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The Boycott Has to Go

DURING the past couple of years, the editors of AMERICAN VEGETABLE GROWER on several occasions have taken a close look at the activities of large, "multi-market" firms in the vegetable industry. What we have found, generally, suggests that they are not a cause for grave or urgent alarm, and that they may be valuable, so far as they are successful in providing well-financed, well-managed marketing operations.

Speaking of two of these firms —United Fruit Co. and Purex Corp. —in an editorial in our May, 1969, issue, we said, "Reserving the right to criticize the mistakes that they probably will make, we welcome them to the vegetable industry."

On balance, we have seen about what we expected in the operations of Inter Harvest (United Fruit) and Freshpict (Purex). For example, Inter Harvest made a bad guess on demand, at one period last winter, and shipped about 30 cars more than it could sell in orderly fashion. Other shippers make bad guesses, but few can make such big ones. On the other hand, Inter Harvest has been bold in trying to develop better packaging and marketing methods. Some industry observers feel that Freshpict operations have been more efficient, overall, because its executives have enjoyed greater freedom to make their own policies and decisions.

Recent events in the labor relations conflict in Salinas have now called attention to a grave weakness that may afflict any multi-market company. When the United Farm Workers Organizing Committee and its allies applied boycott pressure to United Fruit and Purex, both proved to be very vulnerable. Their top-level executives surrendered, overruled the operating managers on the scene, and negotiated contracts that are highly favorable to UFWOC. As we write this, the same process appears to be going on at Pic 'n Pac Foods, the big strawberry firm that is a subsidiary of S. S. Pierce Co.

The reason is obvious. Other grower-shippers, whose sole or primary interests are in the vegetable market, for the most part have been able to resist UFWOC pressures in the jurisdictional fight with the Teamsters. United Fruit and Purex were seriously exposed to boycott tactics in markets for other products. The responsible executives decided they could not risk labor warfare on so many fronts, and they could not expect the Teamsters to rally an effective counter-force of public opinion against the well-organized, highly-emotional appeal of UFWOC and its many allies.

In our opinion, these executives acted hastily and without full information, and without making a determined effort to support the position of their operating managers.

But this is not to say that the industry would have escaped the effects of an inter-union fight if these two companies had never come to Salinas.

The difference between them and the other grower-shippers is, in this respect, a difference in degree, not in kind. The multi-market firms are more vulnerable than the others, but—as we have said many times—everyone is vulnerable to the vicious pressures of the boycott.

This was clearly demonstrated by UFWOC's use of the boycott in the grape industry. The wineries fell quickly; their brand-label markets made them easy victims. Table grape growers were able to resist for several years—but finally they too were forced to the wall by the boycott and by the harassment and coercion of chain store executives that the boycott made possible.

The lesson is plain. The boycott is a weapon of such great and destructive power that there can be no equity in bargaining as long as the UFWOC is free to use it. Federal law prohibits use of the secondary boycott by other unions, and we think it is urgently necessary to remove the exemption tha permits UFWOC to carry on a systematic boycott campaign.

When companies like Unite Fruit and Purex fall so quickly a boycott threat, no one else c expect to do more than prolo the battle.