

Cornell University  
Search Cornell

# CHRONICLE ONLINE

Search Chronicle Online

April 11, 2006

## Migrant labor activist at ILR Union Days calls for rights for immigrant workers

By Linda Myers

Valdemar Velasquez was only 6 when he began working in the sugar beet fields of Ohio to help put food on his family's table.

He knew that his Mexican-born parents wanted more for him, but as impoverished migrant farmworkers they weren't able to provide it. Harder than the poverty, however, Velasquez recalls, was the sting of witnessing his father being paid less than promised and his family treated like pariahs in the communities where they lived and worked.

A vibrant speaker, Velasquez told his story to a crowd of students, faculty and community members April 5 during his keynote talk at Union Days 2006, "Workers on the Move: Migrant and Immigrant Labor in the Americas," at Cornell University's School of Industrial and Labor Relations.

Demonstrating the backbreaking activity of wielding a hoe, Velasquez said his childhood experiences prompted him to work to improve migrant farmworkers' lives. At age 20 he helped found the highly successful Farm Labor Organizing Committee (FLOC) and became its president.

Mary Jo Dudley, director of the Cornell Migrant Program, who introduced Velasquez, detailed FLOC's successes, including leading farmworkers in a successful strike in 1978; securing bargaining rights for small farmers in 1985; and signing cross-border labor agreements with Heinz growers in the United States and Mexico.

Proposed congressional legislation that would make felons of illegal immigrants in the United States rankles Velasquez. "That includes millions of children -- it's incomprehensible," he said. "The bill pushes the United States to the brink of immorality. If we want to make America great, we can start by legalizing people who are already here and giving workers [from other countries] papers and a visa to travel and work."

On the recent massive protests in Los Angeles and elsewhere against the immigration bill, he said: "Latinos are striking back. They're saying, 'Give us dignity. It's time to recognize us as human beings.'"

Risa Lieberwitz, associate professor of labor law at Cornell and co-chair of Union Days, also spoke of the protests and the timeliness of this year's theme. "Collective action by workers is alive and well," she said. "Hundreds of thousands of people are marching to call for the recognition of rights of immigrant workers."

Velasquez also called for trade agreements that establish "a level playing field and across-the-board safety nets such as a hemispheric minimum wage." He faulted media "talking heads" for stirring up anti-Mexican sentiment.

"[Mexican-Americans] were born on this continent. We built those cities in the West and Southwest. We didn't cross anybody's borders -- everybody's borders crossed us," he said. He suggested that critics revisit such American values as freedom, liberty and justice and ask themselves, "For whom? For all? Or just some?"



Kevin Stearns/University Photography

**Baldemar Velasquez, center, performs songs from his CD "Canciones Por La Causa" (Songs for the Cause), in the Willard Straight Memorial Room April 6, as part of Union Days 2006. The theme of the ILR School event was migrant and immigrant workers. Copyright © Cornell University**

### Cornell News Service:

Linda Myers  
(607) 255-9735  
[lhm3@cornell.edu](mailto:lhm3@cornell.edu)

### Media Contact:

Press Relations Office  
(607) 255-6074  
[pressoffice@cornell.edu](mailto:pressoffice@cornell.edu)

In addition, Velasquez gave a concert, "Canciones Por La Causa" (songs for the cause), in Willard Straight Hall's Memorial Room, April 6, and took part in a panel discussion April 7, "Innovations in Organizing Migrant and Immigrant Labor." Other panelists were Nadia Marin-Molina, executive director of the Workplace Project; Wade Rathke, founding director and chief organizer of ACORN; and Byron Silva, staff member at Laborers' International Union of North America.

A Social Justice Career Fair April 6 linked students interested in a career in the labor movement with union and nonprofit professionals.

##

[| April story index |](#) [| Cornell Chronicle Online Home Page |](#)