

THE FARMWORKERS' BOYCOTT IS MORAL & LEGAL

It was a meeting like many others we had been in before. Two farm workers, a Rabbi, a housewife and I were talking to the owner of a large Southern California supermarket chain. Inside, Mr. S. (the owner) was elaborating on why he wouldn't help farmworkers by removing non-union lettuce from his stores. First of all he did not want to become involved. He reminded us that he was not a farmer nor did he employ farm workers. All he wanted to do was run his grocery business. His business principle is to sell anything his customers are willing to buy. We described the suffering of farm workers. We told him about the benefits of the union. We explained to him that he was already involved because he was supporting the growers by selling non-union lettuce. We urged him to elevate the needs of poor people above his business principle. He said his only responsibility was to his customers. We disagreed. We reminded him that his company did its business and made its profits in this society - not on some other planet. We tried to show him that he had a broader responsibility in this society - a responsibility to support poor people in their struggles, a responsibility to help make America a more just society, a responsibility that is even greater because of his power and influence. He was not convinced.

So we told him that farm workers had only one recourse: since he was unwilling to respond on the basis of moral responsibility then we would have to go to his customers and explain the issues and ask them not to shop at his stores until he was willing to do what was right and just. Mr. S. probably doubted that his customers would pay any attention. But the next day each of his stores had 2 or 3 boycotters in the parking lot peacefully handing out leaflets, talking to people, and urging them to shop at another store. In two weeks 7,500 customers had turned away from Mr. S.'s 29 stores. His customers cared - not all of them - but enough to persuade Mr. S. to alter his business principle and begin to sell only union lettuce. What he would not do because it was right he eventually decided to do because he was losing money.

People have different images of the boycott. The growers call it "immoral and illegal" which makes it sound a little evil. But the boycott is clearly not illegal since farm workers are not covered by the law which outlaws some kinds of boycotts.\* Is it immoral? No one ever claimed that the boycott is perfect or pure. It is a way of bringing non-violent pressure on stores and on growers. It is the contention of this paper that the boycott is amorally sound and crucially important way of carrying on the farm workers' struggle for justice and dignity. Cesar Chavez calls it a most beautiful

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\* The 1947 Taft-Hartly Amendments & the 1959 Landrum-Griffin Amendments to the National Labour Relations Act made secondary boycotts illegal. The farm workers' boycott includes primary (please don't buy lettuce) and secondary (please don't shop at this store) elements. Both are important to the success of the boycott.

form of non-violent struggle because so many thousands of people can become involved. The beauty of the boycott is most evident when you watch the people who do the work of the boycott. Many of them are farm workers; others are students, some have left religious orders, most are just plain folks. They all work hard and live on room and board and \$5 a week. They spend 8-10 hours a day, six days a week in grocery store parking lots talking to customers. In an average day a boycotter will talk to 150 customers; some will ignore her or coldly reject the cause; others will curse her out or call her communist; but 30-50 of those customers will understand and will care enough to turn away. Listen to a typical conversation:

Please help farm workers today by not shopping at Safeway.  
(Safeway,...Why, what's wrong with Safeway?)

We are asking Safeway to help the farm workers by selling union lettuce and they refuse.

(Why pick on Safeway?)

Because they are the largest chain in the West and because they have refused to help. Other chains are cooperating and are selling only union lettuce.

(Well, I won't buy lettuce)

That's very helpful, ma'am, but it would be even more helpful if you shop at another store today. If Safeway actually loses customers, they may be persuaded to do what's right.

(But the nearest store is six blocks away and my kids are at home waiting for dinner.)

I understand that but think about the suffering of farm workers. Is it really such a big thing to go six extra blocks to help them? Here is your chance to do something specific. Please do a simple deed for justice. Don't shop at Safeway today.

Every day in every major city individual Americans respond to the pleas of the farm workers and their supporters and turn away from stores like Safeway. It is in fact a beautiful thing to see: hard work, sacrifice and simple persuasion by the boycotters and the willingness on the part of millions of folks of all colours and kinds to do "a simple deed for justice." The boycott is an almost perfect example of determined non-violent action. And it is effective. Most chain stores will not tolerate the steady loss of their customers. In time they decide to cooperate with the farm workers' cause.

