

Farm Workers to RJ Reynolds: i Si, Se Puede! i Si, Se Puede!

By Ben Carroll, Winston Salem, NC

A powerful demonstration of more than 300 farm workers, labor unionists and community supporters here on Oct. 28 opened up a new struggle against R.J. Reynolds Tobacco Co. The Farm Labor Organizing Committee (FLOC) led the demonstration, which marked the beginning of a campaign to demand that the tobacco company meet with the union to address the oppressive and deadly conditions facing farm workers in the fields of North Carolina.

The streets of Winston-Salem were filled with red and black FLOC flags as marchers wove through downtown and past a number of buildings owned by Reynolds, chanting "¡Sí se puede!" and "¡El pueblo, unido, jamás serán vencido!" ("Yes we can!" and "The people united will never be defeated!")

In front of the company's headquarters, marchers placed flowers on a makeshift coffin to memorialize workers who have lost their lives or become sick harvesting tobacco destined for Reynolds, the second-largest tobacco company in the U.S.

Many were on hand to demonstrate solidarity with the farm workers and FLOC in their fight for dignity and respect. A large representation came from unions along the East Coast, including the Teamsters, Letter Carriers, Seafarers, Mine Workers, Steel Workers, Auto Workers, Machinists, Postal Workers and AFSCME, among others.

Various religious groups, such as the National Council of Churches, were also present to lend support to the workers and show solidarity, along with a number of community organizations including Student Action with Farm

workers, Students for a Democratic Society and Fight Imperialism-Stand Together (FIST).

The opening of the campaign came as CEO Susan Ivey of Reynolds American, the parent company of R.J. Reynolds, refused to meet with FLOC over the oppressive conditions on the tobacco farms that supply the company.

A FLOC statement outlines what these workers must face: "In the past two years, six field workers have died in North Carolina tobacco fields, most of them due to heat stroke. In addition, most of these farm workers suffer slave-like hardships, including racism, long hours of stoop labor in the fields, harassment in their work, abject poverty, staggering debt, exposure to lethal nicotine and pesticides, poor health, miserable housing in labor camps, and denial of basic labor and human rights protections."

CEO Ivey claims that because the farms that supply the tobacco and employ these workers are not owned directly by R.J. Reynolds, the company can do nothing to improve their conditions.



Photo: Peter Gilbert, FIST
Farm workers, members of the Farm Labor Organizing Committee, and community supporters march in Winston Salem, NC on October 28 to demand that RJ Reynolds meet with union.

But FLOC argues that this system of layers of subcontractors is designed for exactly this purpose—to defer responsibility. Because of the control R.J. Reynolds has over this procurement system, as well as its excessive wealth, it has the power to change the conditions faced by workers in the field. However, it chooses to ignore the suffering of workers in exchange for profit.

In this case, Big Tobacco faces big opposition from a broad range of progressive forces. In a statement read at the demonstration, AFL-CIO President John Sweeny committed the support of the national union federation to the struggle being waged by FLOC. "We will stand with you, organize with you, and struggle with you until justice is won in the fields. ... Together, we will win."

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you, organize with you, and struggle with you until justice is won in the fields. ... Together, we will win."

R.J. Reynolds is a giant, even among Big Tobacco, manufacturing one of every three cigarettes and controlling six of the top 10 brands in the U.S. It will undoubtedly be a long and hard fight. But the fighting spirit and solidarity exhibited by farm workers, FLOC, other unionists and community supporters in this opening of the campaign demonstrates the willingness of a broad range of forces to commit to victory and win dignity and respect in the fields for North Carolina's farm workers.

The writer is an organizer with the youth group FIST (Fight Imperialism-Stand Together) in Raleigh, NC. He is also involved in various labor struggles throughout the state of North Carolina including supporting the NC Public Sector Workers Union (UE local 150), fighting for Collective Bargaining Rights, and also with the Smithfield Justice Campaign. Organize the South! ■

No justice for Fernandez, immigrant child assaulted then deported

By Tyneisha Bowens

Over the past year the U.S. government has increased its attacks on immigrants living in this country. Racial profiling, mass deportations, and ICE raids have plagued the immigrant community in what has been deemed by the administration a tightening of U.S. security to decrease the undocumented population. In response to these attacks the immigrant community has increased its political militancy in order to defend undocumented immigrants who are forced to flee their home countries due to U.S. economic and political intervention.

The administration has attempted to mask these blatantly racist attacks by claiming that the aggressions against immigrants are necessary to establish economic stability and that they are not driven by racism. This lie, which has repeatedly been put to rest, was again exposed most recently by the treatment of 13-year-old Fernando Rodriguez, an 8th grader who was recently sexually abused and kidnapped by a 25 year old teacher, Kelsey Peterson.

Last month, knowledge of the sexual abuse came out in the rural Nebraska town. In response Peterson and Rodriguez fled to Mexico. After being caught in the border town of Mexicali, Peterson has been taken into FBI custody while Rodriguez, an undocumented immigrant, has been forced to stay in Mexico.

Peterson is now facing charges of child abuse and kidnapping but she is currently on paid leave from her job as a teacher. Rodriguez's parents remain in the U.S. at this point and the young boy is being kept from returning to his home and his education. He will more than likely not be allowed to return to Nebraska.

Most of us are aware that we live in a rape culture where sexual

assault is not taken seriously and survivors of said assault are not protected. But it is shocking that a minor who has suffered the psychological and sexual manipulation of a trusted adult is victimized further by the racist U.S. government.

The mainstream media has made this case out to be a mutual and consented relationship, claiming that the two fled "together" and citing terms of endearment shared between the two in emails. As if a 13 year old is able to consent to a sexual relationship with a 25 year old woman, the Baja California state police official who detained Peterson stated "This was a mutual agreement to flee after the story came out that they were having sex."

Rodriguez's immigration status has made him fair game for both sexual exploitation and separation from his family, friends, and education. There is confusion about how and where the charges against Peterson will be filed and even talk that Rodriguez's immigration status makes the charges invalid. In many online blogs about the case people are praising Peterson for helping rid the country of "illegal immigrants" and inquiring about the immigration status of his family in Nebraska.

Ignored is the fact that this is a minor and therefore unable to consent to sexual acts, ignored is the mental and physical abuse that Rodriguez has gone through, ignored is Peterson's betrayal of the trust placed in her as a teacher. It is as though being an undocumented immigrant is the true crime here and Rodriguez is the one being truly pu-

nished. This case is being used as an example that no undocumented immigrant is safe, especially immigrant children. This case is an example that laws do not protect undocumented people in the U.S. and that if undocumented immigrants do seek such protection they will be swiftly punished.

We must stop these attacks on our undocumented brothers and sisters because the truth of the matter is that these attacks are not about immigration status; these attacks are about your race, your name, and what language you speak. The U.S. government is engaged in racist war not just in Iraq but in all of the Middle East, Latin America, Africa, Asia but also here in the U.S. We must end these racist wars both at home and abroad!

Bowens is a member of Raleigh FIST. ■



FIST leading youth and student contingent in Sept 28 Troops Out Now Coalition march in Washington.