

UFW MARTYRS



Cesar E. Chavez
1927 - 1993

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We don't know how God chooses martyrs. We do know that they give us the most precious gift they possess --- their very lives.

Although we can't comprehend how they are selected for martyrdom, we do know that Nan, Nagi, Juan, Rufino, and Rene were and are very special human beings...special to their families and friends, but perhaps even more so to the people for whom they laid down their lives.

In this great struggle to improve the lives of Farm Workers and Consumers, we work long hours and sometimes make sacrifices we would never dream of making just to earn our daily bread. But no matter how much we work or accomplish or sacrifice, we can never equal the contribution our martyrs have made to La Causa.

We will never let the sacrifice they have made for us be forgotten and we want to share with you what we know of these special sister and brothers.

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UFW MARTYR
NAN FREEMAN
1953 - 1972

On the morning of January 25, 1972, at about 3:00 a.m., UFW pickets were positioned at the entrance to the Talisman Sugar Plant on US HWY 27, about 20 miles north of Belle Glade Florida. The Farm Workers strike had been in progress at Talisman for two weeks.

The plant is situated about 300 feet off the main highway with a side road leading to the main gate. Trucks hauling the sugar cane from the fields made a turn off the main road onto the side road and then pass through the plant gates. The trucks are large semis pulling two “cages” of cane – a double trailer. Loaded, the trucks weigh about 70,000 pounds.

The trucks had been a source of concern to pickets because most of the drivers were dangerously inexperienced scabs who weren't used to handling the 70,000 pound loads. And the Company was overloading the trucks in an effort to make as few trips as possible because the regular drivers were among the strikers.



For several days pickets had complained to the police about the scab drivers because they would speed by the picket lines in a deliberate effort to splash rain and mud on the workers. They went through stop signs at the plant gates and committed other violations of traffic laws, but local police took no action.

Nan Freeman and Pam Albright were two of the five young New College students who responded to the UFW strikers' call for help by going down to Belle Glade on Monday. They had both been doing volunteer work for the UFW at their college in Sarasota as part of the REAL program, a research program in Florida agriculture.

This morning at 3:00 a.m., Nan and Pam were helping Jose Romero at the plant gate. They were posted about 30 feet from the highway on the road leading to the plant gate. They had leaflets and their job was to talk with the drivers of the trucks to encourage them to join the strike.

At 3:15 a.m. a cane truck pulled off the highway onto the road leading to the plant gate. The driver stopped to talk with the pickets. Romero climbed up on the running board to talk with the driver while the two young women stood behind him on the ground.

As he was talking with the driver, Romero noticed a second truck coming down the highway about to turn into the entrance road. Since pickets were continually being told by the police not to block the entrance, Romero told the driver to move on, out of the way. He jumped down off the truck and with Nan & Pam stepped back toward a guardrail, to the side of the truck. But as the truck started up, Romero noticed that the rear trailer would cut back toward them, too sharply and too close to the guard rail, because the truck and trailer had not been properly aligned. Romero turned and pushed Pam out of the way. As he turned to Nan, he saw the side

of the trailer loaded with cane hit her and knock her into the guard railing. She lay on the ground, unconscious.

Palm Beach County Sheriff's deputies, parked a few hundred feet away maintaining a 24-hour watch on the plant, came quickly over, covered Nan with a blanket, and called an ambulance.

They commented they could get no reflex responses and that her pulse seemed to be fading. About 25 minutes later, at 3:50 a.m., the ambulance arrived to take her to the Glades General Hospital in Belle Glade. She was pronounced dead on arrival at the hospital at 4:19 a.m.

STATEMENT BY CESAR E. CHAVEZ

On Tuesday, January 25, 1972, Nan Freeman, a young Jewish woman from Boston, gave her life for Farm Workers. She was 18 years old when she died.

