

## Straight Talk On The Lettuce Strike (Revised August 1, 1972)

—by the Rev. Wayne C. Hartmire, Jr.

How did the lettuce strike get started? For years lettuce workers quietly organized local UFW committees and waited for the successful completion of the Delano grape strike. In July of 1970 as the grape struggle was ending, the United Farm Workers (UFW) petitioned lettuce growers for secret ballot union representation elections. The growers ignored the request, sought out the Teamsters union and signed back door contracts. The workers were not consulted. Denied elections, they went out on strike on August 24, 1970 to demonstrate that they wanted to be represented by Cesar Chavez' UFW. 7,000 workers walked off the job in what the L.A. Times called: "The Largest Farm Labor Strike in the U.S. History."

If the strike was so successful why is there a boycott of lettuce? As a result of the successful strike large lettuce companies (Inter-Harvest, Freshpict & D'Arrigo Bros.) rescinded their contracts with the Teamsters and signed contracts with UFW (later on Mel Finnerman Co. also signed with UFW; approximately 10-15% of California-Arizona lettuce is now UFW lettuce). Other growers continued to resist even though the Teamsters were (and are) willing to recognize UFW's right to represent field workers. On September 17, 1970 a local Salinas judge outlawed all strike activity. The workers chose to appeal that court order and to continue their struggle by launching a boycott of Calif-Arizona head lettuce.

The growers argue that the workers were forced out of the fields by violence. That is not true. There were isolated incidents on both sides but the farm workers continued to work non-violently. The growers admitted that production was cut by over 66% by the strike. They never challenged the newspaper accounts of 7,000 workers on strike. Now because the strike has shown that the workers want Chavez, the growers want people to believe that there was enough violence and intimidation by UFW to "force" 7,000 people to go on strike. Reporters from the major California newspapers, the wire services, the TV networks were all in Salinas. They reported a massive strike by workers. Why wasn't the "massive violence" reported? It wasn't reported because it didn't happen. The lettuce workers went on strike to protest the back door contracts and to demand a union of their own choice.

Why are these lettuce contracts so important? Why didn't UFW let the Teamsters represent the lettuce workers? The most important reason is that the lettuce workers don't want to be represented by the Teamsters. They are taking risks and making sacrifices to have a union that they believe in – a union of their own, the United Farm Workers.

In 1966 DiGiorgio Corp. was under pressure from their workers and they ran to the Teamsters and tried to make a sweetheart deal. In 1966 Perelli-Minetti tried the same tactic to thwart the will of the workers. In 1970, 200 lettuce growers signed back door agreements with the Teamsters. Unless the farm workers make a stand in the lettuce fields, growers all over the country will make deals with unions of their choice and farm workers will never have a strong democratic union of their own.

What evidence is there that lettuce workers want to be represented by the United Farm Workers? The strike in August of 1970 is the most powerful evidence. It is not easy for farm workers to go on strike during the harvest season. When they do, it is because they feel strongly about the issues involved. During the strike a number of growers commented as follows: “The Teamsters have our contracts but UFWOC has our workers” (Inter-Harvest); “I need 700 workers today; my Teamster contract guarantees that I will have those workers but I only have 100 workers in the fields” (Brown & Hill Ranch). Prior to signing contracts with UFW, Inter-harvest, D’Arrigo & Freshpict & Finnerman asked the Catholic Bishops Committee to supervise card check elections to determine the will of the workers. This was done for ranches in California and Arizona. In every case the Bishop’s certified that the workers voted to be represented by Cesar Chavez’ UFW.

The Farm Bureau and the lettuce growers discount the evidence of card check elections and say that UFW is afraid of secret ballot elections. Card check elections along with secret ballot elections and strikes are approved ways under the National Labor Relations Act to determine the will of the workers. Freshpict agreed to the card check procedure, as did Inter-Harvest & D’Arrigo & Finnerman. In the grapes, some companies wanted secret ballot elections (e.g., DiGiorgio & Larson Bros.); they were held and UFW won all of them. Other companies wanted card check or ratification elections; they were held and UFW won all of those also. If lettuce growers are genuinely concerned about the democratic rights of their workers they should begin serious negotiations and work out an acceptable representation procedure at the bargaining table.

