

Wrath of Grapes Boycott: Cesar Chavez – Speech (1986)

I am speaking to you about our Wrath of Grapes Boycott.

Because I believe our greatest court, the court of last resort, is the American people. And I believe that once you have taken a few moments to hear this message you will concur in this verdict along with a million other North Americans who are already committed to the largest grape boycott in history.

The worth of humans is involved here.

I see us as one family. We cannot turn our backs on each other and our future. We farm workers are closest to food production. We were the first to recognize the serious health hazards of agriculture pesticides to both consumers and ourselves.

Twenty years ago over 17 million Americans united in a grape boycott campaign that transformed the simple act of refusing to buy grapes into a powerful and effective force against poverty and injustice. Through the combined strengths of a national boycott, California farm workers won many of the same rights as other workers--the right to organize and negotiate with growers.

But we also won a critical battle for all Americans. Our first contracts banned the use of DDT, DDE, Dieldrin on crops, years before the federal government acted.

Twenty years later, our contracts still seek to limit the spread of poison in our food and fields, but we need your help once again if we are to succeed.

A powerful self-serving alliance between the California governor and the 14 billion dollar agricultural industry has resulted in a systematic and reckless poisoning of not only California farm workers but of grape consumers throughout our nation and Canada.

The hard won law enacted in 1975 has been trampled beneath the feet of self-interest. Blatant violations of California labor laws are constantly ignored. And worst of all, the indiscriminate and even illegal use of dangerous pesticides has radically increased in the last decade causing illness, permanent disability and even death.

We must not allow the Governor of California and the selfish interests of California grape growers to threaten lives through-out North America.

We have known for many years that pesticides used in agriculture pollute the air, earth and water, contaminate animals and humans and are found in the tissue of newborn infants and mothers' milk. This March, the New York Times reported that the Environmental Protection Agency finally considers pesticide pollution its most urgent problem noting virtually everyone is exposed to pesticides.

The Environmental Protection Agency experts have warned that

#1--Pesticide residue is being found in a growing number of food products.

#2--Some poisons registered for use in the last 30 years cause cancer, mutations and birth defects.

#3--Most chemicals on the market have insufficient and sometimes fraudulent test results.

#4--Underground water supplies of 23 states are already tainted and farm workers suffer some pesticide induced illness in alarming numbers.

Consumers must be alerted now that no one can actually define or measure so called safe exposure to residual poison that accumulates in the human body as environments differ and each person's tolerance is unique.

What might be safe statistically for the average healthy 40 year old male, might irreparably harm an elderly consumer, a child, or the baby of a pregnant mother.

What we do know absolutely is that human lives are worth more than grapes and that innocent looking grapes on the table may disguise poisonous residues hidden deep inside where washing cannot reach.

Let me share the frightening facts with you. Last July the New York Times and national television reported that nearly 1,000 California, Pacific Northwest, Alaskan, and Canadian consumers became ill as the result of eating watermelons tainted with the powerful insecticide Aldicarb, labeled the most acutely toxic pesticide registered in the United States. Yet Aldicarb cannot be legally used on watermelons.

In June local agriculture officials quarantined fields in Delano, California grape ranches because residues of the pesticide Orthene were found in the vineyards, yet Orthene cannot be legally used on table grapes.

And a new study shows pesticides used in growing may be responsible for the illness of over 300,000 of the nation's 4 million farm workers.

But of the 27 legal restricted toxic poisons currently used on grapes, at least 5 are potentially as dangerous or more hazardous to consumers and grape workers than deadly Aldicarb and Orthene.

Here are 5 major threats to your health that cling to the California table grapes.

Parathion and Phosdrin--are highly poisonous insecticides, similar to nerve gas, and are responsible for the majority of deaths and serious poisoning of farm workers. They cause birth defects and are carcinogens.

Captan--a proven cancer causing and birth defect producing agent. (Fungicide)

Dinoseb--a highly toxic herbicide that has caused worker deaths.

Methyl Bromide--a more potent mutagen (an agent affecting genetic material) than mustard gas and is highly poisonous and proven carcinogen.

Statistics and new articles do not relate the real cost, the human anguish that originates from poisons on our food. They do not tell the tragedies I personally learn of daily.

How can I explain these chemicals to 3 year old Amalia Larios who will never walk, born with a spinal defect due to pesticide exposure of her mother.

What statistics are important to Adrian Espinoza 7 years old and dying of cancer with 8 other children--whose only source of water was polluted with pesticides.

What headlines can justify the loss of irrigator Manuel Anaya's right hand, amputated due to recurrent infection from powerful herbicides added to the water he worked with in the fields.

How do we comfort the mother of maimed and stillborn infants, the parents who watch their teenage children sicken or die.

What report can be cited at the hospital beds I visit, at growing numbers of wakes I attend.

What court will hear the case of 32 year old Juan Chaboya, murdered by deadly chemicals in the freshly sprayed fields outside San Diego. His dead body dumped by the growers 45 miles away at a Tijuana clinic. What excuse for justice will we offer his 4 children and his widow if we do nothing.

Now is the time for all of us to stand as a family and demand a response in the name of decency. Too much is at stake. This is a battle that none of us can afford to lose because it is a fight for the future of America. It is a fight we can win and it is a fight that everyone can join.

Add your voice to our demands of decency as we call for

#1--A ban on the 5 most dangerous pesticides used in grape production--Parathion, Phosdrin, Dinoseb, Methyl Bromide and Captan.

#2--A joint UFW/grower testing program for poisonous residues on grapes sold in stores with the results made public.

#3--Free and fair elections for farm workers to decide whether to organize and negotiate contracts limiting the use of dangerous poisons in the fields.

#4--Good faith bargaining.

Until these demands of decency are met we will carry the message of the Wrath of Grapes Boycott from state to state. 10 years ago, 12% of the country boycotted grapes and the growers were forced to accountability. California Governor Deukmejian and agribusiness cannot

withstand the judgment of outraged consumers who refused to purchase their tainted products.

Every month over 1 million grape consumers like yourselves receive our message across North America. State and federal law makers, mayors and city councils, religious and labor leaders, students and senior citizens, mothers and fathers, rich and poor, concerned individuals in every walk of life have endorsed the Wrath of Grapes Boycott. With their commitment and their donations, they in turn have reached out to their friends and relatives to help bind the foundation of a growing coalition of decency.

Now I am reaching out to you for help because consumers and farm workers must stand together as one family if we are to be heard. I am not asking you to give up wine or raisins. I am asking you to give us your commitment and valuable support.

I am asking you to join us now and be counted to join the growing family of individuals who will boycott grapes until the demands of decency have been met.

And hard as it is for me to ask for money, I am asking you to contribute to the cause--\$100, \$50, \$15 whatever you can afford. Whatever you would have spent on grapes this year. Insure that every week 1 million more consumers will know the truth.

You have my personal pledge that every cent of your contributions will be spent on the Wrath of Grapes Campaign bringing this message into every home in America because this message is the source of our combined strength.

My friends, the wrath of grapes is a plague born of selfish men that is indiscriminately and undeniably poisoning us all. Our only protection is to boycott the grapes and our only weapon is the truth. If we unite we can only triumph for ourselves, for our children and for their children.

We look forward to hearing from you soon.