

Farmers organize for survival

By Judy Strasser

Eight thousand farmers, all members of the National Farmers Organization, sat down in Milwaukee, Wis., Dec. 6-10 to figure out a fair price for the food that they produce. And when they were done calculating, NFO president Oren Lee Staley told them how to get that price.

"We are going to use the same economic policy and strength used when labor strikes for a higher wage or when the oil producing countries announce oil prices," Staley said. He told the farmers that the NFO would call a massive holding action, if necessary, to make sure its members got back the cost of production plus a "reasonable profit" for their goods.

The NFO has organized successful holding actions in the past. In 1967, NFO members held back milk production and, according to Staley, won recognition as a bargaining agent with many commodity buyers. Last year NFO members diverted Grade B milk (used in manufacturing powdered milk and other dairy products) from one market to another, a tactic they say increased prices by several cents per hundred pounds.

But that is the first time in many years that a farmers' organization has attempted to influence farm prices on such a major scale.

At their convention, NFO members set price goals for a number of commodities, including Grade A (fresh) and Grade B milk, wheat, corn, soybeans, cattle and hogs.

Their task for the next three months, until spring plowing, Staley told the farmers, is to go out and organize. The NFO will use a "Neighbor-to-neighbor" campaign to induce farmers to put their 1977 production in the NFO's collective bargaining system.

►Out to organize 30 percent.

Staley says that if the farmers can organize 30 percent of the production in each commodity, they can control the prices that they get. The NFO will first bargain with major food processors, as it has in



A grain commodity meeting where NFO producers worked out their costs of production and set their price goal.

the past, but if collective bargaining fails to achieve satisfactory prices, holding back 30 percent of production in any one commodity would create shortages and force prices up.

NFO spokesman Ben Strong told *In These Times* that farmers have been forced into organizing their production by an economic situation that is bleak and shows few signs of improvement. Prices in this past year, he said, have been so low that an unusually large number of farmers have simply closed down their operations and sold out. Livestock, dairy and wheat producers are all losing money.

Farmers' economic difficulties are reflected in the parity ratio, a figure that shows the relationship between the prices buyers pay for farm goods and the prices

farmers pay for other goods. The ratio, which has been dropping steadily, reached 66 percent in November—its lowest point since 1933. The NFO price goals are close to 100 percent of parity. This would return to farmers the same buying power they had in the period 1910-1914, when farm costs and prices are considered to have been balanced.

►Debt a constant factor.

High costs and low prices mean that debt is an established part of farm life. NFO spokesman Strong says that it has become increasingly difficult for small farmers to get production loans for machinery, seed, fertilizer, and agricultural chemicals.

Traditionally, banks have loaned farmers money despite falling farm prices because inflation keeps increasing the value of farm land, making it good security. But Strong said that many banks are now requiring farmers to show a positive cash flow—an excess of income over costs—before they will lend more money.

A.T. Jorgenson, manager of the Federal Loan Bank Association in Madison, Wis., says that his agency has always required that its borrowers show a positive cash flow in their farm operations, unless they can support their families from income earned off the farm. In those cases, he says, "all that they have to show is that they can cover the cost of production of the crop." But he agrees that this year farm prices have been so low that farmers can't even cover production costs.

Improvement of the farmers' economic position need not cost consumers anything, according to Ben Strong. Farm prices make up only a small part of the retail cost of food. Transportation, processing, and middlemen's profits comprise the rest. The farmer gets about 5 cents of the 60 cents a consumer pays for a one pound loaf of bread, for example. There is a "rigid and widening price spread" between farmer and consumer, Strong points out.

"Farmers," he notes, "could be paid a fair price without consumers paying any more."

But NFO president Staley warns that the urban and consumer-oriented congress cannot be expected to be sympathetic to the farmers' plight. Only 30 congressmen represent districts with farm populations greater than 15 percent. Staley told NFO members in Milwaukee. He said that Jimmy Carter's election does promise farmers more help than they have been getting. "We can expect better federal programs. But only farmers—organized nationwide and uniting their production for marketing—can assure cost of production plus a reasonable profit," Staley said.

