

1973

Labor Day Statement

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Farm Labor Problem

The struggle of American farm workers to organize into a union of their own choosing has been going on for more than a decade, and the end of the struggle is not yet in sight. Three years ago, with the signing of collective bargaining contracts across the board in the table grape industry, it appeared that the United Farm Workers Union had won its costly battle for survival and was finally in a position to extend its organizing efforts into other crops, not only in California, but throughout the entire agricultural industry. No sooner had those historic contracts been signed, however, than a rival union unexpectedly moved into the picture—or was invited in by anti-UFW growers—and the battle was on again in deadly earnest. The Teamsters secretly negotiated inferior collective bargaining contracts with a large number of lettuce growers—contracts which the California Supreme Court subsequently described as collusive.

Tragically, the UFW was compelled by this underhanded ploy on the part of the Teamsters and the growers to postpone its organizing campaign and once again, in desperation, take up the struggle for survival.

During the next two years, serious efforts were made to resolve the Teamster-Farm Worker controversy, but, in the end, to no avail. Two jurisdictional pacts, which had been hammered out in good faith under the auspices of the U.S. Bishops Committee on Farm Labor and the national AFL-CIO, eventually became unraveled and again the Farm Workers, willy nilly, were forced to engage in still another fight to the finish. At that point in time, in a last desperate effort to restore the peace, the Bishops Committee on Farm Labor met on three separate occasions with Teamster representatives and with representatives of the UFW, searching for a formula which might eventually enable the parties to reconcile their differences.

Unfortunately the Committee's mediation efforts were unsuccessful. Immediately after their third and final meeting with the Committee, the Teamsters announced that they had decided, in executive session, to declare open warfare on the Farm Workers and to invade their jurisdiction and gobble up their members. Shortly thereafter, the Teamsters—who had never claimed to represent field workers in the table grape industry and, to this day, cannot seriously claim to do so—secretly negotiated contracts with all but two of some 20-odd table grape growers whose three-year contracts with the UFW had just expired.

The Farm Workers were stunned and rightfully embittered by this disgraceful move on the part of the Teamsters and the growers, but, grimly determined to protect their jurisdiction, they immediately called a strike in the Coachella Valley in California and at the same time, announced that they were starting another nation-wide table grape boycott.

That was in April of this year. What has happened in Coachella and other agricultural areas of California during the intervening months is a matter of public record. The Farm Workers have received massive support from the national AFL-CIO and its affiliated unions, from church groups of all denominations, from a wide variety of civic organizations, from the religious and secular press, and from the general public. The Teamsters, on the other hand, have received practically no public support from any responsible source in or out of the labor movement. To the contrary, they have been pilloried, right and left, as irresponsible strike-breakers who are not averse to using violent tactics when it suits their purpose to do so.

It is impossible to say whether or not the Farm Workers will have stymied the Teamsters and regained their table grape contracts by the time this Labor Day Statement appears in print. There is some reason to believe, or at least to hope, that by that time the Teamsters, as a result of top level negotiations between their own international and the AFL-CIO, will have voluntarily withdrawn from the field and will have found some way of rescinding their existing contracts in lettuce as well as in grapes. In any event, this much is certain: at some point in time, the UFW will prevail. Sooner or later—and the sooner the better—they will win their struggle for survival and then go on to organize the rest of the agricultural industry.

This prediction is no more exercise in wishful thinking. It reflects the overriding consensus of those who have studied the Farm Worker problem at close range and have kept abreast of recent developments of the Teamster-UFW controversy. There is widespread agreement, in other words, that time and public opinion are definitely on the side of the Farm Workers. As one writer has put it, the Teamsters and those growers who in collusion with the Teamsters, are trying to destroy the UFW “think they are fighting Cesar Chavez, but they are (really) fighting time, and they do not know it—and there is no more ruthless or relentless an enemy.”

The reason so many people, including the writer of this Statement, are confident that time is on the side of the UFW and is running against the Teamsters and their anti-UFW allies in the agricultural industry is very simple: they have implicit confidence, over the long haul, in the good sense and good judgment of the American people. “Americans,” as one historian of the farm labor movement has phrased it, “are sometimes tolerant of unfairness for long periods of time. They are capable of selfishness, prejudice and other human failings. But the value system of the United States stresses the very qualities called for by the farm labor movement: freedom of association, self-determination, fair play. It is always to the advantage of any social movement if, rather than demanding a whole new set of social values, it asks society simply to live up to those which it already professes.”

That is precisely what the disadvantaged field workers who have been struggling so long and so hard to build up the UFW and asking our society to do: live up to those values which it already professes. They are asking for nothing more than that, and they will settle for nothing less—nor will the American people, now that the issues involved in the current farm labor crisis have become a matter of general knowledge.

In conclusion, it remains to say—and to emphasize for the record—that this Labor Day Statement in defense of the UFW is not meant to be an attack on the Teamsters as such or an attack on the growers as a group. To the contrary, we agree with Cesar Chavez, head of the UFW, when he says that farm workers and growers (and Teamsters, we would add) are neither saints nor sinners, neither all good or all bad—but “both are men,” fallible and imperfect men who deserve to be treated with equal respect by reason of their dignity and worth as human beings.

In defending the UFW, then, we are conscious of the fact—as one experienced writer has put it—that choosing up sides as between “good guys” and “bad guys” avoids the basic issue in the current agricultural labor crisis. The basic issue is that farm workers have a right to organize into a union of their own choosing and that no other union and no group of growers should be permitted to interfere with the untrammelled exercise of the right. We happen to be convinced, on the record, that the Teamsters and their overt and covert allies in the industry have been doing just that since the Delano grape dispute was finally settled at the bargaining table in the summer of 1970. We think they are wrong, and, with the best of good will, we urge them to cease and desist—in fairness to the farm workers themselves, for the good name of the Teamsters and the growers, and, last but not least, for the good of the agricultural industry as a whole.

The agricultural industry has been needlessly caught up in the most bitter and divisive kind of conflict for a dozen years or more. And for what purpose? Presumably to avoid dealing with the UFW—the only union which can validly claim to represent the workers who harvest the nation’s crops. For the good of all concerned, the time has come for the leaders of the industry to recognize that that was a serious mistake on their part and, having settled with the UFW and having broken with the Teamsters, to begin making up for lost time by developing a mature system of labor-management relations based on mutual trust and confidence. By comparison with other industries in the mainstream of American economic life, it is rather late in the game for the agricultural industry to be facing up to its responsibilities and its opportunities in the field of labor-management relations—but better late than never. To try to postpone the inevitable and to go on fighting against time—that “most ruthless and relentless” of enemies—would be disastrous for the agricultural industry from every conceivable point of view.

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