Did workers have a chance to vote for the Teamsters before the growers signed contracts in July of 1970? UFW repeatedly asked for secret ballot elections before the lettuce strike and boycott got underway. The growers ignored that offer and signed with the Teamsters. There were no elections of any kind in relation to the 200 Teamster contracts. If the lettuce growers and the Farm Bureau are so concerned about the rights of the workers, why didn’t they protest the “forced unionism” of the Teamster-grower alliance when it occurred in July of 1970?

Why would the growers prefer a union like the Teamsters over Chavez’ union? The growers have been quoted as saying: “UFW is not a union, it is a movement”... “Chavez is a radical” etc. Behind those statements is some conscious or unconscious racism: the predominantly affluent, white growers prefer doing business with affluent, white union officials. It is also one way of avoiding sticky issues like blatant discrimination in

employment and advancement practices (Anglo farm workers tend to get the supervisory, non-field work jobs).

UFW derives its strength from the will of the workers and must therefore represent the true grievances of the workers. Farm workers, elected from each ranch, are directly involved in UFW negotiations. As a result UFW makes harder demands and organizes strong, democratic ranch committees to see to it that contracts are enforced. Growers naturally prefer “doing business” with a union that does not derive its strength from the workers – a union that can collect dues and go softer on demands and enforcement.

Didn't the lettuce growers at one time agree to negotiate with UFW? Yes! In March of 1971 the lettuce boycott was suspended after the Teamsters agreed to withdraw from organizing farm workers. In May of 1971 the lettuce growers started to negotiate with UFW. There were over a dozen meetings. Everyone was hopeful about a settlement. But after the Salinas harvest was completed in the fall of 1971 the growers got more and more unyielding. They refused all compromise on issues important to the workers (e.g., the hiring hall) and the negotiations broke off in November of 1971. In retrospect it is apparent that the lettuce growers were stalling to get past the 1971 harvest while at the same time forming alliances to enact legislation in Arizona and California that would eliminate the boycott.

Are the Teamsters still involved in the lettuce struggle? No! On March 26, 1971, Frank Fitzsimmons, General Vice President of the Teamsters and George Meany, President of the AFL-CIO countersigned an agreement between UFW and the Teamsters. In that settlement the Teamsters agreed to honor UFW's right to organize field workers. The Teamsters have withdrawn from the lettuce fields and are not enforcing their contracts. In the July 22, 1972 issue of Business Week, Wm. Grami, director of organization for the Western Conference of Teamsters is quoted as saying he is willing to concede harvesting work to the UFW while retaining jurisdiction over food processing. “If the growers want to rescind the contracts with us, we will let them,” Grami said in the Business Week interview.

If the Teamsters are no longer involved why do the lettuce growers keep talking about the Teamster contracts? The growers have pieces of paper they call “contracts”. These “contracts” have no meaning to the workers and provide no protections for the workers but the growers have discovered that it confused the issue for the public if they keep referring to their “contracts” with the Teamsters.

If the Teamsters are no longer involved why do the farm workers and their supporters keep talking about them? The growers in their attacks on the boycott continue to refer back to their “agreements” with the Teamsters; that provokes questions in people's minds and we have an obligation to answer those questions.

What is the role of legislation in the current lettuce struggle? The lettuce growers, the Farm Bureau and other grower interests want to destroy the boycott and make strikes impossible for farm workers. If growers can accomplish that result they will have robbed farm workers of their only non-violent means of putting pressure on employers. Without organized pressure growers will never have to sign contracts with their workers.