To some she is a young girl who lost her life in a tragic accident. To us she is a sister who picketed with Farm Workers in the middle of the night because of her love for justice. She is a young woman who fulfilled the commandments by loving her neighbors even to the point of sacrificing her own life.

To us, Nan Freeman is Kadosha in the Hebrew tradition, "a holy person," to be honored and remembered for as long as Farm Workers struggle for justice.

How can we measure the gift she has given to our cause? Will God give her another life to live?...God has given Nan Freeman just one life and now that life is ended. Think of that, all who cherish our Farm Workers' Union: Nan Freeman, our young sister has poured out her one life so that Farm Workers everywhere might be more free.

There is no way to repay her immeasurable gift. There are no words to thank her for what she's done. Some things we can do: our whole movement is declaring a period of mourning that will correspond to the traditional 7-day period of mourning.

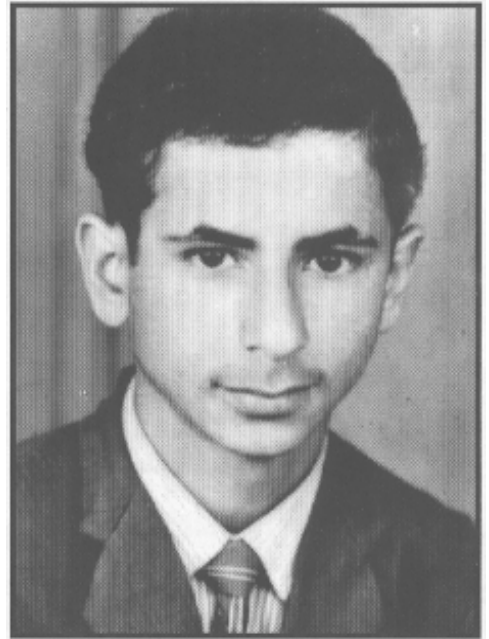
We can remember Nan Freeman. We can honor her life and express our thoughts to her family. We can give more of ourselves just because she has given everything. We must work together to build a Farm Workers' Union that is worthy of her love and her sacrifice.

UFW MARTYR
NAGI DAIFALLAH
1949 - 1973

On the morning of August 15, 1973, Nagi Daifallah, a young Arab member of the UFW died from injuries inflicted by Deputy Sheriff Gilbert Cooper of the Kern County Sheriff's Department.

Nagi had come to this country from his native Yemen looking for a better life. Yemenese Farm Workers were the latest group of people to come to California to be exploited by the California growers.

Most of them, like Nagi, were young men in their early twenties, they were unusually shy, of slight frame, Moslem, spoke no English, and live in barren labor camps. Like other workers, they were paid only when they worked and lived wretched lives. Yet they came by the thousands because Yemen was and is one of the poorest countries of the world where the average annual income was \$94. Before the UFWs' organizing efforts, there were no alternatives for these workers.



Nagi was 24 years old when he was killed. He was 5 feet tall and weighed 100 lbs. Unlike many of his fellow workers, he had learned English and could communicate well. Many times he had served as an interpreter for UFW organizers, he was always very active in union activities, he was a good UFW member, and, in fact, was known as a leader of the Arab workers.

As a striker from El Rancho Farms near Arvin, he was one of a handful of Arab brothers who were on the picket lines in the Lamont area for many weeks of the strike.

At approximately 1:15 a.m. on August 15, a group of about 15 UFW members were present at the Smokehouse Café in Lamont, California. A Kern County Sheriff's Department vehicle arrived. One of the 3 officers in the car, Deputy Gilbert Cooper, began harassing Frank Quintana, a UFW member and picket captain.

Deputy Cooper attempted to arrest Quintana, who had been peacefully standing outside the café, for disturbing the peace. Such an arrest was in keeping with the continued campaign of harassment and arrests of UFW picket captains by the Sheriff's Department during the grape strike of 1973.

