

Arturo S. Rodríguez

Arturo S. Rodriguez spent 45 years with the United Farm Workers of America—the last 25 as president—continuing to build the union Cesar Chavez began into a powerful voice for farm workers by increasing its membership and pushing historic legislation on immigration reform and worker rights.

Farm workers for years only received pay raises when the minimum wage increased. Federal data for California showed farm workers in 2018 earning an average of \$13.18 an hour, \$2.18 above today's state minimum wage. The UFW helped pull the wages of many farm workers up above the minimum wage in the state's largest agricultural regions through pressure on non-union employers from union organizing and contract gains. In 2019, farm workers began benefiting from passage in 2016 of the UFW-sponsored law Rodriguez spearheaded granting California farm workers overtime pay after eight hours a day, ending the race-based exclusion of state field laborers from the federal Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938.

Rodriguez led negotiations with the nation's major grower associations to fashion the agricultural provisions of the bipartisan comprehensive immigration reform bill that passed the U.S. Senate in 2013.

He led the UFW in bringing about other meaningful changes for farm workers by making it easier for them to organize and negotiate union contracts. He sought to fundamentally transform agriculture by creating jobs offering workers decent pay, comprehensive health coverage, retirement security, protections against toxic pesticides, job security and guarantees against discrimination and sexual harassment.

Under Rodriguez, the UFW worked to create innovative alternative representation through benefits and services, and to extend meaningful protections to farm workers in the U.S. and abroad outside the collective bargaining process by co-founding the Equitable Food Initiative. EFI works with growers, environmentalists, leading food safety organizations and retailers in improving the lives of tens of thousands of farm workers worldwide.

Since the Texas native took over the helm of the UFW upon the passing of its legendary founder in 1993, Rodriguez increased union membership with aggressive organizing and negotiating campaigns. Among recent UFW victories are agreements with some of the nation's largest vegetable, strawberry, tomato and wine grape growers. The majority of California's fresh mushroom industry is under UFW contract as well as one of the country's largest dairies in eastern Oregon and the largest winery in Washington state.

Recent historic UFW legislative and regulatory achievements include a 2011 law signed by Gov. Jerry Brown helping farm worker organize when growers deny them the right to have a union; a landmark 2002 California law signed by then-Gov. Gray Davis letting farm workers call in neutral arbitrators to hammer out union contracts when growers refuse to

negotiate agreements; and a 2005 regulation the UFW convinced then-Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger to issue, the first state standards in the nation to help prevent farm and other outdoor workers from dying or becoming ill because of extreme heat. It was strengthened under Jerry Brown's administration in 2014.

The veteran farm labor organizer was first introduced to Cesar Chavez and his cause through his parish priest in Rodriguez's hometown of San Antonio, Texas in 1966. He became active with the UFW grape boycott as a student at St. Mary's University in 1969. At the University of Michigan in 1971, where he earned an M.A. degree in social work, Rodriguez organized support for farm worker boycotts. He began serving full time with the UFW in 1973, when he first met Chavez, who became his mentor for 20 years. Rodriguez has more than 45 years experience organizing farm workers, negotiating UFW contracts and leading numerous farm worker boycott and political drives across North America.

After his retirement from the UFW in 2018, Rodriguez and his wife Sonia returned to live in their native San Antonio. He continues serving as UFW president emeritus.