what it used to be, prior to the Donald Trump administration.

DB: Now, in terms of the formal actions, what is the California Legislature doing? I know there's a number of actions happening, in terms of legal representation for undocumented folks, all kinds of things around standing up against any kind of registry. Have you weighed-in on some of this stuff? Do you think there needs to be expanded legal support for the workers that you represent, and for the undocumented folks who are facing this head on, now?

AR: [California] Senate President Kevin de Leon, and so many of the other, good Latino legislators, and others as well, are very empathetic as to what is happening out here to immigrants. They're fighting hard. They're trying to do everything they can, within their power, within the state of California. As we all know, though, the unfortunate thing is that immigration is a federal issue, and so we can't do anything to really deal with the core issue, and that's bringing about immigration reform. But, certainly there's a lot of efforts being made to enhance the amount of legal representation that's available for

immigrants in the event they're picked up by ICE agents.

And, as you well know, Dennis, there's a big fight against the federal government, against the Trump administration, regarding their action on sanctuary cities. And there's at least discussion in terms of, why don't we make the State of California a sanctuary state because of the large number of immigrants that are here, both in our rural and urban communities. And the importance they are for the economy of this state, especially within the agricultural industry, and the retail industry, the hotel industry, construction, yard maintenance, and things of that nature.

So we're definitely working alongside legislators in any way we possibly can to bring testimony and bring, like you said, a living face to what's happening out there to folks. And trying to ensure that people really do understand the importance of this. This is just not something we can, kind of, sweep under the rug, or something we can ignore because it impacts the lives of people that are very, very important to our society.

DB: And, will Trump's policies, in terms of trade, and the border and his quest to hire American, is that already beginning to reverberate? How do you see that?

AR: Oh, definitely. I mean, there's no doubt. The workers that go back to Mexico, for whatever reason, for family reasons, or whatever. They're not coming back anymore, those workers that work in agriculture. And so, we see definitely that in the agricultural market that, because of that, growers are finally being forced to deal with some of the issues that they should have dealt with a long time ago. And that's it. They're having to raise wages, they're having to provide some better opportunities for workers, in regards to the working conditions or regards to hours of work, or their wage rates, and things of that nature. I think, yes, it is having an impact.

And it's having a very negative impact on the flow of immigrants here into the United States, which are definitely needed for our agricultural industry. That just no longer is occurring, Dennis. And I think it's very much of a tragedy for the American consumer because we've found, time and again, no matter what we do, that very few Americans, if any, actually want to go to work in the fields, in the agricultural fields, and be a part of that. And they're not professionals at it, they're not skilled at it, and they're not willing to tolerate the difficult conditions and make the necessary sacrifices, and so forth.

DB: Alright, well we really want to thank you, Arturo Rodriguez, for taking the time out, again, to speak with us, and celebrate Cesar Chavez's life, his birthday. We miss him, it's been 24 years since his passing, but I know that the United Farm Workers, as we talked about, is not going to forget about it. And

people can go to the United Farm Workers web site [...] to follow all these activities, to get involved.

AR: I do want to mention one story. This is happening in an urban community, right in your audience's area, your listenership's area, in San Jose. And there is a family there that, I won't mention the names of them cause I don't want to embarrass them, but it was so great to go on our apps today and look at, and see one of the stories on Facebook actually, that's being shared by a family that has their children making sandwiches to take out to the farmworkers there in the field. And what a way to celebrate the day of Cesar Chavez, for children to be doing something like that. And I thought if we could just communicate that to children throughout the state, what a blessing that would be for farmworkers obviously because they're getting food. But also it brings to light the importance, the role the farmworker plays in our society.

And I just thought that was such a heartwarming story. That the parents of the three children, cause I know the family, and they do this on their own. And they're not looking for recognition, they're not looking to be recognized in any particular way. But this is the way that they're bringing up their children, so that their children really understand the contribution that farmworkers make to our society.

And that today is the day that we celebrate Cesar Chavez's birthday, it's a day to celebrate the work that farmworkers do in this state, in California, and throughout the country. And so, we want to really thank the family that really has that practice, and I just think it's such a great example, for what all of us could be doing with our children on this day.

DB: And it's poignant, of course, because we have heard too many stories of farmworkers who pick the foods that make the table so beautiful and appealing, and can't even afford to buy them. So there's a lot to think about there. Again, we thank you, Arturo Rodriguez, President of the United Farm Workers, for being with us on this celebration, this birthday of Cesar Chavez, March 31st. Thanks for being with us. Be careful. We'll talk to you soon.

AR: Thank you very much. We appreciate the opportunity to be with you all and thank you for all the good work that you all do in terms of educating and informing your listeners and readers.. We very much appreciate it. Si se puede, and happy Cesar Chavez day.

Dennis J Bernstein is a host of "Flashpoints" on the Pacifica radio network and the author of Special Ed: Voices from a Hidden Classroom. You can access the audio archives at www.flashpoints.net.
