

Solidarity in the Fields: Watsonville

When over 30,000 farm workers, union members, civil rights activists, environmentalists, students, community organizers and others came together in Watsonville, California on April 13, 1997, OPEU was there. OPEU members from around Oregon flew,

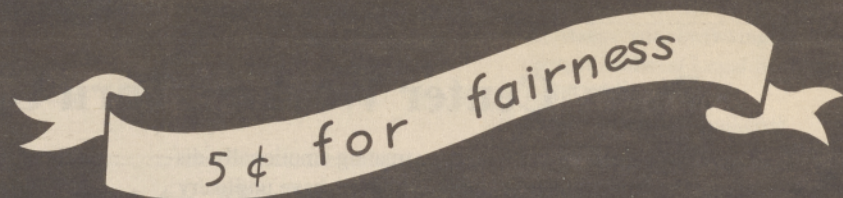
carpooled and caravanned their way to the hub of California's strawberry industry to take part in this historic action.

The march drew participants from over 40 states and represented the largest organizing rally in the history of the United Farm Workers.

It's part of a national effort by the UFW and the AFL-CIO to place pressure on growers and on retailers around the country to raise strawberry prices by five cents per pint. This modest boost would allow wages to rise as much as fifty percent. At stake is the future of over 20,000 strawberry workers – mostly Latino – who continue to struggle for living wages, freedom to exercise their rights as workers without retaliation, sanitary and toxic-free working conditions, freedom from sexual harassment and other abuses. The strawberry industry enjoyed sales of over \$650 million last year while the average worker earns \$8,500 a season, placing them second from bottom among the 19 categories of agricultural workers California monitors.



Above: Marchers include International Secretary Treasurer Betty Bednarczyk, International Executive V. P. Eliseo Medina, OPEU Executive Director Alice Dale, her son Nicolás (in stroller) and board member Steve Barrett (behind Dale). Above Right: Barret, member Lee Orton and member Marge Phelps pause along way. Photographs courtesy of Bette Lee.



Witnessing the Struggle in Oregon

PCUN, Oregon's treeplanters and farm workers union, is conducting a volunteer witness program again this year to monitor growers' treatment of farm workers during this year's strawberry harvest. The program calls for volunteers from the community to visit the fields and the workers' camps during the harvest, documenting working conditions and violations of workers' rights.

First hand reports – in some instances photographs and videotapes taken by witnesses – have helped PCUN to curb the worst violations of workers' rights. A camcorder-wielding witness, for example, captured on tape the crop

dusting of fields still full of workers – important evidence in a subsequent claim against the grower. The mere presence of community members in the fields and in the camps exerts considerable power.

Program participants have the opportunity to stand in solidarity with some of the lowest-paid, most-abused workers in Oregon. Few who serve as witnesses forget the experience.

While Oregon's strawberry harvest is in full-swing as we go to press, PCUN will still be looking for volunteers for this very important programs. To find out more, contact PCUN at 503-982-0243.

Watsonville Brings Movements Together

The struggle in California's strawberry fields is building new bridges between this country's labor and environmental movements. Besides coming together in the streets of Watsonville, unions and environmental groups are working together in other ways to advance the cause of farm workers.

One example is the current fight over the cancer-causing fungicide Captan currently in use in the strawberry fields. Use of Captan on strawberries has increased seven-fold over the past six years while use of the substance has been banned on 42 other crops.

Farm workers have been joined by a coalition of environmental

groups – the Sierra Club, Greenpeace, Friends of the Earth and U. S. PIRG – in pressuring the EPA to reevaluate how long workers must remain out of the fields following a Captan application.

"Farm workers are our poorest and hardest working workers," stated George Hutchinson, Conservation Chair of the Oregon Chapter Sierra Club. "How we treat them speaks to what sort of society we are."

The coalition is also seeking penalties for the failure of growers to notify workers of Captan's hazards and asking that penalties be used to create a medical care fund for farm workers and their families.