

Ben L First UU SPEG

Good morning. My name is Benjamin Lee. I am a full-time volunteer organizer with Eastern Farm Workers Association.

As usual, thank you all for your warm hospitality, I know I can speak for all the members and volunteers at EFWA when I say we are so glad to have such a good friend and ally as FUUSS.

Eastern Farm Workers Association is an all-volunteer run membership association of Central New York's migrant and seasonal farm workers joining with other low income workers in the region fighting to improve living and working conditions. EFWA focuses on organizing the 'unrecognized workers'; a term we coined over 41 years ago to describe the growing majority of the workforce that are not covered by the dubious protections of federal labor law, who have no collective bargaining rights. No right to a union. Farm workers, domestic workers, independent contractors, temporary workers, day laborers, part-time and casual labor, prison labor, welfare-to-work program workers, and more, are all unrecognized workers and are all members of EFWA.

For 41 years, we have operated 365 days a year 9am to 9pm (available 24/7 in case of emergencies) without ever accepting a dime of government funding. This has enabled our members to not only build and run an 11-point benefit program through which we distribute food and clothing and organize free medical, dental, and legal advice

sessions, but to also build an independent voice with which to fight government policies that we find are aggravating or even causing the poverty conditions our members face in the first place.

• MANY OF OUR ACTIVE VOLTS ARE MEMBERS OF YOUR CONGREGATION
• MIKE OBLEN - EJECT.
• NANCY CLAUSEN
• TINA + MELISSA BROUGHT A GROUP FR. US + THEN RE THEIR HOME School grp to OUR TAYLOR THIS PAST HOLIDAY SEASON
• WE OF COURSE APPRECIATE USE OF THE FACILITY FOR OUR BACK TO SCHOOL + GMS.

When Peg told me the theme of the service was 'Resistance' I have to admit that I was a bit baffled, because at EFWA, we don't ever speak about our work in those terms. We speak about our *positive* program, what *we* are building. We speak about gaining the strength and ability to hold the government accountable to the needs and interests of Central New York's lowest-paid workers.

The word resistance seemed to me to lend primacy to the actions of a more powerful oppressive force and doing what one can to mitigate the harm *they* do. The word seemed inherently reactionary.

At EFWA we don't want to lessen poverty, we want to end it. A movement for succinct change must not only concern itself with what it is *against*, but what it is *for* and be always building *that*. Acquiring the power to bring *that* into reality.

There is a sign on the wall in our office written in both English and Spanish that says:

Nobody ever gave anyone their freedom.
They took it!
That is what we teach here.
How it is done.

When we are training new organizers we teach them that power is the ability to start and stop motion.

Encounter an unfavorable condition and want to stop it? You must have a certain degree of power to do so. Want to initiate and secure a more favorable condition? Again, this requires you have some power in relation to that situation.

When we are discussing political and or economic conditions there are but 2 ways to have power to change them.

The first is obvious: money.

As a billionaire, if you want to change anything about your lifestyle, you purchase the necessary elements, hire the necessary people, etc. If you want to influence legislation or enforcement of laws, you invest your money in political action committees or directly into a political candidate's campaign. You can also hire lobbyists in order to influence the legislators already in office. You can fund a think tank that provides the data the legislators use to frame their legislation or the priorities of the executive branch. After all, think tanks and lobbyists have been referred to as the 4th branch of government.

But how can you have the power to change conditions if you have little or no money at all?

Some say that knowledge is power. And although it certainly helps, we would take exception to this claim. Knowledge is by no means adequate to be able to start and stop motion, to change the conditions.

The majority of Americans are painfully aware of the pressing problems in our country's economy faces. Right now 60% of Americans favor federal government intervention in closing the gap between the rich and the poor. But at the same time, according to a poll by the Associated Press, more than 60% of Americans believe the federal government *incapable* of confronting the nation's problems.

Historically, the only way poor and working people have ever had power to change their conditions is through organization.

After all, what is a strike? If one worker decides he won't work under the given conditions and walks out, he's just lost a job and changed nothing in terms of working conditions at the workplace he just left. But if all the workers collectively decide to cease working, they can effectively shut the company down. They can agree to go back to work once their demands for safety measures, a pay raise and a health plan, etc, are met. They have both stopped and started motion. But they had to organize together in order to do it.

None of our members could have, by themselves, forced the federal office of Housing and Urban Development to cut checks to families who were unlawfully displaced by the local town government in Lyons, NY when, with HUD money, they forcibly removed a whole community of low income workers in order to gentrify the downtown area of Lyons. But through EFWA and their Citizens Committee to Save Water Street, they picketed, attended town board meetings, published their own newspapers on the matter, filed class action law suits, and eventually did prevail in getting reimbursements for those families affected.

None of our members could have single-handedly forced the State Public Service Commission to deny National Grid over \$300 million dollars in utility rate hikes in the face of record numbers of shut-offs each year. But through EFWA, they organized petitions with thousands of signatures, mobilized the community to testify at numerous public hearings, and traveled all the way to Albany with a large delegation they assembled to hold the PSC accountable and did manage to succeed in stopping these rate hikes, keeping that money right here in the local economy.

And in the positive, it is only through strong independent organization that our members are able to run a free-of-charge, self-help benefit program year-round that provides healthcare, dental care, legal advice, food distributions clothing distributions, stops utility shut-offs and evictions, and literally saves lives, year round.

