

The Montreal Star

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# Weekend

MAGAZINE



**BASEBALL'S  
BUSH LEAGUES:  
SITTING ROOM ONLY**  
And: The fall and rise  
of Leonard Jones





DOMINION  
exploite les  
travailleurs

AGRICOLLES

DOMINION  
SAUVEZ  
LA CAUSE  
DES  
ENFANTS

DOMINION  
exploite les  
travailleurs

BOYCOTTONS  
LES RAISINS  
et LAITUES  
DOMINION  
S'EN



# CALIFORNIA'S CHICANOS BRING THEIR FIGHT TO CANADA

Boycotting grapes and lettuce here may seem futile—but to the Chicanos it is a matter of life and death

By James Quig/Photographs by Frank Prazak

REUBEN AND Maria Elena remember it well from their youth: the small plane always banked in the west and they would stop picking their grapes and grab their pile of stones; their parents hunched down over little Jesse and held their hands over his mouth and eyes. The pilot lined up with their section of the vineyard, dropped down to 15 feet and pushed the button that spat out the insecticide in a white cloud over their heads. Reuben, Maria Elena and their big brother Joe cried, swore and threw their stones. But the little plane always got away and returned to poison them another day.

That's all it was really — another day in the California vineyards where Chicano farm workers toil under murderous conditions. They must work while planes spray the crops.

Fact: 800 US farm workers die by insecticide poisoning each year. There

were 5,729 severe poisonings in 1970; nausea, stomach cramps, rash and redness of eyes are more common.

Fact: Child labor was outlawed in US industry in 1938 but still thrives in farm fields where 800,000 children — one quarter of the labor force — work in an industry ranked third for accidental injury and death.

Fact: 80 percent of US farm workers' children never go to high school.

Fact: The life expectancy of a US farm worker is 49 years.

Fact: The American public — and the government — ignore the plight of the farm workers.

Reuben Serna, 29, and his sister Maria Elena, 32, are Chicanos (Mexican-Americans) from Lodi in Northern California but I met them in a flat in Montreal where they had come to organize the grape and lettuce boycott for Cesar Chavez and his United Farm Workers union [UFW].

There are 200,000 farm workers in California; 90 percent of them are Chicanos. They have been struggling for 10 years to form a union that would put an end to the inhuman working conditions.

In 1965, California's grape pickers went on strike to win recognition for their union. The strike dragged on ineffectively for three years and the farm workers didn't win anything until they organized a boycott of California grapes and lettuce (the other major crop) which ran from 1968 until the spring of 1970. The goal was simple: convince consumers not to buy grapes and lettuce until the growers recognized the workers' union and ended the exploitation and oppression. The boycott worked — the grape pickers got their union and signed contracts with the grape growers.

Then 15 months ago, the lettuce growers of California's Salinas Valley threw a giant spanner into the works. Fearing that Chavez would now attempt to unionize the lettuce pickers, they signed contracts with the International Brotherhood of Teamsters. The Teamsters had appeared on the scene at the invitation of the lettuce growers and had persuaded some workers to sign with them. Chavez saw this as a plot to frustrate the efforts of the farm workers to achieve genuine self-organization, so he called on all farm workers — both grape and lettuce pickers — to strike, and set up another boycott. The goal this time around is equally simple: the lettuce pickers want to be represented by the UFW (which claims it already represents 85 percent of the farm workers).

UFW organizers such as Maria Elena and Reuben are in every major city in the States. In Canada, there are Chicano activists in Toronto, Montreal and Vancouver, and volunteer boycott committees at work in other centres including Halifax and Winnipeg.

"Cake sales, cocktail parties, rock concerts — we'll use every trick to get our message across and raise funds for the strike," says Maria Elena. And — according to the Sernas — the boycott's working:



Behind the smiles of Maria Elena and Reuben Serna (above in their Montreal office) lies grim determination. Left: Another day's picketing.

