

# FOOD JUSTICE

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**CANCER IN  
EARLIMART:  
PESTICIDES  
VICTIMIZE  
FARM WORKERS'  
CHILDREN IN  
GRAPE TOWN**

In this Food and Justice you will read about a cancer cluster in Earlimart, a town amidst the pesticide killing fields of California grape ranches. This is not the first such town the UFW has brought to public attention, and once again — just as in McFarland and Fowler — it is the children who are suffering and dying.

## Dying.

One child from Earlimart, three-year-old Jimmy Caudillo, died in March from leukemia. Six children from McFarland have died. And many others are suffering through treatment, their parents struggling to pay hospital bills, hoping for the best, praying, waiting.

All this could be stopped, if only growers would quit using the pesticides.


But the growers don't want to give up the poisons, and they and their political allies have now resorted to CIA-style "damage control" techniques to hide the hideous truth of toxic farming.

Each time the UFW locates a cancer cluster in the grape region of California, a grower association is quick to express sympathy for the victims. They admit a problem exists, but to solve the problem the growers want state bureaucracies to "investigate" and "research" the issue.

So the various state agencies proceed to investigate, and research, and issue meaningless statements, and soon the media drops the issue, and nothing is resolved.

Since the cancer cluster in McFarland was found three years ago, the state has been conducting investigations and research. So far the results are "inconclusive." But six children have died.

We don't need any more research. We need to stop killing children with the pesticides that ultimately threaten us all.

Please help us boycott table grapes. 

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*Natalie Ramirez, cancer victim, with her parents, Gonzalo and Ramona. Gonzalo, who brought the Earlimart crisis to the UFW's attention, here prays for an end to the pesticide poisonings.*

## UFW Finds Cancer in Earlimart

### More Tragedies While Officials Waste Time, Lives

On September 14th, the United Farm Workers held a press conference in Delano, California, to announce they had found a cancer cluster in Earlimart, yet another of the pesticide-contaminated towns in the grape region of the San Joaquin Valley.

In his statement to the press, UFW President Cesar Chavez recalled McFarland, the town twenty minutes south of Earlimart where six children have died.

"In recent years," said Chavez, "children in McFarland have contracted cancer at 800 percent above the expected rate. Now the children in Earlimart are being afflicted at 1200 percent above the expected rate."

Chavez presented four of the families victimized by the pesticide abuse of California grape growers: the Ramirez's, whose daughter Natalie lost one kidney

to the cancer that now threatens the remaining kidney; Maria Quijada, whose son Mario is afflicted with lymphoma; Maria Castellanos, whose daughter, Mayra, has rhabdomyosarcoma; and Maria Caudillo, attending in memory of her son Jimmy, who died of leukemia in March.

"These families are here to share their anger and their pain," Chavez said. "And they are here to fix the blame for these tragedies. I commend their courage in coming today. It is not an easy thing."

The parents then spoke by turn, each expressing sadness about their children and concern for others who are threatened by pesticide poisoning.

Maria De Jesus Caudillo spoke only briefly, but her words summarized the tragic living conditions of farm worker communities. "We are surrounded by fields, we work on them, and the pesticides are harming our families," she said.

In addition to the four families attending the conference, another, the Tobars, have been beset with illness. Monica, a ten-year-old girl, contracted leukemia this year. (For stories of the victims and their families, see pp. 6-9.)

The five Earlimart cases are the latest found by the UFW, but probably aren't the last. "We're in the midst of God knows how many other clusters," Chavez said. "If they're not there now statistically, they are there now in reality. More kids will get cancer, and more will be born with birth defects."

Chavez said that the UFW will be closely observing the response of various official agencies — county, state, and federal — to the continuing cancer crisis in California. In the past, these agencies have done nothing to help stop the frightening increase of disease in the communities devastated by toxic farming.

"Their gimmick is to confuse the issue with a whole series of investigations and contradictions," Chavez said. "That's just what happened in McFarland," he said. "They said 'We don't know what it is!'"

"But we know damn well what it is," he continued. "And we are convinced that the only way to stop this attack on our people is to stop the growers from using pesticides. And the only way to stop the growers is through the economic pressure of our table grape boycott."

Dr. Marion Moses, an internationally recognized environmental health specialist on pesticide poisoning present at the conference, also spoke out on the urgency of curbing pesticide use.

"We do not need any more studies," Dr. Moses said, slamming the bureau-

cratic tactics of research and delay that have only shielded the pesticide problem from public scrutiny while more children die. "We do not need any more experts or any more committees.