The Farm Workers who were with Quintana protested the arrest. In the midst of this confrontation, Deputy Sheriff Cooper, inexplicably, singled out Nagi and started harassing him. Nagi tried to get away and Cooper began chasing him as he ran north on the sidewalk.

The Deputy caught up behind Nagi and, without any warning to halt, swung a long, 5-cell, metal flashlight and struck Nagi in the back of the head. Cooper, 6 feet tall and more than 200 pounds, delivered such a forceful blow to the 5 foot, 100 pound Nagi that he severed Nagi's spinal cord from the base of his skull. Nagi fell to

his knees from the viciousness of the blow and then crumpled face forward to the sidewalk, unconscious and bleeding profusely from his head.

Two Sheriff's Deputies then turned Nagi on his back, seized him by the wrists and dragged him, head dangling and bouncing on the pavement, for sixty feet, leaving a massive trail of blood all the way. They left his body lying in the gutter near the rear door of the police car.

Other people, who had been told to leave by the police, attempted to come to Nagi's aid and asked the officers why they did not call an ambulance. More deputies arrived in response to the people's attempts to reach Nagi and request an ambulance. Three workers were arrested in their attempt to help their fallen brother.

At Nagi's funeral thousands of UFW workers and supporters followed the casket bearing Nagi's body on the 4-mile trek to the Forty Acres in Delano. After the service, a long car caravan accompanied the casket to the Bakersfield airport and Nagi's body was flown to Yemen for burial in his homeland. Mushin Daifallah, Nagi's father told us that Nagi was a dutiful son who sent him money as often as he could to support the family in Yemen. He said "I lost my son when I needed him the most."

STATEMENT BY CESAR E. CHAVEZ

Nagi Daifallah was an immigrant. Like so many thousands of Farm Workers, he came to this country seeking opportunity and fell into the trap of poverty and powerlessness that has enslaved so many migrant Farm Workers in our country.

He joined the United Farm Workers Union and gave himself fully to the grape strike and the struggle of justice for all Farm Workers.

Nagi Daifallah is dead at the age of 24. The hand that struck Brother Nagi down trembles in fear. It too is the victim of the climate of the violence, racism, and hatred created by those men who own everything...and kill what they cannot own.

We are faced with discrimination, exploitation, and even slaughter. The government represses our people and millions of Farm Workers are trapped in poverty while the growers lavish in riches we have earned for them.

These are differing ills, but they are the common works of greedy men. They reflect the imperfection of our society.

In the struggle to change these evils, Nagi gave his life.

UFW MARTYR
JUAN DE LA CRUZ
1913 - 1973

Juan De La Cruz, age 60, was shot and killed on a United Farm Workers' picket line near Arvin on August 17, 1973.

A native of the state of Aguascalientes in Mexico, Juan De La Cruz came to the state of New Mexico under the Bracero Program. Later he brought his family to the U.S. and they traveled from place to place as migrants searching for work.

They finally found year-round employment in Arvin where Juan worked at Roberts Farm for 14 years before his death.

In an interview, Juan's wife, Maximina De La Cruz, said of those years, "Field work then was tough. There were no toilet facilities and no drinking water. The grower told us to pick faster and, if we didn't speed up, we were fired. They paid us one dollar an hour."

Juan De La Cruz joined the UFW when organizing started in his area in 1965. He knew that the Union was good for him and for his people. He had been a member of the Lumberman's Union in Mexico and of the Construction workers in Texas.

Mrs. De La Cruz added, "It is better now with the Union. We have better wages and everything. We have a medical plan and insurance, paper cups and drinking water, toilets in the fields and twenty minutes rest periods during the day."

Juan De La Cruz, a gentle man and quiet man, died after being shot while on a picket line which was strung out along the highway between Arvin and Weedpatch. As a caravan of scabs drove out of the fields, five shots were fired from a pickup truck. Juan, shielding his wife, shoved her to the ground, and was struck by a 22-caliber bullet just below his heart.