On August 13, 1972 Arizona's repressive farm labor law goes into effect. It outlaws all elements of the secondary boycott and even makes it illegal to encourage someone to "boycott lettuce". On November 7, 1972 the people of California vote on a farm labor law that outlaws the boycott, makes it illegal to say "boycott lettuce" and provides for a 60-day injunction against all strikes and boycotts. (The Arizona and California laws are supposed to provide for union representation elections for farm workers but both laws make it impossible for migrant and seasonal workers to vote; the California law contains the following phrase which automatically disenfranchises almost all harvest workers: "the date of such election shall be set at a time when number of temporary agricultural employees entitled to vote does not exceed the number of permanent agricultural employees entitled to vote." Consider a typical case where a grower has 10 permanent workers and 200 harvest workers. 190 of the harvest workers would not be allowed to vote.)

In this legislation needed? No! It is unjust and discriminatory against farm workers. The Farm Bureau is for it because they want to crush the farm workers' union. But what is so terrible about farm workers organizing non-violently? Why would the whole machinery of government come down on their efforts? How can any state enact such laws against the poorest workers of America?

What does the future hold for the lettuce boycott? The lettuce boycott will continue no matter what laws are passed. In time (1-2-3 years?) lettuce growers in California and Arizona will want to sign contracts in order to sell their lettuce (they should remember the experience of the grape growers). But the Calif. and Arizona laws make it an unfair labor practice to negotiate on certain subjects (e.g., hiring hall, pesticides, mechanization). No self-respecting union can negotiate with its hands tied. If and when the growers want contracts they will first have to repeal their own repressive laws. The boycott will again bring the agricultural industry into the 20th century. They could avoid all this trouble and save a lot of money (millions of dollars will be spent by the growers in the California initiative fight) if they would just sit down with their organized workers and negotiate contracts.

Is UFW just interested in more and more wage increases for workers? The average farm worker family in the USA works hard and earns around \$2,500 per year. Wages have to be improved. But the United Farm Workers have a bigger dream than that. "Our goal is a national union of the poor dedicated to world peace and to serving the needs of all men who suffer." (Cesar Chavez) Already the farm workers' union has the following programs that serve the whole life needs of the workers and their families: credit union...family counseling...legal aid...co-op gas station...economic development fund

(more co-ops, retirement housing, etc.)...huelga school...La Paz retreat center...art & cultural center...newspaper.

Why is the religious community still supporting UFW? What are the moral issues involved? Religious leaders are concerned about the suffering of the poor and about justice for farm workers. The lettuce conflict is a grass roots struggle by workers to gain a union of their choice. The moral issues are the same as they were in the Delano grape strike: dignity, self-determination and justice. Will farm workers finally have the right to build their own union, to experience the dignity of doing it themselves, to negotiate as equals with their employers and thru' improved contracts to provide adequately for their own families. The whole principle of self-determination and self-respect for farm workers is at stake in the lettuce strike and boycott.

The growers claim that Chavez is just out for money and power. Cesar Chavez lives on subsistence like all the strikers and boycotters: room, board & \$5.00 per week. He and his wife and children live in a small, 2-bedroom house at La Paz, Ca. Cesar Chavez and his family do want organized strength for the workers. They have pledged their lives to building a strong farm workers' union that can bring a measure of justice to rural America.

What can people do who want to help Cesar Chavez & the United Farm Workers? Most importantly, support the boycott of Calif.-Arizona head (or iceberg) lettuce. Tell friends, store managers, restaurant employees, airline stewardesses, etc., etc., about the lettuce boycott. Shop at stores that handle only UFW lettuce. Contact your local boycott office and offer your assistance. (If you need an address or phone number contact NFWM). Other ways to help: 1) send money to UFW, P.O. Box 62, Keene, Ca. 93531; 2) For regular information on the farm workers' struggle become a distributor for El Malcriado, the official paper of the UFW; 3) If you have seen material from Geo. H. Gannon, a grower from Mabton, Wash. Or material from the "Truth Squad" of Ariz. Ecumenical Council and if you want additional information contact NFWM.

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