"All use of known and suspect carcinogenic (cancer-causing) pesticides in agriculture must be stopped," she said. "And it must be stopped now."

Dr. Moses added that the continued risk to human life is not only brutal but needlessly so because a recent finding by the National Academy of Sciences indicates that pesticides are not even necessary to maintain crop yields.

All of the parents of the Earlimart children either work or have worked in the grape fields of Tulare County, where Earlimart is situated and which ranks first in California in the production of grapes. Because more pesticides are used on grapes than on any

other crop, the Tulare area is an especially dangerous place to live and work.

"Pesticides are always present in the vineyards where the parents of these children work," Chavez told the press. "They contaminate the ground water. They drift onto streets and schools. Children are exposed to them when they play outdoors, when they drink the water, when they hug their mothers and fathers returning from the fields."

Responding to questions about the UFW's grape boycott, Chavez reminded the press that the farm worker union has always been at the forefront of the battle against chemical farming and that this boycott, like past boycotts, is the most effective way to stop poisoning children, endangering the environment, and threatening the food supply.

"Our fight isn't anything new,"

Chavez said. "We started back in 1958, Dolores Huerta (UFW 1st Vice-President) and I. Nobody believed us. Then in 1965, when we fought to stop DDT, people thought we were crazy. But we won those battles. We had union members working under contracts that prohibited DDT even before the government banned that chemical."

Dolores Huerta also answered questions about the success of the boycott. "One of the pesticides we pinpointed early on was Dinoseb," she said. "The growers have already stopped using Dinoseb.

"Right now in the industry there is a lot of talk about pesticides," she continued. "Unfortunately the growers are not talking about stopping these pesticides. They are talking about how they can fool the public into believing that they are doing something."

Chavez was quick to add that the growers have many allies among the political agencies who assist them in hiding the truth from the public.

"The bureaucrats are the apologists for the industry," he said.

The Department of Health Services in California has been particularly slow to

respond to what is obviously — officially declared or not — a cancer epidemic. Supposedly compiling statistics for the past three years regarding child cancer and birth defects in the grape region, the department has yet to offer anything substantial.

In town after town, it is the UFW that locates the cancers, only to have the department issue another trivial statement about its ongoing investigation.

"This has got to stop," Chavez said. "The state is spending millions of taxpayers' dollars for these surveys and investigations, and all the taxpayers get is more cancer, more birth defects in their children, and more death."

Chavez also emphasized that the children of the cancer clusters are warnings for everyone. "Years ago," he related, "miners carried canaries with them to warn against poison gases in the shafts. The miners depended on the birds for their lives. If a canary died, a miner knew he was in danger.

"Farm workers and their children are now society's innocent canaries," he said. "They demonstrate the effects of pesticide poisoning before anyone else. Their suffering is a sad message to all of us."

*UFW President Cesar Chavez addressing members of the press: "We're in the midst of God knows how many other clusters. If they're not there now statistically, they are there in reality."*



*Maria de Jesus Caudillo with UFW Secretary-Treasurer David Martinez, who brought the Earlimart families together.*



*Flanked by Gonzalo and Natalie Ramirez, Dr. Marion Moses demands an end to toxic farming.*

Two months ago, this magazine reported the story of Natalie Ramirez, the four-year-old girl who lost one kidney to cancer and has suffered through treatment to save the other. Natalie's cancer is now in remission, and Gonzalo Ramirez, her father, says the recovery is an act of God.

The Ramirez family lives in Earlimart, and it was Gonzalo who first called attention to the health problems of the town's residents.

While being interviewed for Natalie's story, Gonzalo told UFW reporter Victor Aleman that he was very concerned because there seemed to be so many other families in the town with sick children.

"Gonzalo asked me if we could investigate," Aleman said. "So I immediately contacted Cesar (Chavez, President of the UFW), and he told me to get to work."

In a week and a half, UFW personnel canvassed the homes in Earlimart, regrettably confirming Gonzalo's fears.

The UFW found five children with cancer in the town and one additional case just beyond the city limits.

The union contacted Dr. Marion Moses, a public health specialist who has assisted farm workers in the cancer-

## Doing the State's Job

plagued towns of McFarland and Fowler. Moses talked to the families of the children and verified the cases.

Dr. Moses then joined Chavez to publicly declare Earlimart a cancer cluster and demand an immediate end to the pesticide use that has brought such misery to farm communities.

During the door-to-door investigation of Earlimart, the UFW found numerous other health problems in addition to the cancers. One woman had recently experienced a still-birth, her child born without a brain. Two young girls had kidney problems.


