News



Members of the Farm Labor Organizing Committee take part in the group's convention in September in Toledo, Ohio. (Matt Emmick)



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Toledo, Ohio — October 20, 2022

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At age 21, Baldemar Velasquez, son of a Mexican family that spent years working in U.S. agriculture, decided to take action to address the deplorable conditions imposed on farmworkers.

Angered and aggrieved and following in the footsteps of Cesar Chavez, Martin Luther King Jr., and Mohandas Gandhi, Velasquez founded the Farm Labor Organizing Committee, or FLOC. According to its website, the union "has set international precedents in labor history, including being the first union to negotiate multi-party collective bargaining agreements, and the first to represent H2A international guestworkers under a labor agreement."

Since 1967, Velasquez has been the union's only president, a charismatic, evangelical Christian who in 1989 received the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Fellowship (Genius Grant), which included a $265,000 award.

The union used a unique three-way collective bargaining strategy to bring soup giant Campbell Soup Company and the North Carolina-based Mt. Olive Pickle Company into union contracts. The Campbell's contract, signed in Toledo in 1986, included the soup company, the Ohio farmers who produce the thousands of pounds of tomatoes used in Campbell's soup products and the workers who toil in the fields. In 2004, FLOC duplicated its Ohio effort when the Mt. Olive Pickle Company, the North Carolina Growers Association and many of the state's cucumber workers joined another three-way labor agreement.

With the Mt. Olive victory, the Farm Labor Organizing Committee, long based in Toledo, opened union offices in Dudley, North Carolina, to provide support for the farmworkers who joined the union in a Southern state where labor unions are rare. In 2006, FLOC opted to expand its presence in North Carolina with a new campaign against R.J. Reynolds Tobacco Company.

With Velasquez splitting time between the Ohio and North Carolina union operations, some unprecedented disagreements began to spring up last year regarding the

union's strategies in North Carolina and in general. Some FLOC supporters also started to express dissatisfaction with Velasquez's leadership style, according to a range of NCR interviews with FLOC staff, union members and supporters.

As president, Velasquez has been reelected every four years in more than 40 years of uncontested races. After he was reelected president in 2017, Velasquez, now 75, had told FLOC staff it would be his final race, according to interviews, and that he was considering helping Leticia Zavala or Justin Flores, both former elected FLOC vice presidents, to step into the presidency in 2021.




Baldemar Velasquez, the president of the Farm Labor Organizing Committee, speaks during the group's convention in September in Toledo, Ohio. (Matt Emmick)

COVID-19 delayed that election, but in the meantime, as disagreements between Velasquez and his North Carolina staff became more volatile, Velasquez announced

his intentions to seek another term.

In response, Zavala and Flores decided to run an unprecedented campaign to wrest control of the union away from Velasquez.

Enter "It's Our Future," or IOF, the name chosen for the campaign to change some of FLOC's priorities. With Zavala running for president, the battle lines were drawn, and Velasquez was ready for a fight. Using his power as the union's CEO, Velasquez sent letters to Flores, and another worker who supported It's Our Future, firing them. Zavala also told NCR that she subsequently felt disempowered by Velasquez and was not permitted to do any work representing the union.

The Farm Labor Organizing Committee's election convention was set for Sept. 10 in Toledo rather than North Carolina, as per a vote approved by FLOC's board of directors, Velasquez said in an NCR interview. Flores disputes that claim, and says Velasquez made the location decision on his own. Only once has the convention been staged in North Carolina, in 2013, although the majority of FLOC's farmworker members are in North Carolina.

Scheduling the convention during the peak of North Carolina's tobacco harvest meant few of FLOC's North Carolina farmworker contingent would be able to get time off work to make the weekend trip to Ohio to cast their votes.

Velasquez defended the decision to hold the vote in Ohio, saying in the interview: "First of all, there's no good time to have a convention when it comes to the summer when the workers are in the fields because the crops are perishable and they're time sensitive." The union leader also said the 2013 convention in North Carolina had cost some 30% more than conventions in Ohio.

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In the lead up to the convention, Velasquez reached out to his longtime supporters, also signing up new union members, who, despite never working in agriculture, paid a $30 fee to become "associate members" of the Farm Labor Organizing Committee that allowed them to be voting "delegates" to the convention. Former Toledo mayor Carty Finkbeiner, who is white and has been a strong supporter of the union, voted in the election, which Velasquez won 135 to 21.

Velasquez told NCR that the former mayor and other delegates are "legacy fighters that are associate members and that when we're calling a new campaign they're the ones that take to the streets; they're the ones that do the boycotts."

"You're never going to build a union with just migrant workers; they need the support of stable year-round people who are connected to agriculture," he said.

Velasquez also defended the fact that several of his family members were among those voting in the election. He said his children and siblings "were all raised on picket lines and marches and they stay faithful to that."