For the second time in one week, plans were made for a Farm Worker funeral. On the night of August 20, a candlelight procession was held in the city of Arvin, winding through the streets and ending at the Arvin city park where the wake was held.

On the following day, thousands of Farm Workers and supporters from throughout the country marched in a procession to the cemetery, following a funeral mass in the park.

A twenty-year-old Filipino worker, Bayani Advincula, was later arrested by Sheriff's deputies and charged with murder. Advincula was identified as the passenger in a pickup truck, who lifted a twenty-two caliber semi-automatic rifle from the floorboard, and fired it into the picket line.



Advincula admitted firing the gun, but he said he was not shooting at people, claiming instead he was shooting toward the cotton fields. Advincula was freed on \$1,500 bail and was later acquitted of all charges by a Kern County jury. The county paid for the cost of the trial.

STATEMENT BY CESAR E. CHAVEZ

Juan has not only given himself in life – but he has now given his only life on this Earth for us, for his children, and for all Farm Workers who suffer and who go hungry in this land of plenty.

We are here because his spirit of service and sacrifice has touched and moved our lives. The force that is generated by that spirit of love is more powerful than any force on earth. It cannot be stopped.

We live in the midst of people who hate and fear us. They have worked hard to keep us in our place. They will spend millions more to destroy our Union. But we do not have to make ourselves small by hating and fearing them in return. There is enough love and good will in our movement to give energy to our struggle, and still have plenty left over, to break down and change the climate of hate and fear around us.

We are going to win. It is a matter of time. Juan De La Cruz has not given his life in vain. He will not be forgotten. His spirit will live in each of us who decides to join the struggle and who gives love and strength to others.

Juan is a martyr in a just cause. We will give purpose and memory to his life and death by what we do. The more we sacrifice, the harder we work, the more life we give to the spirit of our brother, Juan De La Cruz.

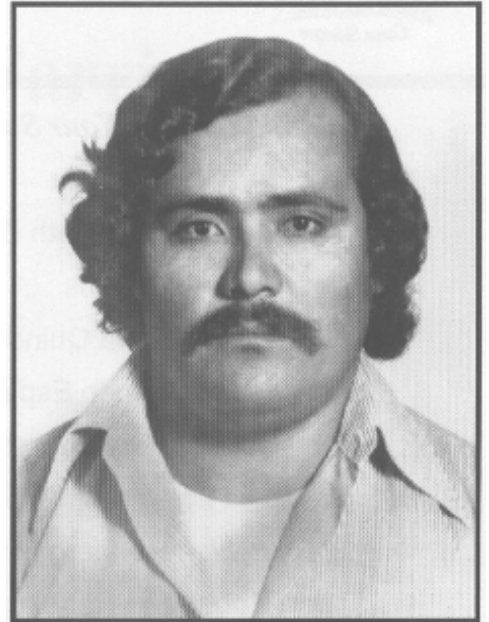
JUAN'S DEATH CAME TWO DAYS AFTER THE KILLING OF NAGI DAIFALLAH. THE LEADERSHIP OF THE UNION DECIDED NOT TO RISK ANY MORE LIVES ON THE PICKET LINES. THE STRIKE WAS CALLED OFF AND FARM WORKERS BEGAN THE LONG TREK TO THE CITIES OF AMERICA TO ORGANIZE THE SECOND GRAPE BOYCOTT.

UFW MARTYR
RUFINO CONTRERAS
1951 - 1979

Shortly before noon on Saturday, February 10, 1979, on the 22nd day of the bitter lettuce strike, 28 year old striker Rufino Contreras and a half dozen fellow strikers walked onto a lettuce field owned by Mario Saikhon, in an effort to talk with a crew of about 75 scabs imported from outside the Imperial Valley.

When the approaching strikers were still about 80 feet away from the scabs, three armed company foremen, who had positioned themselves strategically on two flanks to trap the strikers, caught Rufino and the UFW workers in a vicious crossfire.