The UFW also learned of five people, ages 20-45, who had recently died of cancer.

Many of the town's inhabitants, most of them farm workers in daily contact with pesticides, complained of stomach ailments, headaches, rashes, burns, and other pesticide-related health problems.

"We live in the pesticides," said Gonzalo. He maintains the state won't recognize the problem because most of the cancer towns like Earlimart are predominantly Spanish-speaking and farm workers.

In the Earlimart case, Dr. Moses had to inform the health authorities about the cancers. And this wasn't the first time that she and the UFW have done the work the state agencies are paid to do.

"The bureaucrats are not concerned about suffering workers and children," said Aleman. "If we find a little girl who is dying, they put her name on a computer and go to lunch."

Gonzalo agrees. "They have to hear the screams for help," he said, "but they play deaf." 



*Earlimart victims and families pray with Maria de Jesus Caudillo at the grave of her son, Jimmy.*

## Sickness and Death in Earlimart

Jimmy Caudillo was born late summer, 1985. His birth was especially joyous for his mother, Maria de Jesus Caudillo, because her pregnancy had been so difficult.

"I worked in the vineyards the first five months of my pregnancy," she said. "They used to spray the fields with pesticides at night, and every morning when we started to work we noticed the strong smell. I got sick at least three times. I felt like everything was going around and around, everything getting dark. I also used to have very intense headaches."

At first, Maria thought her sickness was the result of pregnancy, but then considered that during the pregnancy with her older son, Hugo, she had experienced nothing similar.

"I never felt anything like that," she said. "This time (while carrying Jimmy), when I came home, my clothes used to be saturated with the smell of pesticides.

"I used to tell the doctor that I could not

work anymore, but he used to insist that I could," Maria said. "I was nearly six months pregnant, and the doctor wanted me to work for at least two more months."

But Maria stopped working, and three months later Jimmy arrived.

"He was a normal child," Maria said. "He learned how to walk, and he began to learn how to talk."

And then Jimmy got sick.

"When he was a year old, we had him baptized," Maria said, "and on that day he became ill and could not even enjoy his party."

After that initial illness, Jimmy ran fevers, vomited frequently, always seemed tired, had no interest in food. Soon he could no longer climb the few steps he had managed to conquer before the illness.

Maria and Jaime, Jimmy's father, made numerous trips to the doctor, and Jimmy was eventually hospitalized.

"They tested him for three days, and



***Maria de Jesus Caudillo holding portrait of her family. Top: Maria and husband Jaime. Bottom: Jimmy and brother Hugo.***

for those three days we stayed with him," Maria said. "They took a lot of his blood, and he got spots all over him."

Finally the doctors told Maria and Jaime that Jimmy would have to be moved to Los Angeles, and the Caudillo family packed a few things and accompanied the ambulance that carried Jimmy.

After tests in Los Angeles, Jimmy was incorrectly diagnosed with a blood deficiency, and the family returned to Earlimart with vitamins that were supposed to cure him. A week later, the Caudillos

were back in Los Angeles. Jimmy was tested again, and this time the doctors found leukemia.

"So they put him in intensive care," Maria said. "Jimmy used to cry day and night. It was strange for him: all the tests, the strange room, the people in strange suits. He was only one and half years old, going through all these painful experiences."

The rest of the family also had a difficult life in Los Angeles. They literally lived with Jimmy at the hospital for a

while. Only one person was allowed to spend the nights with Jimmy, so while Maria stayed with her sick boy, Jaime slept in the car and Hugo managed as best he could. "Sometimes I hid Hugo under Jimmy's bed," Maria said. "Some days my husband had to hide him in other areas of the hospital."

Eventually the Caudillos were given an apartment at the Ronald McDonald House, a home for families of cancer victims.

During his stay, Jimmy was given bone marrow tests two or three times a week. "It was very painful for me to see," said Maria, "especially painful for him. They used a needle as big as a pencil and it was like they were twisting a screw into his spine."

After six months of treatment, the doctors thought Jimmy's cancer was in remission, and the Caudillos took their son back home to Earlimart. The following six months were happy ones for the family.

"Jimmy was as normal as Hugo," Maria said. "He was playing, happy, and eating well."

But when Jimmy began to complain about pains in one of his feet, the family again travelled to the hospital in Los Angeles. They were sent home after a check-up. Then the fever returned, and the Caudillos made their last trip to the hospital.