Continued



# The average Chicano farm worker gets \$3,000 a year for his torrid labors

"Gallo Wines is the world's largest winemaker and we have already knocked their market down by nine percent," claims Maria Elena. "At 11 percent Gallo is just breaking even and at 12 they are losing money."

Reuben adds: "When they start to lose money they will recognize our demands. And we will boycott as long as it takes because to be a Chicano farm worker under today's conditions is to dream constantly of being something else. Our family was one of the rare lucky ones. After years of moving with the crops and living in labor camps we finally found a way out. Because my mother was strong and determined, we were able to get an education; there were nearly 400 white graduates but only 10 Chicanos the year I graduated from high school."

In 1968 Maria Elena began working as an organizer for Chavez and soon the whole family was involved. Maria Elena gave up a dream of becoming a lawyer; Reuben quit a successful career in photography.

When Chavez asked Reuben last December to organize the Montreal boycott, he was only too willing. Montreal is the fifth largest market for California grapes and lettuce and if the UFW is going to win, the Canadian market will have to be reduced by about 20 percent. Maria Elena and Jesse told Reuben they would come with him to help. Together with Jesse's wife and Virginia Sanchez, Reuben's girl, they piled into Jesse's VW and Reuben's Mustang and headed across the continent.

They drove into Montreal December 28 and picketed a Dominion store selling California grapes and lettuce the very next day.

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The vineyards of California are a long, long way from Dorion Street in the east end of Montreal. In the shade of the Jacques Cartier Bridge and the towering new CBC building, Dorion Street is a lot closer to the fantasy world of La Ronde, the amusement park at Man And His World, the remnant of Expo 67 just across the waters of the St. Lawrence. But there is little fantasy on Dorion Street; the families there are too busy trying to make ends meet to have time for dreams of what could be.

Reuben Serna is right at home on Dorion Street — and they don't even speak either of his languages, English and Spanish. He has been invited here tonight for dinner: boycott workers get \$1.50 a day for food so you take the invitations where you can get them. Tonight the ham and potatoes are compliments of Quo Vadis, a sort of half-way house to survival for ex-convicts and drug addicts.

"They heard about our fight and wanted to help," Reuben explains. "They have organized a community meeting in the neighborhood and

I'll be speaking there after dinner."

"Do you spend all of your resources in the less prosperous areas?" I ask. "Why aren't you out pitching to the rich — the people with the power?"

"Because they don't want to listen. They don't understand. Poor people understand poor people. It's the same in every city where we have boycott workers. Look, I'll give you an example. We organized a Saturday morning demonstration at two supermarkets recently. One in the west end — where everybody was well off and another in the east end where they weren't. We got 30 people out for the west-end demonstration but 300 showed up where the people were poor."

But even with the poor, selling the boycott isn't easy . . .

They have promised Reuben a good reception at the community meeting. Many of the young activists from the area are expected to show up and Reuben feels that if he gets his message across he will gain new support for his supermarket picket lines. The meeting place is on Visitation Street in a little building that was once a corner confectionery store.

When we arrive there are three women seated at the head table but nobody else is there at all. At the meeting's peak there are six women and two men in the hall.

The chairwoman calls the meeting to order. She seems unsure what the purpose of the meeting is but has heard it has something to do with grapes and that the man in the corner there with the headband wants to say something to them. Reuben is on.

Sometimes he speaks in Spanish but tonight he speaks English. François Legeais, a French born and educated member of the boycott staff, translates but that isn't easy on the audience because they don't talk like François on Visitation Street. After a little while a worker from the half-way house translates François' translation for the audience.

Reuben tells them what it is like where he comes from. He tells them about the terrible working conditions, the child labor and how families have to keep moving with the crops to stay employed; and how all that moving helps keep them poor. He tells them about the back-breaking work of cutting the lettuce and how his people work from "when you can't see in the morning until you can't see at night" and average \$3,000 a year for it.