Rufino's younger brother Jose Luis Contreras, also a Saikhon striker and a member of the delegation, said that the moment the shooting began, the strikers started scrambling back towards the public road. When Jose Luis turned around to see if his brother had made it to safety, he saw that Rufino was back in the lettuce field, lying with his face down in a muddy row.



Rufino's father, Don Lorenzo Contreras, also a Saikhon worker, Jose Luis, and other strikers repeatedly attempted to re-enter the field to render aid to their fallen son, brother and co-worker. They were kept at bay by the continuing gunfire of the foremen. One striker counted 86 gunshots at the strikers.

The shooting went on for over an hour before the Sheriff showed up and called an ambulance, even though his office was only a ten-minute drive from the lettuce field.

Oscar Mondragon was sent to the hospital in El Centro to accompany the family. Rufino died shortly after 2:00 p.m.

I went to the site of the shooting with instructions from Cesar to get all the strikers away from the area and to get them to return to El Hoyo, the strike headquarters 14 miles away in Calexico, where they were to await Cesar's return from negotiations in L.A. We knew the workers would be angry at the cold-blooded murder of Rufino and we wanted to prevent a bloodbath.

Though the strikers were outraged at the senseless killing, thankfully their respect and love for Cesar helped us convince them to stop the picket line and return to the strike staging area.

Then came the difficult part. We needed to tell Rufino's 25 year old wife, Rosa, that her husband was dead...and we knew she was in poor condition to survive such tragic news.

Rufino had not been to the picket line for several days because he was at his wife's side, day and night, in the hospital where she was suffering from third degree burns over most of her body. She had been burned badly

in a domestic accident with a kerosene lamp at their home in Mexicali. Rufino was a very loyal family man, but he also felt obligated to do his part for his larger family, his union. Jose Luis says that on Friday, February 9, "Rufino had just received the papers that his wife was eligible for the union's medical insurance and he was showing them to his friends. Like everybody, he was a good union member. He was proud of it and that day he was very happy." So Rufino returned to the picket line on that terrible day, Saturday, February 10.

On Sunday February 11, the family finally decided that Rosa had to be told why her beloved husband had not been by her side the previous Saturday night. Helen Chavez and other UFW leaders accompanied the family to the hospital to tell Rosa the tragic news.

She took it very hard, and in her sobbing grief, said that her heart had already told her something was very bad, because her husband was a good man who always put her and their two children first. She said Rufino was a kind, gentle husband and father, never one to stay away drinking at bars all night, never abused her or the children, always there when they needed him the most, She had sensed something terrible had happened.

And then she insisted on being taken to the funeral home the next day, Monday February 12, to view Rufino's body. though we were afraid to do it because, in her terrible condition, she might go into shock, several of us accompanied Rosa and the Contreras family to the mortuary.

Rosa was so badly burned that we had to take her in a wheelchair, wrapped in bandages and blankets. When we wheeled her up to Rufino's casket, the young widow broke our hearts, not simply with her grief, but with her courageous acceptance of her husband's sacrifice. We heard her say to Rufino, "Why did you leave me, my love? Fino, look at the condition I'm in. What will I tell your children when they ask for their father?"

After several minutes we really feared for her, so Helen went up to Rosa and told her we should be going, that she had to be strong for the children. Rosa understood, and in the midst of her grief, quieted her sobbing, and asked for a few more minutes.

In leaving Rufino that day, she spoke the most courageous words I have ever heard. She said to her husband, "Vete tranquilo, mi amor. Yo cuidare a tus hijos." ("Go in peace my love, I will take care of your children.")

On Tuesday, February 13, Rufino's father, Don Lorenzo Contreras, told me that Rufino was a good worker who, in 7 years had always done his best for Saikhon. In the last two years, Rufino had not missed a single day of work as a lettuce cutter, even the precious year when he was ill with a bad case of the flu.