Effectively what we are striving to achieve through EFWA is not merely a force of *resistance*. Where we can only react to the actions of those currently in power in this economy, whose ability to prosper and acquire more wealth and control always comes at the expense of working people.

No. What we *are* doing, however, is organizing the unorganized so that the lowest paid workers in Central New York may become the force that the government and major corporations have to reckon with in terms of decisions that affect their lives; to become increasingly powerful through independent organization, by us for us.

So, I suppose *if* we are engaged in resistance, as Peg says we are, then it is against the constant campaign of *disorganization* of poor and working people, we are resisting.

Poverty disorganizes. If you have no food in the house, it is near impossible to focus on anything else. Poverty rips people apart to meet their basic needs by any means necessary. Our benefits program is resistance against that. “*I don’t have time for no meeting!*” or “*I don’t have no time for no canvass! I got a tooth ache, no dental, and kids to feed and no food in the house!*” However, through our mutual aid model, our material needs become the reasons to stick to together not separate.

Also the ideology of individualism disorganizes. Individualism is promoted in all sectors in this country and is a constant campaign of disorganization. Individualism says: Your problems are personal problems and therefore the solution must also be personal. If you are poor, then it is your fault and don't expect anyone else to give a damn. Always look out for number 1. Etc. *"I can't get involved, I've got to take care of my family."* *"I can't get involved, I've got to focus on my studies."* Never mind that 9 out of 10 college grads won't find work in their field of study.

In fact, there is an advertisement on the wall at Lemoyne College that I have seen while speaking in college classrooms, which demonstrates exactly what I am talking about. The ad is for a company that helps students craft their resume and their job hunting and interviewing skills. The ad says something to the effect of:

*"for every 100 people who apply for a job,
only 20 will get an interview, and only 1 will get the job.
Hire us and we will make sure you are that one."*

What the ad implies, but does not outright say is: screw the other 99, don't bother worrying about them, they're on their own, you've got to focus on yourself if you want to make it in this system. The problem is. They're right. That is why we must organize and fight for *systemic* change and *collective solutions* versus individual solutions.

So, by actively organizing the unorganized, we are putting up resistance against the active disorganization of working people. Isn't that how the powerful few have always been able to oppress the many anywhere in the world: through divide and conquer? If there is no power for poor and working people to make change without organization, then resistance is the act of organizing the unorganized.

Thank You.

(Introduce Barb)

Barb M First UU SPEG

- My name is Barb Munger. I am a full time volunteer organizer with Eastern Farm Workers Association.
- I have just recently retired from working in the healthcare field for over 40 years.
- I've done nursing, home care, medical billing, and an assortment of other jobs.
- And I've seen first hand the way the insurance companies deny payment for care as much as possible in order to maximize their own profits.
- When working as an authorization and referral specialist I would get so frustrated everyday, fighting and fighting to get the patients the care they needed and that the doctors prescribed, only to be denied by the insurance companies.
- One time a patient died, on my watch, because of how long the insurance companies delayed the treatment.
- When I met EFWA, I was looking for a way to make a difference in people's lives where I could really see the results.
- I not only signed up as member myself to get some help I needed. I also signed on for an organizer training program.
- As a canvass captain, I have led teams of volunteers going door to door in Syracuse's poorest neighborhoods helping to overcome the isolation the families face and getting them access to EFWA's benefit programs as new members.

- As a medical advocate, I have worked hand in hand with volunteer doctors who are providing free-of-charge care to our members who have no other means of obtaining preventive healthcare.
- I have led our Operation Camp Crew visits to the farm labor camps bringing the workers supplies and making sure their voice was being represented at our weekly membership council meeting, building up our independent voice so we *can* fight back, leaving no one behind.
- Back in August of 2015, I decided to become a full-time volunteer organizer like Lynn and Ben. And I am currently in charge of training the new organizers that come along so EFWA can continue to grow and expand our benefits programs and our Membership Council and hence strengthen the voice of unrecognized workers in Central New York.
- I'm here today to tell you all that if I can do it, then anyone here can do it too. We are always promoting our full-time and part-time organizer training programs. Come talk to me or Ben today after the service in the fellowship hall to find out more about how you can set a schedule with EFWA and take on a piece of the action.
- Or if you are not sure about setting a schedule, then come talk to us about visiting our office on North Salina St. for an orientation and a day's activity such as a canvass or an advocacy session or a labor camp visit and see what you think.

- Or maybe there are other ways you can help like donating food, clothing, furniture... *or a car!* Or volunteering your professional services as a doctor, dentist, lawyer or graphic designer. Who knows! Let's stay in touch!
- And lastly. Most of you probably already know that we will be holding our 10th annual Super Bowl Sunday Tamale Benefit Fundraiser here next weekend.
- The Tamale Benefit helps to sustain our to sustain our Winter Survival Campaign which includes distributions of winter clothing and outerwear and space heaters as well as advocacy to prevent utility shut-off's.
- If you have never volunteered on this activity before, you've got to give it a try. It's a lot of fun. So anyone who has not yet signed up to volunteer on one or more shifts of tamale rolling or have not yet placed your tamale order, please come and speak to me or Ben after services.

Thank you.