Jimmy was given many more treatments. None worked. Finally the doctors told Maria and Jaime that there was

no longer any hope. Jimmy was moved to the area where terminal children reside. Then, late one night, Maria and Jaime watched their little boy die.

"He died in peace, with no pain," Maria said. "We just closed his eyes."

"I know there are a lot of sick kids," she continued, "but nothing to me seems so unfair as Jimmy's case. It was so hard, and he suffered so much pain at such a young age. It is not fair."

Maria was one of the parents who appeared with Cesar Chavez and the UFW to condemn the pesticides that have created a cancer cluster in Earlimart. Pesticide use has become an increasingly



***Maria Castellanos with her daughter, Mayra, victim whose cancer is currently in remission.***

important issue to consumers, who continue to join the UFW's table grape boycott in hopes of forcing California growers to stop the gruesome plague of cancer among farm town inhabitants.

For Maria, pesticides have always been an ugly reality. "When I was working," Maria said, "one of the women in my crew was also pregnant. She gave birth to a beautiful little girl. But the girl was born with brain problems and died after two months.

"That period was when I was pregnant — it was the period when they sprayed most of the pesticides that year."

Another mother, Maria Teresa Castellanos, has also watched her child suffer because of pesticides. And like Maria Caudillo, Maria Teresa is sure that pesticides are to blame for the misery.

Maria Teresa, a long-time resident of Earlimart, worked the grape fields ten years ago while pregnant with her daughter, Mayra. "I worked the first four months of my pregnancy," she said. "When we finished working at the end of

the day we were full of green powder. Once they were spraying this chemical three rows away from us while we were working. Everybody got sick. We felt dizzy, wanted to vomit."

For years after Mayra's birth, Maria Teresa had little need to worry about the pesticides. But when Mayra got sick in 1987, the latent effects of pesticide poisoning became obvious. She was then eight years old.

For a year, the Castellanos watched their daughter suffer through the medical maze of cancer: sickness, mistaken diagnosis, more pain, another doctor, another wrong diagnosis, pain, hospitalization, treatment, pain again, more treatment.

Mayra underwent chemotherapy. "She vomited every time she had a treatment," Maria Teresa said. And, as is usual with chemo patients, Mayra lost her hair.

Finally the doctors removed the tumor that was threatening her life, and today Mayra's cancer is in remission.

Mario Quijada's cancer is in remission today, but he too suffered through chemotherapy like Mayra.

Two years ago a tumor was found in Mario's stomach after numerous trips to different doctors in various clinics and hospitals. After a year and a half of chemo, Mario's doctor told his family last July that his tumor had disappeared.

"But the doctor told me he has to be checked every six months, to be sure," said Mario's mother, Maria Quijada.

So Maria Quijada is still worried, and at the UFW press conference she joined the other families of Earlimart cancer victims to ask for help.



*Maria Quijada and daughter Cinthia at UFW press conference. Maria's son, Mario, has survived a cancerous tumor in his stomach, but Maria is still worried.*



*Grape workers vote for resolution during the conference in Delano. The conference was held by the UFW after workers asked the union to help them change the worsening conditions in the fields.*

## Grape Workers Ask UFW For Help

On Sunday, August 27th, hundreds of California grape workers travelled to Delano, assembling there to demand an end to the brutal conditions in the fields.

Workers from 89 grape ranches attended the conference, which was held by the UFW in response to a flood of appeals for assistance.

Conditions in the grape fields have worsened drastically in recent years, as workers' rights have been intentionally ignored by the California Agricultural Labor Relations Board (ALRB). Originally established to protect workers trying to organize, the ALRB has become an oppressive tool under the current regime of Gov. George Deukmejian. Growers now receive ALRB cooperation whenever they want to break contracts and labor laws.

After twenty years of progress in the fields during the 1960's and 70's, the

ALRB has combined with growers to turn back the clock on workers, who are now reliving the nightmare of the pre-union 50's.

Urged by workers to help any way he could, UFW President Cesar Chavez issued a pamphlet announcing the conference.

"The human exploitation by grape growers cannot be permitted to continue," Chavez wrote in the pamphlet. "The working conditions, low wages, bad hours, and lack of benefits and protections get worse every day. Something must be done right away."

UFW organizers carried the message to the fields, and workers responded readily, coming to Delano in caravans on their day off.

At the conference, workers spoke about the many ways growers harass and pressure employees, endangering workers' lives while perpetuating a general



*UFW organizer Marcelino Zavala hands announcement of Grape Worker Conference to receptive worker at Superior ranch. Hundreds of workers spent their day off attending the conference.*

climate of fear and mistrust.