Often when Cesar would go to the Imperial Valley, Rufino would be one of the loyal UFW members who pulled all night security; still, after 5:00 a.m., Rufino would leave to show up for the arduous, all day job cutting lettuce.

Don Lorenzo, who as a bracero had suffered the indignities, injustices, and discrimination of the hated system, said he didn't want revenge for his son's life. He simply wanted justice; he simply asked that the three foremen and the growers responsible be given a fair trial.

The three foremen were quickly released on \$5000 bond.

Soon thereafter, Judge Lenhardt, whose wife was part of a group of 300 grower's wives, lawyers wives, and Anglo high school kids, recruited supposedly to save the lettuce harvest being struck by 5,000 highly skilled, professional lettuce workers, the same judge, claiming to be unbiased, refused to try the three foremen because he said there was no way to prove which of the three had fired the fatal bullet.

On Wednesday, February 14, "el dia de los enamorados" (Valentines's Day), Rosa, her children, Don Lorenzo and the Contreras family were joined by 9,000 farm workers and supporters, including Governor Jerry Brown, to bury Rufino at the cemetery North of Calexico.

Prior to the burial, an outdoor Mass "de cuerpo presente" (with the closed casket) was celebrated at El Hoyo.

Throughout the service, Rosa, in her wheelchair, clutched their 5-year-old son, Julio Cesar, crying into his shoulder as if he were a man. The little boy simply stood quietly, embracing his mother. Nancy Berenice, the Contreras' 4 year old daughter, stood nearby with Rufino's father, mother and other relatives.

We had roped off an area for the media and journalists near the front to give them access to the service, but also to keep them under control because, jaded by so much tragedy they report, they had been cold and intrusive during the period of mourning.

On Saturday evening, for example, when Cesar had returned from LA to El Hoyo, he and Don Lorenzo were in a tearful embrace, crying over Rufino's senseless murder and the reporters were shoving microphones into their faces. We wanted to prevent that insensibility at the funeral.

At the end of the service, little Julio Cesar's grandmother quietly took him by the hand and escorted him up to the front, where the flag-draped casket was, to say goodbye to his father. The child broke into uncontrolled sobs and cries of "...mi papa, mi papa, mi papa..." that touched the hearts of the thousands gathered to honor Rufino. There wasn't a dry eye, even among the several dozen hardened reporters present.

STATEMENT BY CESAR E CHAVEZ

February 10, 1979, was a day of infamy for Farm Workers. It was a day without hope. It was a day without joy. The sun didn't shine. The birds didn't sing. The rain didn't fall.

Why was this such a day of evil? Because on this day greed and injustice struck down our brother Rufino Contreras.

What is the worth of a man? What is the worth of a Farm Worker? Rufino and his father and his bother together gave the company 20 years of their labor. They were faithful workers who helped build up the wealth of their boss, helped build up the wealth of his ranch.

What was their reward for their service and their sacrifice? When they petitioned for a more just share of what they themselves produce, when they spoke out against the injustice they endured, the company answered them with bullets. The company sent hired guns to quiet Rufino Contreras.

Capital and labor together produce the fruit of the land. But what really counts is labor. The human beings who torture their bodies, sacrifice their youth, and numb their spirits to produce this great agricultural wealth. A wealth so vast that it feeds all of America and much of the world. And yet, the men, women, and children who are the flesh and blood of this production often do not have enough to feed themselves.

But we are here today to say that true wealth is not measured in money or status or power. It is measured in the legacy that we leave behind for those we love and those we inspire.

In that sense, Rufino is not dead. Wherever Farm Workers organize, stand up for their rights, and struggle for justice, Rufino Contreras is with them.

Rufino lives among us. It is those who have killed him, and those who have conspired to kill him, that have died. Because the love, the compassion, the light in their hearts has been stilled.

Why do we say that Rufino still lives? Because those of us who mourn him today, and bring him to his rest, rededicate ourselves to the ideals for which he gave his life. Rufino lives insofar as we continue to build a union that will someday bring justice to all farm workers.