Farmworker Felipe Montan, a union member for 18 years from Mount Olive, said: "Maneuvering things in his favor at the convention, [Velasquez] was not democratic at all. We couldn't go because we would lose our jobs and many of us are unhappy. What farmworkers were there? Where is the base? In North Carolina. It was a bad move, and if anyone had a good impression of Baldemar [Velasquez], it is gone."

Farmworker Eladio Collazo, a nine-year member from Nash County, North Carolina, said: "I feel frustrated, but firm in continuing the fight and taking action, more ready than ever. I thank all those who went to bravely represent us. Baldemar feels victorious because he won up there but here in North Carolina he is lost."

Zavala, whose husband, Fernando Pineda, has been a union member for about 20 years, said during her childhood she was inspired by Velasquez and uplifted by the union he led.




Leticia Zavala, a former vice president of the Farm Labor Organizing Committee, speaks during the group's convention in September in Toledo, Ohio, as Baldemar Velasquez, the group's president, sits on the dais. (Matt Emmick)

"He was a sign of inspiration and hope for me working in the fields, a frustrated teenager that hated my parents for bringing me to this country to stoop over," she said. "When I would hear his speeches in the union meetings it was just so inspirational, and I love him and I respect him for that, and I always will, but what he's doing right now is not correct. And because I love him, I need to make sure he understands that."

"It's not something specific against him. The union needs leadership, and the union needs multiple leadership. It's not a one-man show," she said.

For his part, Velasquez seems unfazed by the challenge to his leadership coming from his former North Carolina staff. In the interview following the close of the convention, Velasquez blamed Zavala and Flores for the strife.

"The problem is that we've got two people really that it's all centered around, and they wanted to do things a certain way that I did not agree with, and I assigned them to do the things that I needed them to do because I know what we need to do to have longevity," Velasquez said.

During his victory speech in Ohio, Velasquez appeared to offer an olive branch to "those who voted against me," but he said he had no plans to reach out to his opponents or to patch things up with the IOF folks.

"I'm not going to do anything about it," Velasquez told NCR. "I'm just going to carry out the work. If they want to join us, fine. If they don't, they can sit on the sidelines. If they come to me, I'll sit down and talk to them; I don't have a problem with that. But I'm not going to be bullied into doing things, of people defining their own roles in things."

The It's Our Future campaign also picked up support from individuals and farmworker support groups in North Carolina. Lori Khamala, a Quaker who is a past coordinator of an American Friends Service Committee branch in North Carolina, has been a union supporter since the Mt. Olive campaign. She was in Toledo supporting the It's Our Future campaign and working as an election monitor.

Khamala, who says she is trying to remain hopeful about the Farm Labor Organizing Committee's prospects, left Toledo with a tone of despair: "I think my biggest takeaway is that the farmworker union I knew and supported for the last 20 years is no longer an organization for farmworkers. FLOC as a farmworker union to me is dead. It's so sad."

Velasquez said he won't "lose sleep" over this latest battle. "I've had other people who didn't like me, didn't like my decisions, things like that," he said. "Did I make the right decision all of the time? No. But I've made more right ones than wrong ones. I want to make my own decisions because I'll live with my own decisions."

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His critics claim Velasquez has not made gains in the Reynolds campaign, and Velasquez is not offering any specific details.

"A lot of these talks are confidential; I really can't talk about any details," he said. "All I know is there have been talks going on and that there seems to be a better depth of good faith, and so we're hopeful that we'll have a positive result from our current discussions."

Flores said It's Our Future lawyers have submitted a complaint to the U.S. Department of Labor addressing Velasquez's election practices and accusing him of not following the Farm Labor Organizing Committee's bylaws.

"I think Baldemar's actions have ended his credibility with union members who pay dues and work under union contract," Flores said.

In Toledo, Velasquez's supporters were not worried.

Retired Diocese of Toledo priest Fr. Richard Notter delivered the invocation and benediction at the convention. Fluent in Spanish, Notter has worked with migrant farmworkers since he was a seminarian. His ties to the union and Velasquez go back to the union's inception.

"I've known him and his family since he was a little kid," Notter said of Velasquez. "It's kind of unfortunate really. The challenger has got a very different vision. She is very committed to dealing with every little complaint that comes along, attacking the growers, and I think Baldemar's vision, which is broader, is we have to help these small farmers survive, so we have to work with them, not against them. And I think that's basically the conflict and the two theories of how they should be proceeding."

At the convention, sisters Linda Guerrero, 75, and Theresa R. Utter, 61, whose grandmother was born in Mexico, but neither of whom ever worked in agriculture, both said they were delegates who were voting for Velasquez.

Both women, who are Catholic, have had grandsons in Toledo who participated in a union youth program that they praised. Guerrero said she joined the union six years ago, but had never voted in an election. Utter recently joined the union.

After the vote, Guerrero said: "I thought it was good, wonderful that Baldemar got reelected and everything came out OK."