But is the boycott necessary? Why don't farm workers just talk to their employers directly? If they won't talk wouldn't a strike be

sufficient to make them talk? In the grapes of course, farm workers asked for elections, asked for a meeting but were ignored; they then went on strike and continued the strike. On August 3, 1957, 80-90% of Giumarra's farm workers went on strike but instead of talking to his workers Giumarra spent thousands of dollars to recruit hungry people from Mexico to come and pick his grapes. The farm workers continued to strike but they also began a boycott of Giumarra's grapes. Giumarra got around the boycott by illegally marketing his grapes under labels provided by other growers. The farm workers' union eventually had to boycott all grapes and they eventually won contracts with their employers. In 1967 Giumarra (and other grape growers also) had so much unilateral power that he could refuse even to talk to his workers about an election. In 1970, after 3 years of strike and boycott Giumarra negotiated a contract with the UFW and happily began to sell grapes again.

In lettuce the farm workers' union is faced with the same situation as in the grapes. In July of 1970, Cesar Chavez asked the lettuce growers for a meeting to discuss elections. The growers ignored this offer, sought out another union and signed sweetheart contracts behind the backs of the farm workers. Cesar Chavez repeated his offer for elections. The workers elected UFW ranch Committees, organized and on August 24, 1970 went on strike to gain the union of their choice. 7,000 workers went on strike in what the L.A. TIMES called the largest strike in farm labour in U.S. History. The industry was shut down. Some growers decided to negotiate with the UFW. But the vast majority sought other ways to stop the farm workers union. In September the growers got a local judge to outlaw the strike.

The farm workers had to choose between violating the court order or going out on the boycott. They decided to go to all the major cities to ask consumers to support their struggle. The lettuce boycott was effective. The Teamster and UFW unions reached an agreement. The growers decided to negotiate. In March of 1971 UFW suspended the lettuce boycott and began serious negotiations with the lettuce industry. But the growers were not that serious. They stalled the negotiations through the key 1971 harvest and then rejected all the compromise proposals offered by UFW. The negotiations are over and farm workers have no other recourse but to return to the lettuce boycott.

The point of these illustrations is to show that the boycott is necessary if farm workers are to win the simple right of negotiating with their employers. The boycott has been used because growers refuse even to talk to their organized workers; the boycott has been used because growers are willing to bring in strike breakers and misery of another country in order to bring in strike breakers. Agricultural employers could avoid all the pressures of the strike and boycott if

they would be willing to respect their workers enough to sit down and talk with their representatives. How much better it would have been for Giumarra if he had had an election and negotiated in good faith in 1967 instead of 1970. How much better it would be for the lettuce industry if they would negotiate in good faith now instead of after a long and costly boycott.

The boycott is reasonable, necessary and directed toward a just end. For those who hesitate at this point just ask yourself these questions: would it be better, would it be more just if farm workers were to stay locked in poverty and misery for another 100 years? Humanly speaking would it be better if the grape growers had succeeded in thwarting UFW's effort by using poverty-stricken people from Mexico to break every strike effort? Hasn't the boycott helped to open up a whole new world of possibilities for farm workers?

The boycott is both moral and legal. It is essential to the success of the farm workers' struggle. It is a way for farm workers to recruit practical and useful support from millions of Americans. It is a way for us to keep casting our vote for or against justice because the boycott will continue; now wines and lettuce, later other crops because there are hundreds of thousands of workers in citrus, vegetable, sugar, tobacco and melon fields who want and deserve a strong union.

The boycott is moral and legal. The fact that Congress in 1947 was fanatically anti-union and passed an anti-boycott law over the President's veto is no argument for outlawing the farm workers' boycott. Perhaps the full strength of the boycott should be made available to all workers again. Perhaps then all the Black and Brown working poor of America would have an adequate non-violent tool to bring about a measure of justice for themselves and their families.

Wayne C. Hartmire, Jr., Director      Dup: United Farm Workers  
National Farm Worker Ministry      1192 Alexandre de Sève  
1411 W. Olympic Blvd., Room 511      Montréal, Québec  
Los Angeles, California 90015      9/74  
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