

# The Grapes of Wrath Revisited:

## Farmworkers' Strike Goes On



George Sheridan

When they buried Juan de la Cruz in the San Joaquin Valley, it was with the dignity of a warrior and the ritual of a saint. Fifteen thousand farm workers carried candles in procession through the vineyards, three bishops said the requiem mass, and Joan Raez sang at his grave.

Juan de la Cruz was a member of the United Farm Workers Union. He was shot dead by a strikebreaker as he picketed a field near Bakersfield, California, August 16, 1973.

In 1965, Juan de la Cruz had been one of the first to join the new Farm Workers Union. For over fifty years — his entire life — he had been a field laborer. His wife says “You know, he was a quiet man. He never talked much about ideas or anything like that.” But when the time came he showed himself in action.

When they buried Juan de la Cruz, Cesar Chavez spoke the eulogy: “Last night as we walked in a candlelight procession through Arvin I was thinking about the earliest days of our Union. I remember with strong feelings the families who joined our movement and paid dues long before there was any hope of winning contracts. Sometimes, fathers and mothers would take money out of their meager food budgets just because they believed that farm workers could and must build their own union. I remember thinking then that with spirit like that . . . we had to win. No force on earth could stop us.

“Juan de la Cruz is part of that spirit. He joined the Union in its earliest days. He could have held back. He could have waited to see which side was going to win. Instead, he threw himself into our struggle.

“Juan has not only given himself in life — but he has now given his only life on earth for us, for his children and for all farm workers who suffer and who go hungry in this land of plenty. We are here because his spirit of service and sacrifice has touched and moved our lives. The force that is generated by that spirit of love is more powerful than any force on earth. It cannot be stopped.

“We live in the midst of people who hate and fear us. They have worked hard to keep us in our place. They will spend millions more to destroy our Union. But we do not have to make ourselves small by hating and fearing them in return. There is enough love and goodwill in our movement to give energy to our struggle and still have plenty left over to break down and change the climate of hate and fear around us.”

The dark dampness of the early August morning covers the vast irrigated fields of central California as scores of workers and their families begin to assemble in a small community park. A dozen cars, some of them with police markings and some without identification, are filled with uniformed men wearing the badges of Kern County sheriff's deputies.

They are observing every movement of those assembling, who soon form a group of several hundred men and women of all ages. Most of the workers are Chicanos; nearly all of them wear a familiar button — a black eagle on a red background — a symbol which has become known to millions of Americans over the past decade. It is the badge of the most exploited of Americans who toil — the farm workers.

# The Grapes of Wrath Revisited:

Throughout the Southwest their union, the United Farm Workers, AFL-CIO, is engaged in an epic-struggle against the combined forces of the White House; America's most powerful industry; and the world's largest union. Not since the 1930's, the era of the Grapes of Wrath when vigilantes assaulted farm workers who dared to sign a card in fledgling CIO agricultural unions, has so much bloody violence occurred in the rich valleys and endless dusty fields of California.

Even the Committee to Re-Elect the President (CREEP) got into the act. They gave \$10,000 to the National Socialist White People's Party (California wing of the American Nazi Party), originally for "dirty tricks" against the Wallace campaign. Later the money was used to finance acts of terror against the UFW in Coachella. (All the above assertions have been documented by the *N. Y. Times* and the *Los Angeles Times*.)



The seeds of conflict were planted when Frank Fitzsimmons, President of the International Brotherhood of Teamsters, maneuvered the huge union into endorsing Nixon — and contributing a quarter of a million dollars under the table to the re-election campaign. The first fruit of this maneuver became apparent when Nixon's Undersecretary of Labor arranged for Fitzsimmons to speak at the annual convention of the American Farm Bureau Federation — long the most anti-union employers' group in the nation. Fitzsimmons proposed what is surely the strangest alliance in the annals of labor when he urged the Farm Bureau to join the Teamsters in destroying the "revolutionary" UFW.

The Mafia, too, played a role, if indirectly, in cementing the alliance between the Teamsters and the President. Former Atty. General Richard Kleindienst ordered the FBI to drop an investigation which had already uncovered a plan to loot the Teamsters' \$1.4 billion pension fund through a mob-controlled "pre-paid medical plan." In San Diego, Teamsters President Fitzsimmons met with major Mafia figures, including some who have been identified as "hit men" for Murder, Incorporated. Several hours later, Fitzsimmons joined President Nixon on Air Force One for a flight to Washington. A state investigator who watched the plane take off said "I can stand crooks, but it bothers hell out of me when a guy meets with mobsters and then with the President."

Charles Colson, Special Counsel to the President, sent two memos to federal agencies (including the Labor Dept., the Justice Dept., and the National Labor Relations Board) ordering them to stay out of the conflict between the UFW and the Teamsters "even if it leads to bloodshed" unless they could find some way to "screw" the United Farm Workers (his words). After his retirement from public life, Colson became General Counsel to the Teamsters, at a salary of \$100,000 per year.

