The 1979 Lettuce Strike*

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In order to explain the issues in this strike it's necessary to go back to the beginning. The contracts were due to expire at the end of the year so last August (1978) the union held a series of meetings with the workers in the industry. We found out that everyone wanted a lot more money—a lot more. So we did a study to see where things stood.

The first Sun Harvest (InterHarvest at that time) contract contained a base rate of $2 per hour (1970). The last base rate was $3.70 per hour (1978). When we applied cost of living figures, using 1967 dollars, we found out that the $2 in 1970 was worth $1.71 and the $3.70 in 1976 was worth $1.84. This means that after 8 years the base rate per hour had increased 13¢. You can see that we have a double burden—low wages to start with and a cost of living problem, too. For example, the 1970 agreement called for 40½¢ per box for lettuce cutters, which equals 32¢ in 1967 dollars. In 1978 the rate was 57¢ per box, which equals 28¢ in 1967 dollars. This means that there had been a loss of 4¢ after 8 years.

You see the same picture when you look at benefits. In 1970, the contribution to the medical plan was 10¢ per hour for each employee, which was actually worth 8.9 cents. In 1978 the contribution was 16½¢, which was worth 8.5 cents.

Then we studied the industry. Salinas is like any other industrial town. You go down along Abbot and Merrill Streets and there are the coolers and packing houses. The only difference is that there are also labor camps right in the middle of these industrial facilities. Labor is seen as just another commodity. You go to pick up the people where you get the other equipment that you need.

Thirty-five companies dominate the whole industry. Ninety percent of the lettuce in the winter months comes from the Imperial Valley. Eighty-seven percent of all U.S. lettuce comes from the Salinas Valley in the summer months. There are three dominant companies. First is Sun Harvest, which ships about 10 million cartons a year, with a sales value of $50-70 million. Second is Bud Antle. Both of these are subsidiaries of food conglomerates, United Brands and Castle & Cooke. The third major company is Bruce Church. The companies which make up the lettuce industry got organized during the days of the Bracero program. They have remained organized and are more unified by far than any other segment of California agriculture.

We needed to find out if the industry had been making money. We looked at the figures and found out that in 1970 the Salinas lettuce crop had been worth $69 million. In 1978 the lettuce crop was worth $210 million. The per acre yield increased from 540 to 620 cartons. Profits in 1970 had been $6.6 million. In 1978 the profits for Salinas lettuce growers (in the Salinas Valley alone and on lettuce alone) was $71 million.

*Summary of Marchall Ganz' report to the National Farm Worker Ministry Board in Salinas, CA. 5/15/79 (Marchall Ganz is a member of the UFW Board members.)
It is very revealing to see when increases came in the base rate. From 1970 to 1975 the base rate increased only 43¢ from $2.00 to $2.43. And then in the summer of 1975 the base rate jumped from $2.43 to $2.95. It had taken 5 years to get a 43¢ increase and then all at once there was an increase of 52¢. And the reason was that ALRB elections were to begin in the fall of 1975. The same thing happened in 1976. Just before elections were to resume, there was another increase of 45¢ to $3.40. The growers were trying to win the loyalty of the workers with these increases. So we know if the industry can come up with these increases for political reasons, they can also afford them when the economic situation of the workers requires it.

We also looked at the wages of the other employees in the industry. We wanted to know if everyone was in the same situation as the farm workers. The cooler workers, members of the Meatcutters Union, made $3.50 per hour in 1970. In 1978 the hourly rate was $8.28, which is an increase of $4.78. The drivers, who are members of the Teamsters Union, were making $4.30 in 1975 and $7.10 an hour in 1978. The UFW pension plan calls for a contribution of 15¢ per hour. Three years ago, the average contribution in California was 81¢. The cooler workers get 5 times more than the farm workers in their medical plan, 6 times more for their pension, and 3 times more in wages.

On January 5th the union presented its economic proposals to the industry. The proposals included a percentage formula for the medical plan rather than an hourly formula — as a way to deal with the fewer hours worked per day in the lettuce fields. The proposals also included cost of living language (like the UAW agreements) and paid union reps (also like the UAW). Having union representatives who travel with each crew is the only way we can administer the contracts. Since the crews move from place to place, there just isn't any other way to do it. Our proposals also included an increase in the pension plan, gas expenses, per diem for travel and guarantee of earnings for the first week of the harvest.

The way it has always been and the way it is now is that farm workers pay out of their pockets their travel expenses. What other industry operates like this? If a company asks you to move, isn't it common sense that the company is going to cover those travel costs? And if the company asks you to report for work in Arizona and you live in Calexico and have to drive 3 hours round trip, why should this be free time?

So often you hear that the pay and the benefits we have gotten is "good….for farm workers." But why should farm workers be judged on a different scale than anyone else? Our earlier struggles were struggles for recognition. Now the workers are seeking just the beginnings of equality. It is not so much to expect.

On January 18, 1979, the growers responded to our economic proposals. These companies, who had supported Nixon, Ford, Reagan, etc. told us it was their patriotic duty to uphold Carter's wage guidelines. They said they couldn't offer anything beyond 7 percent. In addition to offering only 2¢ for the medical plan, they wanted to gut language we already had in the contract covering the good standing of union members and maintenance of standards. The growers also wanted to take away the hiring hall.

We estimate that by the end of April, the industry had lost $50 million as a result of the strike. This does not count the thousands of dollars the growers have put up for their public relations campaign. This is money that could have been used to settle the strike. Instead, it is either lost or has been used to try to break the strike.

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