Judy Strasser lives in Madison, Wis., and follows developments in farming and land for *In These Times*.

Legal precedent may undermine affirmative action

Minority students cite the Bakke decision as a blow against the few hard-won gains of the civil rights movement.

By Margie Cortes and Juan Gonzales

Programs aimed at integrating minorities into the American mainstream are under fire in what appears to be one of the most significant legal cases in the decade.

In mid-September, the California Supreme Court, in a case challenging affirmative-action admission practices at the University of California at Davis, ruled the use of racial standards was unconstitutional.

Allan Bakke, a 36-year-old Sunnyvale engineer, charged in his 1974 lawsuit against the U.C. Davis Medical School that he was the victim of "invidious discrimination" because of his race—he is white. He charged that special admission programs violated his constitutional rights under the 14th Amendment and that he was better qualified to enter the school than students admitted under the special program.

Special admission programs, like the one at U.C. Davis, were set in motion in the 1960s as a means of integrating minorities into the business and academic community. At Davis, the medical school each year admits 100 first-time students with 16 slots filled under the special admissions program by disadvantaged minority students.

In 1973 and 1974, Bakke applied for admission, but was denied each time. The court agreed with him that his constitutional rights were violated.

►Civil rights groups react.

California civil rights groups began reacting as soon as the decision was handed down. The Bay Area Third World Students Alliance issued a statement saying that "the recent California Supreme Court decision is another blow struck at the few hard-won gains in rights of minority peoples." They cited the fact that only 2 percent of all attorneys and less than 3 percent of all medical doctors and dentists in California are minorities.

Ed Salazar, assistant dean of students at U.C. San Francisco Medical School, said "the Bakke decision will give every weak-knee administrator in a university the chance to destroy affirmative action programs."

Demonstrations in Los Angeles and San Francisco against the decision were staged Oct. 21 to coincide with the university's request for a retrial. Six friend-of-the-court briefs were filed by prominent activist groups, including the Mexican-American Legal Defense and Educational Fund (MALDEF) and the National Lawyers Guild, supporting the Davis program. The court refused to retry the case.

In mid-December, the U.C. Board of Regents decided to appeal the Bakke decision to the U.S. Supreme Court. The court is deciding whether it will hear the case further. A decision is not expected until next fall.

►An earlier case sidestepped.

There was a similar case in 1974, *Marco*

Defunis v. the University of Washington Law School. But in that case Defunis was allowed to attend the university while his lawsuit went through the courts, allowing the Supreme Court to sidestep the issue by declaring that since Defunis was so close to graduation there was no longer an issue at stake and the case was moot.

"This is an issue of vital public importance that has cried out for resolution since the *Defunis* case," U.C. attorney Donald Reidhaar said. "It is fair to state that if the opinion stands, it will have an impact throughout the university and for other state universities as well."

Many civil rights spokespersons object to the case going before the court on grounds that the university did not make an adequate defense in the state courts. Technically, the U.S. Supreme Court merely re-examines the case presented to the lower courts and judges the point of law.

Fania Davis, a prominent black activist and law student on the U.C. Berkeley campus, pointed out inadequacies in the university defense of the admissions program:

"Minorities' rights were not introduced into the evidence. Evidence of the history of discrimination at U.C. Davis was not brought to light, nor the fact that the affirmative action program was an answer to this history. The university did not even offer any oral testimony."

►Concern that case will expand.

Peter Roos, education director for

MALDEF added, "Our concern is not that *Bakke* is a disaster. We're concerned it will be expanded substantially by a hostile Supreme Court, ending educational programs and having a snowballing effect into employment practices."

As predicted, the *Bakke* case is already affecting other areas. Within weeks after the original California Supreme Court decision was handed down, white prison guards in Los Angeles filed suit against the state to change its affirmative action hiring program.

At the same time, Associated General Contractors of California sued in U.S. District Court to halt the San Francisco School District's practice of awarding 25 percent of its construction contracts to minority groups.