In the full arrogance of power, the Teamsters and farm owners decided the time had come to finish off the United Farm Workers. Cynically they announced that the grape workers had grown tired of Chavez and now desired to be represented by the Teamsters. As evidence, they claimed to have petitions signed by 4,800 Coachella Valley farm workers. Only two reporters have ever seen these petitions, both

# The Grapes of Wrath Revisited:

declared they appeared to be fraudulent. According to Vincent Hanna of the *London Sunday Times*, "I was suspicious about the signatures. Most of them looked literate and inconsistent with the educational level of the workers. Only about a third were dated, and many signatures, on different pages, seemed to be in similar handwriting. It is very doubtful whether any of the petitions would be accepted by a court."

The companies and Teamsters announced new contracts, with lower wages than the Farm Workers Union had demanded. Worse, these contracts contained no pesticide safety provisions, permitted a return to child labor, and ended the job security and grievance procedure which had been the workers' rights under UFW contracts. (All this according to the testimony of the farm owners and teamsters themselves. No farm worker or reporter has actually seen one of the contracts.)

Cesar Chavez asked for secret ballot elections, so that the workers themselves could decide what union they wanted to represent them. He confidently predicted that in such a free election, the UFW would win over 90% of the votes. The companies and Teamsters refused to permit elections. So the grape workers struck.

The companies and Teamsters imported "guards" to intimidate strikers. They burned houses, blew up cars, beat and stabbed pickets. Throughout the summer, 45 pickets were shot at, including Chavez, his son, and his nephew. The deputy sheriffs made only five arrests in connection with the shootings.

But if the sheriffs could not arrest farm owners or Teamsters for acts of violence, they could arrest strikers for

using loudspeakers or standing closer than 100 feet apart (both forbidden by local court injunctions). Over 4,000 farm workers went to jail on charges of unlawful assembly and failure to disperse, as well as catch-all charges like disturbing the peace. In Fresno County, the farm workers filled the jail, the work farm, the youth facility, and the county fair grounds. Finally the deputies stopped making arrests when there was no place to put more prisoners. Eventually, higher courts overturned all the injunctions, and the workers were freed to resume their picketing. But when the continuing violence resulted in the death of Juan de la Cruz and Nagi Daifullah, an Arab striker, the farm workers called off their picketing and turned to the boycott.

Over five hundred farm workers have come from California to eastern cities to spread the word: Boycott grapes, boycott lettuce, boycott Gallo wine. There is some union lettuce available, marked with the Aztec eagle on the plastic wrapper. But all grapes are boycotted. (The union grapes were all sold early in the summer.) And the boycott of Gallo includes Gallo's pop wines: Boone's Farm, Ripple, Spanada, Strawberry Hill.

In September, the Teamsters publicly admitted that they do not represent the farm workers and agreed to tear up their phony contracts with the grape companies, and to allow their similar deal with the lettuce companies to end. But apparently this was yet another Teamster double-cross. Anyhow, the boycott continues. People who want to help, or who need more information, can contact the United Farm Workers at 1915 Park Street, Hartford.

"Teamsters and Growers: A Romance Rekindled," The Nation, March 19, 1973  
by Ron Taylor

"Grapes of Wrath, 1973," London Sunday Times, September 2, 1973, by  
Vincent Hanna

"The Battle of Coachella Valley," Rolling Stone, September 13, 1973  
by David Harris

"Chavez and the Farm Workers: 'We Have Our Patience'," The Nation, September  
3, 1973, by J.B. Lieber

"Coachella Valley: Struggle for Self-Determination," Christianity and Crisis,  
July 9, 1973, by John Bank

The Inner Tooth

#8

Winter, 1973

Published by the Inner Tooth Collective  
of the Inner College, University of Connecticut  
Box U-167, Storrs, Connecticut, 06268

- "Chavez Union Struggling for Survival," N.Y. Times, June 27, 1973, p.44
- "One Day in the Desert," A.D., August 1973, by Thomas Orrin Bentz
- "Duel in the Sun: Union Busting, Teamster Style," The Progressive, July 1973  
by Harry Bernstein
- "Cesar Chavez and the Teamsters," The New Republic, May 19, 1973, by  
Peter Barnes
- "Speaking Out: Treachery in the Coachella," The Christian Century, July 4,  
1973, by James T. Ryan
- "Cesar Chavez: The Powerful Innocent," The Critic, July-August 1973  
by Eugene Kennedy
- "Viva la Causa!" American Journal of Nursing, May 1973, by Marion Moses
- "Cesar Chavez: What He Now Wants for Farm Workers," St. Anthony Messenger,  
April 1971, by John Bank
- "La Huelga: The Jails Are Full; The Boycott Is Working," WIN, August 2,  
1973, by Duane Campbell
- "David-Goliath Battle in Labor," Washington Post, April 23, 1973, by  
John Herling (syndicated column)
- "Harvest of Hunger," Good Housekeeping, September 1972
- "'I'll Never Eat Iceberg Lettuce Again'," Village Voice, August 24, 1972  
by Jack Newfield
- "David vs. Goliath?" America, March 17, 1973, by James Vizzard
- "The United Farm Workers: A Translation of American Idealism," Journal of  
Current Social Issues, Vol. 10, #4--Autumn 1972, by John R. Moyer
- "Eulogy for a Striker," Steel Labor, September 1973
- "The Wages of Martyrdom," L.A. Times View, Part IX, September 30, 1973

For More Information:

United Farm Workers of America, AFL-CIO  
Connecticut Grape & Lettuce Boycott Office  
1915 Park Street  
Hartford, Connecticut 06106

233-7234 (h); 527-5064 (o)