After workers aired their complaints, they worked together to formalize their grievances in a series of resolutions.

Workers demanded that:

- Growers obey the law and provide drinking water. The UFW had water provisions in contracts twenty years ago, and ten years ago the state passed a law requiring every field to have water. But many workers are without potable water, their bosses telling them to drink from the pesticide-contaminated irrigation ditches.

- Growers provide and maintain bathrooms. Many workers complained of filthy toilets in the field, and others said their fields had no toilets at all. They spoke against the common practice of "clocking" workers while they use the toilets, a harassment technique used by foremen. And the workers also called for soap and water to be supplied – an especially important issue because they work all day handling the grapes that the consumer will be eating.

- Growers stop using pesticides. This resolution came from workers at the Pavich ranch, and they wanted to warn the public that the Pavich grapes, often advertised as "organic," are full of chemicals. The resolution also contained a full

endorsement for the UFW's table grape boycott and was cheered by all the workers.

- Growers stop using labor contractors, who workers call "parasites." These are the growers' henchmen. They extract bribes from workers seeking employment. They cheat workers on their wages. Women are harassed, and some are denied employment if the contractor isn't satisfied with their appearance or the way they respond to his work-a-day charms. This resolution called for legislation, work-stoppages — whatever it takes to get rid of the parasites.

- Growers stop degrading workers. Workers are humiliated, sexually harassed, and generally treated like slaves by foremen, and growers condone this behavior because they want workers to remain oppressed. The grower formula is simple and direct: Oppressed Workers Equal Depressed Wages. Workers demanded respect.

- Growers stop working employees through lunch breaks without pay. Growers often threaten to fire workers if they don't meet quotas, and to keep their jobs workers have to spend their lunchtime working. Growers set quotas ridiculously high as a constant threat to workers.

- Growers stop working employees with-

out breaks. By law growers must allow workers a ten minute break every four hours, but this law is constantly ignored. This illegality perhaps explains the absence of water and toilets on grape ranches, where sun-baked workers have no time for such luxuries. This resolution was framed by workers from M. Caratan, the ranch where workers voting for the union in an ALRB-sanctioned election were beaten by company goons as they emerged from the balloting booths.

- Growers increase wages to reflect cost-of-living increases. There have been no wage increases for years despite the soaring profits in the grape industry. Many workers can no longer support themselves on their wages, and many feel that the growers' continued refusal to share the wealth is emblematic of a pervasive racism. Growers know the workers are suffering, but because workers speak with a Spanish accent growers feel unobliged to show any concern.

Workers also passed resolutions calling for an end to suspensions and unjust firings. Often a worker is suspended for three days or more if a foreman finds one bad grape on a bunch. And the firings on ranches are notoriously arbitrary, though growers do achieve some regularity in firing workers who show any desire for a union.

In all there were fifteen resolutions passed by the workers, there was also much discussion about the increasing

problem of pesticides. Workers complained that crews were sent into the fields too soon after sprayings, that victims of mass crew poisonings have been threatened with dismissal for seeking medical help, and that growers and foremen intentionally disregard regulations concerning the safe use and storage of pesticides.



*Farmworkers' living conditions are worse than ever. Here, pregnant woman makes temporary home under bridge with more than 100 families.*

Workers are defenseless against all these practices. OSHA (Occupational Safety and Health Administration) has deserted them. The ALRB has turned on them with the governor's blessing. The California Department of Food and Agriculture (CDFA) has worked itself silly covering for pesticide-abusing growers, consigning workers to the hell of poisonings and cancer.

Together, UFW officials and workers said they would do everything possible to bring change to the fields. Chavez em-

phasized that worker unity is crucial, particularly now that growers and their allies have gained control of the political machinery that keeps workers oppressed.

All of the workers attending the conference are presently laboring without contracts. Some of them have been illegally fired from various ranches for supporting the UFW. Many of the workers at the conference were subsequently fired — fired, illegally, just for attending the conference.

But all the workers insisted that their families and friends in the grape fields will always look to the UFW to help them end the miserable conditions.



*Victoria Gutierrez at work in the vines.*

## Slavery in the Fields

### Hard Work, Low Pay, No Respect

Victoria Gutierrez has worked in the grape fields for the past twelve years, laboring for meager wages to support her six children. She is a proud woman, a strong supporter of the UFW who doesn't hesitate to stand up for herself and her co-workers.