In both cases, the *Bakke* decision was cited as precedent.

To mobilize support for programs Civil Rights leaders have planned demonstrations and forums throughout California in January and February. The forums, which are for administrators, faculty and students, will focus on the legal implications of the *Bakke* case and corrective measures that can be initiated against racial discrimination.

Added Roos, "We will analyze special admissions programs to prove that they do not discriminate against whites. We want to make people vocal advocates of these programs."

Margie Cortes and Juan Gonzales are writers living in the San Francisco area.

These two pages conclude the first half of our 8-part series on the labor movement. The second half begins in February.

Seniority clashes with affirmative action

"That's where we come to a parting of the ways between the women's movement and labor," says Barbara Merrill as she shifts nervously in her chair. Affirmative action v. seniority is an issue "that puts everyone on the defensive," she says. Merrill should know—a black woman, she is president of the Coalition of Labor Union Women (CLUW) in Chicago. An ardent trade unionist, she is also deeply committed to racial and sexual equality.

The last three years of economic recession has placed her and many other minority and women unionists in a contradictory position on the question of seniority v. affirmative action.

"We owe the women's movement a debt of gratitude for drawing attention to the equal employment provisions of the Civil Rights Act," she explains. "But from labor's perspective, it looks like the women's movement wants affirmative action to take the place of seniority. For labor to give up seniority would be going back 30 years—it's the basis on which the labor movement was built."

The dilemma could be solved, Merrill suggests, by cutting through the "rhetoric and emotionalism" and striving to integrate both principles. The mechanics of such a level-headed approach are difficult to imagine, however, in the context of massive layoffs, soaring unemployment and heated debate inside and outside of unions on whether seniority or affirmative action is more important.

Women and minorities remain concentrated in lower-paying "entry-level" jobs. Since they've only recently been hired in some industries, often through affirmative action programs, they are the first to be laid off under the "last-hired, first-

fired" principle followed by most employers. The U.S. Civil Rights Commission reported in a recent study that minority members and women have been disproportionately affected by lay-offs during this recession. Much of their limited progress has thereby "been obliterated."

Feelings run high on all sides of the controversy. Labor leaders refuse to compromise on seniority, the primary protection for union members against capricious firings by management. Women's and civil rights organizations argue that prevailing seniority systems perpetuate racist and sexist hiring patterns. Stuck in the middle are organizations like CLUW and the Coalition of Black Trade Unionists (CBTU), which are securely tied to trade union structures but are supposed to protect the special interests of blacks and women.

While the burden of guilt for discrimination rests primarily on employers, the unions themselves have often served as junior partners in keeping minorities and women in lower-paying jobs or in excluding them from some industries altogether.

The extent of union discrimination is hard to generalize. Some unions blatantly discriminate against women and minorities, while others fail to fight energetically for their advancement. Still others actively organize these groups and defend their rights on the local level.

Black and women trade unionists contacted by *In These Times*, regardless of union, solidly supported the seniority principle. "Unionism is based on seniority—that's the whole crux of the system," commented Dorothy Gaines, recording secretary of a United Steel Workers local.

Outside of trade unions, however, reaction was more critical. "The seniority

system is based on racism," says Jim Haughton of the New York-based Fight Back organization. "In all industries and crafts there should be an equitable representation of nonwhites and women to make up for past discrimination. A seniority system should only commence from that point on."

"You just can't fight racism in organized labor from within because you're part of the system," Haughton continues. His organization has focused on forcing the construction trades to hire black and minority workers and is trying to build a coalition to demand government loans to rehabilitate houses in New York city. This program would operate in the heart of the black community and help bring work back into the city and back to black workers, he says.

The Civil Rights Commission also adopted a critical position toward seniority last October by holding that seniority systems are by definition illegal under the Civil Rights Act, since minorities and women have lost jobs in higher proportion than their involvement in the labor force.

It suggested that the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, the act's enforcement arm, issue specific guidelines based on the principle that "all seniority systems are invalid as they apply to any workforce that does not mirror the relevant labor market."