If Rufino were alive today, what would he tell us? He would tell us, "Don't be afraid. Don't be discouraged. He would tell us, don't cry for me. Organize."

This is a day of sorrow, but it is also a day of hope. It is a time of sadness because our friend and brother is dead. It is a time of hope because we are certain that Rufino today enjoys the justice in heaven denied him on earth. "Greater love hath no man than this that he give up his life for his friends."

It is our mission to finish the work Rufino has begun among us, knowing that the justice for ourselves and for our opponents is only possible before God, who is the final judge.

UFW MARTYR

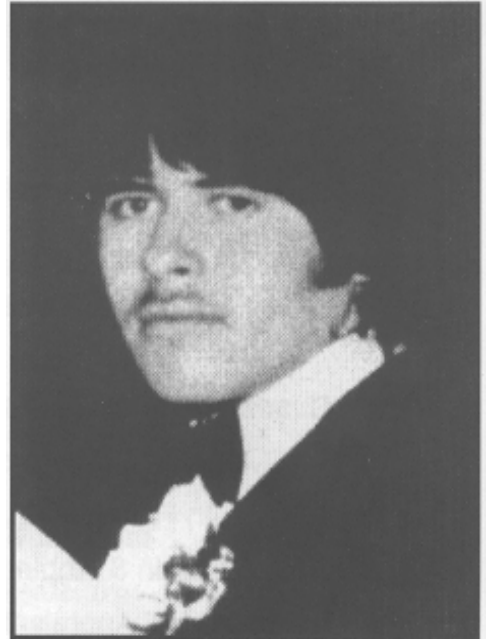
RENE LOPEZ

1962 - 1983

On September 21, 1983, Rene Lopez, a worker at Sikkema Dairy near Fresno, was shot to death at point blank range by company goons hired to harass the strikers who were attempting to bring in the UFW to represent them.

A few weeks earlier, Rene's co-workers had asked the 21 year old native of Nuevo Leon, to be their spokesperson, since he was bilingual, having graduated from Caruthers High School in Fresno County. Rene, reported by his high school classmates as a gentle person who didn't get into fights, respectfully told the dairy owner that below minimum wage for 60-hour workweeks was unacceptable and he requested a modest increase.

Fred Sikkema's cruel response was that he intended to fire some of the workers and force the remaining workers to do firee's job as well as their own...for the same pay. Dismayed, Rene and a committee approached the UFW to ask how to proceed. Roberto Escutia in the UFW's Horticulture Division was assigned to help.



He advised the workers to file for a Union representation election, so that retaliation the company would take against them, for concerted activity, could be proven to be unfair labor practices for supporting the UFW.

Since the company threatened to fire some of the workers, they decided to strike while at the same time petitioning the ALRB to conduct an election for Union representation.

Sikkema's response to the strike was to hire goons, including Dietmar Ahsmann, his brother in law, and Donato Estrada, a Mexican known to be involved with drugs.

On the day of the election, minutes after Rene had cast his ballot for the UFW, Ahsmann and Estrada drove by on their way to meet with Sikkema in one of the dairy buildings. Five minutes later they drove back in the car to where the strikers were gathered and they motioned to Rene to come over to the car.

Quietly Rene walked over to the passenger side of the car being driven by Ahsmann. When he was within three feet of the car, Estrada pulled a gun and shot Rene "a quema-ropa," at point blank range, in the face.

Estrada then began to aim his gun at the other strikers and one of those strikers told me he heard Rene's last words after being shot, "No los mates!" ("Don't kill them!"). Even mortally wounded, Rene was still advocating for his fellow workers.

Ahsmann was acquitted for his part and Estrada was sentenced to 7 years in prison. The DA, however, refused to charge Fred Sikkema for his role in hiring and directing the killers.