"Come and live here," says one of the women. Things aren't that good on Visitation Street but they aren't that bad. "Can't you leave that country?"

"The United States is our home," replies Reuben. (It must be noted that Reuben and Maria Elena, like most of the Chicano farm workers, are American citizens.)

And then he tells them how they

can help his people: don't eat the grapes or the lettuce.

It isn't easy for them to understand. How can it possibly matter to anyone so far away whether or not they have a little green iceberg lettuce salad with supper?

Reuben explains the growers will have to let the workers have the union they want if enough people like them don't have the little salad. If enough people like them don't buy table grapes children won't have to go to work in the fields at eight years old like he and his brothers and sister did. And slowly but surely he bridges the gap.

"Maybe we should go in and drop the grapes on the floor," suggests one woman.

Reuben says he can't ask them to do that. If they just don't buy them and tell their friends the story of the Chicanos he will be happy. And maybe they can follow him and picket some of the stores.

And the meeting is over. They ask him for nothing and they promise him nothing.

"But they will tell others," says Reuben. "And the others will tell others. That's the way we won the boycott in 1970 and that's the way we will win it this time."

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## The Dominion Stores executive said he had heard Chicanos were well paid

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Maria Elena Serna learned to make tortillas when she was nine years old. And she learned to make very good tortillas. If they were not good her mother would throw them out the window and warn her that only stupid people cannot make good tortillas and anyone who is that stupid wouldn't live in her house. So Maria Elena's tortillas were very good.

Sometimes in Montreal, if she has any energy left after her 18-hour work days, Maria Elena will cook some Mexican food for the boycott staff but mostly food is a necessity rather than a planned pleasure. Maria Elena doesn't say bad things about Montreal, but it isn't her home and she hasn't seen her two children since she left California last December.

When I talked with her she felt the boycott had already put a five percent dent in the Montreal grape and lettuce market, and that September will bring them much closer to their goal of 20 percent.

Two Quebec food chains — Metro and Marché Union — have already agreed not to sell non-UFW grapes but the big target is Dominion Stores,

Canada's largest supermarket chain. If Dominion refused to sell non-UFW grapes, the Canadian goal would be achieved and the Sernas could go home. Dominion has made an important concession; it sells Californian grapes but in many stores they have put up signs advising customers that if they want to support the boycott, they should not buy these grapes.

But the Sernas still have a long way to go if Albert David's opinions are any indication. David is regional manager for Dominion in eastern Ontario and Quebec and he says bluntly that he has had it with the United Farm Workers. David says he was a sympathizer in the beginning but no more. He and his customers, he says, are fed up and he believes they are eating more grapes than ever. He says there are conflicts going on all over the world and Dominion can't be expected to get involved in somebody else's fight. If the government allows California grapes into Canada and his customers want them he is going to sell them — no matter who picked them. Furthermore, it's his information that the Chicanos are well paid and don't have it that rough.

But Reuben and Maria Elena keep pushing and soliciting support — both moral and financial. The flat they live in is paid for by a special Sunday collection at the Loyola College chapel; various Montreal unions supply office space, supplies and enough cash to help support the strikers back home.

And not all of the help comes from the poor and oppressed: Maria Elena finished one work day drinking white wine in a big house high on a hill in a ritzy part of Montreal. The lady of the house, Maria Elena's friend now, was the wife of a wealthy contractor and had supported the Chicanos and their fight for union representation for years. California lettuce never darkened her door and the white wine was not from California. Together the two women planned a Saturday-morning picket line at the neighborhood Dominion store.

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I don't pretend to know the Sernas very well. I have never fought for anything the way the Sernas are fighting. I didn't go to work at eight years old and nobody has never sprayed me or my kids with bug killer — from a plane or any other way. But if the Sernas can do all that I can lay off the grapes and lettuce. And you needn't tell me how trite that statement is.

Reuben and Maria Elena have thrown enough stones.◀

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