The commission proposed alternatives to the "last-hired, first-fired" procedure including worksharing (cutting the hours of work for all), separate seniority lists for women, minorities and non-minority males, and inverse seniority.

Everyone admits that the final solution to the conflict between minority rights and seniority systems depends on a heal-

thy economy that can provide jobs for all—which has never been the case in capitalist society. That, essentially, is a question of economics and politics. Labor leaders in particular are hoping that the federal government will quickly implement a full employment policy.

The choice of a new labor secretary is another governmental decision that is closely tied to the affirmative action-seniority question. A behind-the-scenes power struggle is going on in the Carter "transition team" over this choice.

AFL-CIO president George Meany, the AFL-CIO hierarchy and UAW leaders are backing John Dunlop, President Ford's one-time labor secretary. Dunlop is closely associated with the building trades unions and has helped their national leaders keep a firm grip on uppity locals.

Dunlop is also an old enemy of affirmative action, women's and civil rights groups say. He is the father of proposed Labor Department regulations that would cut by 90 percent the number of companies required to meet affirmative action guidelines before receiving federal contracts. A coalition of civil rights and women's organizations are fighting his reappointment.

The winner of this squabble over the labor secretary will suggest which part of Carter's varied constituencies will pack the most punch in the new administration. AFL-CIO leaders expect Carter to cut inflation, push pro-labor legislation and provide jobs for union members.

Jim Haughton and other community activists have less faith in what the new president will do. "Until such time as we're able to build a united movement to fight for our real needs, crisis in employment and inflation will continue to increase," he says.

Organizing women, blacks: labor's come a long way



By Dan Marshall
National Staff Writer

In 75 years, changes in American industry and the workforce composition have impelled trade unions to seriously confront organizing minority and women workers.

Labor shortages in both world wars brought many blacks from southern fields to northern mass-production industries. Women and minorities predominate in the service, public employment and clerical sectors of the economy that have tremendously expanded since World War II.

The attitudes of trade union members and leaders toward black and women workers have also progressed.

In the early 20th century, labor leaders were unabashed about their racist sentiments. Many unions excluded blacks outright or placed them in segregated locals with the express approval of the American Federation of Labor. AFL policies toward blacks prompted A. Philip Randolph, head of the Sleeping Car Porters, to condemn the federation in 1919 as the "most wicked machine for the propagation of race prejudice in this country." As late as 1943, 30 AFL unions excluded blacks through constitutional provision or union ritual.

The Congress of Industrial Organizations, formed in 1935, broke many racial barriers by organizing thousands of unskilled black workers in the mass-production industries and by using its political influence to promote fair employment practices.

The CIO's United Packinghouse Workers, now a part of the Amalgamated Meat Cutters, was the "most consistently militant, antiracist union in the country," says Stella Nowicki, an early packinghouse union organizer who worked in

the union for many years.

The Packinghouse Workers encouraged multiracial leadership in its locals, fought against the poll tax that prohibited many southern blacks from voting and helped cut through the color bars in baseball and other professions, she says.

► Industrial unions have better record.

CIO-formed industrial unions retain a better record in fighting discrimination than AFL craft unions.

Dorothy Gaines has seen that commitment to racial and sexual equality operate for many years. Gaines, a member of United Steel Workers Local 2645 in Chicago, had worked as a press operator at Continental Can Co. for 31 years when she tried to advance into an inspector's slot last year.

"There was a lot of rejection at first," she says. "There was only one woman in the quality control department before me. Instead of putting me in a proper training program, they just expected me to know the job after three weeks. I heard stories that they didn't think I was really qualified for the job and were trying to ease me out."

When she went to the union for help, it called a special meeting with management to straighten out the problem. Another inspector was brought in to train her and she quickly picked up the necessary skills.

"Everyone seemed happy the obstacles were overcome," she says proudly of breaking the department's sexual barrier. "Now the whole department has been opened up to other women and minorities. It made me feel real confident—before I was on the verge of calling it quits. But I knew I'd be letting other people down if I quit."

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