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Farm Labor: A Deceptive Calm

FOR the past several months, visible activity in the farm labor organizing campaign has been limited mainly to a series of indecisive skirmishes. Events that might be described as a "victory" for one side or the other have served at best only to secure isolated positions which may have long-term strategic value but do not affect the momentum of the central conflict.

This situation may give an illusion of tranquility to the farm labor scene. In fact, there has been a lot of action.

A good deal of it has been behind the scenes, in the intricate negotiations required to develop serious legislation. Considerable effort is being applied to the tedious process of obtaining court rulings on difficult points of law. Direct organizing activity has not achieved significant successes but organizers are making their presence felt in a number of places. UFWOC has been maintaining a "moratorium" on its lettuce boycott, but sympathizers are keeping some pressure on retailers.

Any number of reasons can be suggested for the low level of picketing and other forms of open organizing activity.

Undoubtedly, Cesar Chavez and his staff have been giving some attention to internal problems. These involve not only policy matters but the basic machinery of staff and structure for administration of contracts and other routine

business matters. UFWOC has a long way to go in identifying and training the people it needs for the day-to-day routine operations.

So far as Chavez is accepted as a leader among farm workers, his status has been achieved mainly by his own strong personality and zealous dedication, and he and his chief aides have a high identification with Mexican-Americans in California. He has, in fact, shrewdly recognized that the leader of a national campaign must be cautious about relations with regional or special interests. This has led him to risk some discontent among the militant Chicanos who support the racially-oriented causes of "La Raza," but the popular image may handicap UFWOC in expanding into areas where worker interests and ethnic backgrounds are somewhat different.

The collision with the Teamsters in Salinas last summer created some confusion in the ranks of UFWOC and its mixed collection of allies. The decision to make a major issue of the Teamster contracts possibly could not be avoided, but it clearly dissipated some of the momentum generated in the earlier victory over the table grape growers and prevented UFWOC leaders from giving full attention to organizing in other areas and other crops.

All these observations are somewhat speculative. Other considerations suggest that UFWOC may, in fact, have adopted a temporary policy of limited activity. Vigorous

organizing effort would fan the flames of conflict and lend weight to arguments that legislation is needed to help settle farm labor disputes. The Teamster-UFWOC case is a conspicuous example, and top officials of organized labor have many reasons, including the legislative climate, for keeping Chavez out of the headlines while they try to negotiate a quiet settlement.

Without attempting to weigh all these explanations, we believe growers should recognize two points.

1) The reasons for the recent lull generally reflect temporary situations, rather than any major permanent obstacles to farm worker organization. You can expect UFWOC to attack again whenever the leaders feel they are ready.

2) The existence of a labor dispute is clearly being felt in the market. Even when supplies have been plentiful, retailers have not made any effort to merchandise lettuce for fear of attracting attention of the UFWOC forces, and prices have consistently been below normal levels in relation to supplies. Pressure from religious groups killed an important tie-in promotion with a salad dressing manufacturer, and all growers, union or not, are feeling the effects of the unresolved labor dispute.

We see grave danger that growers will be deceived into thinking that the war is over when it has only begun.