

By *Gustavo Gutierrez*  
Tempe, Arizona

I heard the alarm clock ring and turned over in bed wishing I could lie in bed longer, but it's 3:00 AM, and if I don't get to 3rd and Madison before 4:00 AM, I might not be able to get to work with one of the contractors.

So I get up and struggle with my clothes and shoes, get the coffee perking and... Boy! that first cup of coffee sure feels good!

My mind wanders to the other people in the city who are still sleeping, like the government office workers, who don't go to work until 8:00 AM, but I can't let my mind wander too much in that direction. I have to go out and earn enough for the rent.

I add up what I've made since Saturday and it is only \$25 after expenses, lunch money for the kids, groceries, and I'm still short \$15 for the rent money and here it is already Wednesday.

Well, night as well start walking; it's a mile to 3rd and Madison and it should take about 20 minutes to get there. I'm not as young as I used to be.

The buses and trucks are lined up and down Madison and 3rd Ave. The drivers are shouting, "We pay every afternoon," come and pick oranges, lemons, 12¢ a bag. "Come and pick cantaloupes." "Cutting lettuce you can work in crios or in cuadrillas; everybody works together."

The drivers shout like barkers at a circus all bidding for the laborers who come looking for work.

Some of the buses had been there since 2:30 AM, some of the buses were left parked overnight, and some were loaded since 3:30 but were still there. It is senseless to go out to the fields at that hour because it would still be dark when they got there and they couldn't start working till it was light enough to see.

Some of the other buses had left early but that was to eliminate any chance of some man getting off the buses if somebody came along with a better deal.

Some of the buses were going as far as Marquahala Valley, some 75 miles away. Others were going to Aquila, which is 80 miles away--160 miles round-trip. This would be 5 hours just to go and come, without travel pay.

I remember when I was young and was not afraid to do any kind of farm work from loading lettuce to thinning sugar beets, but now I did not want to look had in the eyes of my fellow workers or take the chance of being too slow, so I avoided working where I had to work in teams. I chose work where it was to each his own.

I thought, "I'll go with Pancho (one of Joe Rodriguez's foremen -- he had cantaloupes). I know I can hack it there and they pay every day." So I got on the truck at 5:30 AM and then we went to the contractor's house, where we sat and waited for an hour for the contractor to come back from Glendale, where he had been to pick up the payroll from Joe Rodriguez's office.

After he got back we took off for the fields which took about an hour. When we got there, we had to wait half an hour because we started to work at 8:00. That's a long wait but what can you do when you don't have a car and anyway, it's too expensive to drive a car 45 miles on \$1.25 an hour.

When we got to the fields I knew that we were going to eat dust because it just rolled like when you have a storm. The drinking water turned into muddy chocolate because of all the dirt that had got into the water tank.

When we started working I knew that there was no stopping until quitting time. That meant no stopping to eat, no rest periods, and so it went all day until quitting time. Up and down climbing into the trucks, unloading the bags full of cantaloupes, and you had to be agile and climb the board that runs from the ground to the truck.

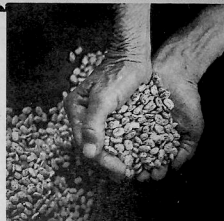
While we were working, one of the foremen asked for our names but not our social security numbers. Still, when we got paid, they took out money for the social security. Nobody told us how many hours we had worked or how much we were supposed to have earned, or how much social security they took out. Nothing was said about anything; the contractor acted like he was doing us a favor.

We stopped working at about 4 PM, but we didn't get back into Phoenix until 6:30 PM -- the contractor had stopped to talk to the rancher, put gas in the truck -- and all this on our time.

I felt like hitting something to relieve my frustration, but I knew that wouldn't help.

Somewhere in the bus I heard that in Delano, California there were farm workers who had organized a union. In fact, the man was saying they even had some contracts with some of the big companies where the workers were the ones who decided how the contracts should be written and how they should get paid. This is what they had to do in Arizona, they had to get together and organize.

Maybe, I thought, I could write to Delano and get some information and then maybe Phoenix and the surrounding area could truly be the Valley of the Sun instead of the Valley of Shame.



## Why we struggle

Gus Gutierrez in an Arizona farm worker now organizing for the Union in Central Arizona. UFWOC's Arizona headquarters are at 9162 West Polk, Tolleson. Gutierrez led the Guadalupe Organizational during the 1950's. This organization was patterned on the C.S.O. in California, and brought many benefits to the poor people living in Guadalupe, the huge Mexican-American barrio outside Phoenix. Gutierrez is an old friend and ally of Cesar Chavez and the other leaders of UFWOC.