Dolores Lopez, Rene's mother tells us that Rene was very proud of his association with the Union. When he was still in his mid-teens in high school, he had traveled to Stockton to support a big UFW tomato strike, as well as to learn more about the UFW. During the first days of the election campaign, Dolores says that her young son came in with a big smile, saying proudly but with sincerity, "Today I am a man. Today I signed a UFW authorization card to become a member of the United Farm Workers."

Hundreds of workers and supporters joined the Lopez family in Fresno. There were flower baskets and funeral wreaths bearing names of UFW committees from throughout California, from Delano, Coachella, Napa, Salinas and Calexico from vegetable, citrus, grape, poultry and other workers.

There was one small wreath that said "Querido Novio." ("Beloved Sweetheart"). They were supposed to have been married the weekend he was murdered.

STATEMENT BY CESAR E. CHAVEZ

On behalf of all of us here, we extend our deepest sympathies to Rene's family – his mother Dolores, his father Francisco, his brother Efren, his sister Lupe, his sister Rebecca, his sister Yolanda, his brother Juan Francisco and his sisters Iliana (and grace), and grandparents Fernando and Tomasa Lopez and Ignacio and Virginia Robles.

Thanks be to God, Rene's mother, father, brothers and sisters, whom he loved so much, were able to be with him at this bedside during his final hours. Rene left them a beautiful heritage of courage and faith...a heritage that...please God, will sustain them, come what may, until they meet him again in paradise.

Rene Lopez's good deeds are known to all of you and especially, to the members of his family...good deeds, above all of charity and kindness and human compassion. These good deeds go with him and live after him...and for that reason, his funeral this morning is an occasion not for gloom, much less for despair, but rather an opportunity to celebrate, in a spirit of Christian joy, Rene's life and the goodness and mercy of God.

The Book of Wisdom tells us: "Length of days is not what makes age honorable, nor number of years the true measure of life. Understanding, this is a man's grey hairs. The virtuous man, though he died before his time, will find rest".

All who knew Rene Lopez as a personal friend or more immediately as a member of the family, can vouch for the fact that he had understanding. By this I mean that he had the gift of faith, the gift of knowing what is truly important in his life.

It was not possible for Rene to shut his eyes to situations of distress and of poverty, which cry out to God, or to keep silent in the face of injustice. He was that kind of a man.

Rene was young, but he had already felt the call to social justice. His mother, Dolores, said that he came home one day with the stub of his Union authorization card, showed it to her, and said, "Here is my first Union card, now I am important, now I am a man."

But Rene's first Union card was also his last...He will never enjoy the blessings of youth...He will never fulfill all the promise others saw in him...He will never pass on his great love to his own sons and daughters.

Rene has been taken away from us in the prime of his life..., before he could share the full measure of his talents and goodness with the world about him.

Rene is gone because he dared to hope and because he dared to live out his hopes.

Rarely do men and women choose to die in the midst of their quest for freedom. They wish to be truly free and to live more fully in this life.

But death comes to all of us and we do not get to choose the time or the circumstances of our dying. The hardest thing of all is to die rightly. Rene Lopez died rightly; he is a martyr for justice.

Rene is at peace with God. He has given all that he can give.

But how many more Farm Workers must fall? How many more tears must be shed? How many more martyrs must there be before we can be free? When will the day come when the joy becomes great and the grief becomes small?

The answer, my brothers and sisters, is in our hands. The answer is in our hands.

We who live must now walk an extra mile because Rene has lived and died for his and our dreams. We who keep on struggling for justice for Farm Workers must carry in our hearts his sacrifice.

We must try to live as he lived...We must keep alive his hopes...and fulfill, with our own sacrifices, his dreams. We must take Rene into our hearts and promise that we will never forget his sacrifice.

Rene's father, Francisco, looking down on his fallen son, said these words: "When he was born, I received him with a kiss, and now I give him back to God with a kiss."

"Happy are those who died in the lord: let them rest from their labor for their good deeds go with them."
Amen.