

Let's Not Build Any Berlin Walls

UNION troubles are hitting the vegetable industry with force this summer. Latest problem, and the one perhaps most indicative of things to come, is the nationwide strike against Campbell Soup Company.

The strike, which began on July 30 and co-incided with the beginning of the tomato season, involves in-plant workers. Campbell processing plants at Camden, N. J.; Napoleon, Ohio; Paris, Texas; Sacramento, Calif.; and Chestertown, Md., have been forced to close. New Jersey workers are represented by Amalgamated Meat Cutters and Butcher Workmen of North America and International Association of Machinists. The meat cutters union also represents Campbell workers in Napoleon and Paris. Those in California are represented by the International Brotherhood of Teamsters.

Main union demand is for a common contract expiration date. Two-year contracts at Campbell plants throughout the country now expire at different times of the year. "What the union is seeking," says Camden plant manager William S. Crowley, "is a company-wide strike provision. If we are to remain a successful and growing company, it is impossible for us to agree to this."

Higher wages are also being sought. A Campbell spokesman stated, however, that the firm had recently put into effect a unilateral raise of 13 cents per hour for cannery workers. Campbells, he noted, is paying the highest wages in the industry. For instance, the firm's Camden plant workers have average per hour earnings of \$3.18.

Some 200 growers under contract to

Campbell in South Jersey and Pennsylvania were the first to feel the effects of the strike, as tomatoes were already ripening in their fields. Many growers have since been forced to plow up their crops. Time and ripening tomatoes wait for no man.

The company, though not legally compelled to, has agreed to pay its growers for the cost of production, plus a "reasonable" profit. In a letter to Campbell growers in New Jersey, divisional manager of the firm's agricultural department, Robert A. Jones, said: ". . . We do not know how long this strike will last. The union leaders have chosen the start of the tomato season as their time to impose this strike. So that contract growers of tomatoes for our company will not unduly suffer . . . our representative will call or visit you and offer to arrange to set, immediately after the tomato season, an amount which we determine to be the average cost before harvesting, plus what we judge to be a reasonable profit. We regret this situation has developed . . . It is too bad that we have not been able to convince the union leaders that the issue they are pressing is so vital to our economic survival that we cannot possibly agree to it."

Similar letters were sent to Campbell growers in other strike-affected areas.

New Jersey Farm Bureau and New Jersey Agricultural Marketing Association commended the company for its offer, stating that "this letter relieves the anxiety of growers considerably, although we realize that it places a heavy burden on the company."

Campbells also gave growers permission to market their crops elsewhere

if possible, but other major canners have long since contracted for tomatoes and probably cannot handle additional tonnage.

The implications of this strike are far reaching. Not only are the company and its contract growers affected, but in New Jersey, for instance, hundreds of Puerto Rican and migrant workers will be out of work. And, according to spokesmen for New Jersey Farm Bureau, the entire South Jersey economy will be affected by the loss of wages and grower income.

This should be ample proof that unions intend to use every coercive tool at their disposal to organize agriculture.

Legislators who are currently agitating to bring agriculture under the National Labor Relations Act certainly cannot condone the tactics being used. To bring a perishable crop to the point of harvest, only to have a Berlin Wall thrown up against it is thwarting the democratic process. We believe union workers are entitled to a fair wage and fair consideration for their efforts but we do not believe they have the right to prevent growers from harvesting their crops by making contracts with canners ineffectual.

If a processor closes up shop because of union activity, will the unions support the workers and the growers until such time as new jobs and new outlets are provided? We think not.

Growers have become a minority group, and in this turbulent age, more than ever they need a strong voice. Their voices and actions need to be made loud and clear to put across amendments prohibiting strikes or picketing at harvesttime.