

The Los Angeles Times Series on the United Farm Workers: A Disservice to readers and the Farm Worker Movement

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Introduction

For more than 40 years, the *Los Angeles Times* has covered efforts by Cesar Chavez and the UFW to represent and serve farm workers fully, fairly and accurately. Over the past 12 years, the *Times* has published dozens upon dozens of stories, written by at least 22 different reporters, chronicling the UFW's significant efforts and successes in winning representation elections, boycotts, contracts, legislation, court rulings as well as other government actions—all in the service of representing farm workers.

Unfortunately, the paper's recent series of stories by Miriam Pawel stands in stark contrast to the *Times'* previous coverage.

Although her articles have a veneer of fairness and accuracy, they in fact are far from that. The picture painted is a false and inaccurate one. This White Paper seeks to refute many of the falsehoods in the *Times* series. We are confident that any fair-minded person who reads both the articles and this document will conclude that the *Times'* has done a great disservice to its readers, to the Farm Worker Movement, and to the truth.

The journalistic failings of the series are significant:

The *Los Angeles Times* Code of Ethics states, "People who will be shown in an adverse light in an article must be given a meaningful opportunity to defend themselves. This means making a good-faith effort to give the subject of allegations or criticism sufficient time and information to respond substantively."

Yet in her stories:

- On at least 71 occasions, Miriam Pawel failed to ask the Farm Worker Movement about specific charges or allegations in her stories. Many involved serious criticisms.
- On at least 17 occasions, Miriam Pawel made false or inaccurate statements even though she knew the facts ahead of time.
- On at least 6 occasions, Miriam Pawel misrepresented quotes or statements in her articles, taking them out of context.

- On at least 31 occasions, Miriam Pawel omitted the Farm Worker Movement's side of the story during important points in her coverage.

The first three days of Miriam Pawel's stories—those concerning the present Farm Worker Movement—add up to about 388 column inches of text. Just 23 of those column inches—or roughly 5 percent of the three stories—can charitably be described as containing facts or perspective from the movement.

The series boils down to three major charges. All of them are false.

FALSE CHARGE: The UFW has abandoned organizing farm workers.

FACTS:

- (1) Over the past 12 years, the *Times*' has written extensively about a succession of UFW organizing and election campaigns in the fields.
- (2) Workers at 32 companies voted for the UFW in secret-ballot elections since the mid-1990s.
- (3) The UFW has signed important new union contracts with the largest strawberry, rose, winery, and mushroom firms in California and in the nation.
- (4) As a result, dues money paid by farm workers under UFW contract nearly tripled from 1994 to 2004.

FALSE CHARGE: The reason farm workers remain largely unorganized is that the UFW has abandoned them.

FACTS:

- (1) Despite significant obstacles, the UFW has in fact won new rights and important victories for farm workers in the fields, in the courts, in the state legislature, in the U.S. Congress and in the governor's office. Prior to its recent series, the *Times* extensively covered these UFW efforts in all these arenas. **Bruce Raynor, president, Unite-Here, and John Wilhelm, president, Hospitality Division, Unite-Here,** wrote to the *L.A. Times* prior to the series, noting **"The UFW's recent history shows remarkable success in the toughest organizing job in America."** The obstacles to farm worker organizing are enormous: fierce political and economic opposition by California agribusiness and 16 years of two pro-grower, anti-UFW Republican governors between 1983 and 1999 (Rene Lopez, a 19 year old farm worker leader, was murdered by grower agents just after voting in a state conducted union election at Sikkema Dairy near Fresno in 1983.) Most of today's farm workers in California are much

more vulnerable to abuse and threats because they are undocumented immigrants.

FALSE CHARGE: The Chavez family runs a web of “family businesses” that do not help farm workers but trade on the legacy and name of Cesar Chavez and the UFW.

FACTS:

- (1) All of the non-profit organizations have distinct missions, budgets and professional staffs, and provide vital services for farm workers in addition to the UFW’s work. Among those services are high-quality affordable housing in farm worker communities, an eight-station network of popular educational Spanish-language radio stations targeting farm workers and blanketing regions with the greatest concentrations of farm workers in the nation, classes to improve job skills and learn vocational English, and community organizing programs to help bring about basic social and economic change in rural communities.
- (2) Chavez family members in the Farm Worker Movement are paid—and live—modestly. Many spent decades working for next to nothing. None profit personally in any way from the legacy of Cesar Chavez.

Finally, it is sad the *Times* attempted to unfairly impugn the reputation and memory of Cesar Chavez, who dedicated his life to serving farm workers and all who are victims of poverty and injustice. The life and work of Cesar Chavez will remain an inspiration to millions of Americans long after the *Los Angeles Times* series has been forgotten.

The full text of the UFW White Paper on the *Los Angeles Times* series, with supporting documents and a sampling of the hundreds of letters of support and testimony about our work, can be found at:

<http://www.ufw.org/puzzledLAT.htm>