Victoria was recently fired from the M. Caratan grape ranch after months of abuse. At the UFW's worker conference last month (story pp. 11 - 13), Victoria spoke bitterly of the treatment she had received.

"I was laid off, first of all, because I never allowed the owner or his foremen and supervisors to take advantage of me," she said. "Secondly, because I was always outspoken about the union."

Victoria had been sexually harassed constantly by her foreman, Fermin Marti-

nez, who is infamous among farm workers for his perversions. "He used to come to my table, where I was packing grapes, and stand very close behind my back, making all these sexual propositions to me," she said.

Victoria told how one of her co-workers was propositioned even more directly when Martinez dropped his pants in front of her.

Martinez's bravado is condoned by the ranch owner, Louis Caratan. "If you take complaints to the owner," Victoria said, "he will switch you to another crew and then fire you right away so that you can't charge him with sexual harassment."

Victoria said it was also very difficult for workers to defend themselves. "They are afraid they will be kicked out of the labor camp or lose their jobs," she said.

One day Victoria wore a UFW t-shirt to work. "That day Fermin said aloud that some day he would get rid of me," she said. And Victoria was then set up, given her firing in front of other workers — a common tactic used to scare workers to keep them from openly supporting the union.

Victoria said that Martinez propositioned another woman right after firing her husband for passing out the pamphlet from Cesar Chavez announcing the grape workers' conference.

All of these practices — harassment, firings — are illegal. But the issue of legality perhaps obscures the really hideous lesson that workers like Victoria are taught day after day in the fields. Growers, not simply content to extract grueling labor for wages as low as \$1.50 an hour, have contrived a whole system of repressions designed to reinforce their mastery over workers. Foremen and supervisors play the role of overseers,

using intense psychological pressure to keep workers forever anxious about their jobs.

Martinez once told Victoria: "These farmworkers are worse than dogs. I kick them in the ass and they come back and kiss my shoes."

Martinez was obviously exaggerating, but his words imply a clear readiness to treat workers as objects to be manipulated at will by growers and their lackeys.

This is the language of slavery — or wage-slavery, if such a distinction exists.

Fernando Leiva, another worker interviewed at the grape worker conference, talked about the system of bribes that further obliges workers to curry the paternalistic blessing of their bosses.

"This happens to most workers," he said. "Just to get a job you hand your wallet to the supervisor. I have many friends who put about \$150 in their wal-

lets, and the supervisor gets \$100, or \$125, or sometimes the whole \$150."

This is only the beginning. Fernando told how foremen and supervisors must be constantly honored with food, beer, invitations to living quarters — whatever it takes to keep them friendly.

Fernando, who has worked the fields for ten years, said that most workers won't talk about this standard practice. "They are afraid of losing their jobs and being blacklisted," he said.

The bribes aren't real protection. Workers are still

fired. They are soaked with pesticides, worked through breaks and lunches, harassed sexually, cheated on their wages.

But the bribes do function to keep workers feeling dependent, and this is why growers approve such practices.

"These powerful growers believe that workers have to be treated like slaves, probably because we are Latinos," Fernando said. "They are just simply racists."



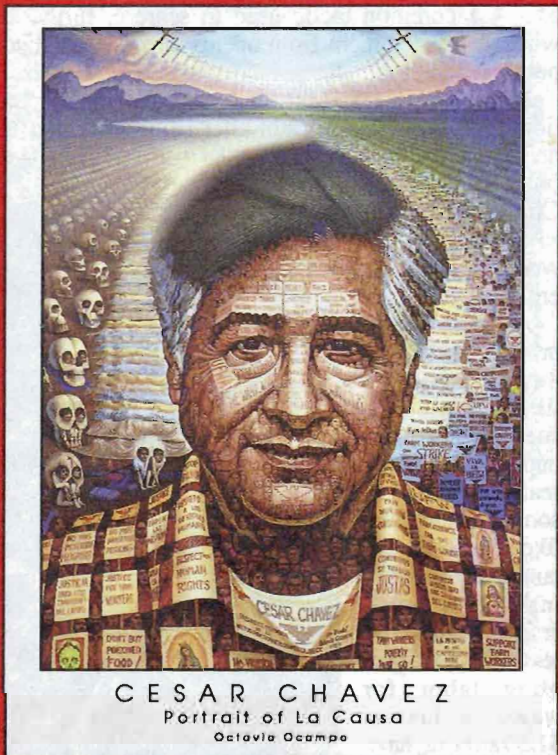
*After a hard day in the field, worker takes a makeshift bath in pesticide contaminated water from an irrigation pipe.*



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