

Still poor,
still uneducated,
but wise about
what is needed.



The Farm Worker

by Pat Hoffman

The majority of the more than two million farm workers in the USA struggle along as they have for years. They earn close to \$2,000 a year, work hard, and are willing to travel long distances in search of employment. Little has changed for them in the past ten years. But, for perhaps a fifth of the farm labor force, and for the rest of us, the farm labor scene has changed radically since 1965. A gigantic struggle has gone on involving many parties and touching nearly every American.

What are the dimensions of the conflict today? The primary combatants are (1) farm workers (principally in California, Arizona and Florida, and mainly under the aegis of the United Farm Workers), and (2) big growers (primarily growers who have become a part of large grower corporations and some noncorporate growers) who use hundreds of seasonal workers to harvest their crops. Other important actors in the conflict are the Teamsters Union and consumers.

The arena for the conflict is the marketplace where grapes, head lettuce, and domestic wines (particularly Gallo) are bought and sold, and the farms where these are produced.

Agribusiness (coalitions of growers and other related business people) has found the status quo to its advantage: a large pool

of labor, economically and politically weak, must accept whatever wages and working conditions are offered because they are desperate to earn money for food and shelter. Agribusiness has traditionally opposed anything that would change this situation: its supporters succeeded in excluding farm labor from the National Labor Relations Act in 1935; they opposed social security for farm workers; they have fought unemployment insurance¹ and most other social legislation for farm workers; they have been solidly opposed to the organization of farm workers since the late 1800s, using tactics of firing workers for organizing, blacklisting them with other growers, using direct armed violence, gaining cooperation of local sheriffs to use violence and jailings to stop organizing efforts.²

Farm workers have, on the other hand, persisted in organizing for change. In the last ten years, they have organized widespread strikes in grapes, lettuce and citrus

fruits. These strikes have economically hurt the growers, but not enough to overcome their considerable resistance to change. So, farm workers have gone to the cities and enlisted help to spread the word of their plight to the people who buy the products. The United Farm Workers and their supporters have asked consumers not to buy grapes, head lettuce, and a variety of domestic wines—currently Gallo—as a way of adding their economic weight as consumers to the small economic weight of workers.

What You've Wanted to Know But Were Afraid to Ask

Into this conflict has come the giant Teamsters Union. The Teamsters have control over a large portion of food processing in this country. Their contracts cover workers in packing sheds, trucks, warehouses and grocery stores. To include workers who tend and harvest the crops is the final link in controlling the whole food process chain. So Teamster officials in California saw their opportunity in 1970 and 1973 to complete this power chain by offering to sign contracts with growers of lettuce and grapes who were under pressure from their workers to recognize the United Farm Workers Union (1970 in Salinas, California) or to

1. In California, unemployment insurance legislation for farm workers has been defeated annually, most recently in 1974.

2. "Farm Labor Organization, 1905-1967, A Brief History," National Advisory Committee on Farm Labor, 112 E. 19th St., New York, N.Y. 10003.

renegotiate contracts with the UFW ('73 in grapes).

The Teamster contracts would look respectable on paper, but would involve no essential change in the power relationship between workers and growers. There would be an improved wage and some benefits (medical plan, unemployment insurance, etc.) that would come primarily to year-round employees (such as tractor drivers and mechanics who are mostly white). Seasonal farm workers would receive few, if any, benefits.³ Workers would continue to be hired through the old labor contractor system, which gives workers no seniority or protection from unjustified firing. A farm labor local (Teamster Local 1973) was organized to "service" contracts. A number of Chicanos were hired to staff the local (some were former labor contractors). In reality, workers were not informed of benefits in the contracts; meetings were not called with workers to discuss the contracts or services of the Teamsters Union; nor were they allowed to participate in any way in the union to which they "belonged" other than having their dues withheld by the company.⁴ Local 1973 appeared to some to be a public relations

scheme to convince the public that the Teamsters were serving farm workers. Local 1973 has now been abandoned and its Chicano staff fired.⁵ Farm labor contracts are to be serviced in the future by other locals covering workers in different occupations.

The Plot Is Simple

So now we come to the rest of the population who by virtue of being consumers have been drawn into the scene as pivotal characters in a play they had not planned to attend, let alone act in. The cast of characters in the conflict has become larger than that of a Shakespearean drama, but the plot is simple: a power struggle between (1) large, monied agricultural interests and their many allies in government, civic life and the marketplace, and (2) workers who are poor, uneducated, but determined and wise about what is needed. The workers are hanging on, and hanging in, to what is for them a mortal struggle. For us as consumers, it is a moral struggle to decide where our weight will be cast: we have alternatives. To do nothing is to support the status quo. To act on behalf of agribusiness is to achieve the same end. Or we can throw our

economic weight with the workers in their attempt to bring about change.

Ms. Hoffman is an elder at Old First Presbyterian Church, Los Angeles, California.

3. The Teamster medical plan requires that a worker have 80 hours work under contract in January in order for his/her family to be eligible for benefits in February. He/she must have 80 hours in February to be eligible in March and so on. Seasonal workers and their families are thus denied protection at the seasons of the year when they have the least money and the most sickness.

4. "I'm not sure how effective a union can be when it is composed of Mexican-Americans and Mexican nationals with temporary visas.* Maybe as agriculture becomes more sophisticated, more mechanized, with fewer transients, fewer green carders (aliens), and as jobs become more attractive to whites, then we can build a union that can have structure and that can negotiate (with management) from strength and have membership participation." *Los Angeles Times*, April 28, 1973, quote from Einar Mohn, who was head of the Western Conference of Teamsters.

5. *The Fresno Bee*, November 4, 1974; *Los Angeles Times*, November 6, 1974.



Farm workers are still a very necessary part of our economy. Some begin working in the fields as children, learning to move down the rows, bent at the waist, for long periods of time. What are the fair compensations for such work? United Farm Workers will not let us forget the question.