

El Malcriado News Brief

WEST FOOD MUSHROOM WORKERS VOTE UNANIMOUSLY FOR DOLE BOYCOTT

More than one hundred mushroom workers rose to their feet Tuesday evening, July 13 to vote unanimously for a boycott of their employer, West Foods, Inc., of Ventura and its parent company, Castle and Cooke, the giant multi-national food corporation. Among Castle and Cooke's subsidiaries are Dole, C & C Sugar, and Bumble Bee Sea Foods.

West Food was under a Teamster contract for five years prior to the late summer of 1975 when company workers came to the UFW Oxnard field office to ask the United Farm Workers Union to help them organize a union election under the Agricultural Labor Relations Act.

The ALRB election was held on September 8 and the workers voted UFW 136, Teamsters 39, and no union 9. After dismissing a Teamster appeal, the ALRB certified the United Farm Workers, AFL-CIO, as the official bargaining agent for the West Food workers on December 1.

The business of West Foods is the year round production of mushrooms and its farm workers have one of the worst jobs in agriculture. The mushrooms must be grown in complete darkness in chemically treated beds of steaming horse manure compost. There are eight beds, two on four different levels, in each of the eighty growing rooms. The beds fill the approximately 8,500 square feet of the room, leaving the workers barely enough space to squeeze between them. The bedding and harvest workers wear hard hats with lights attached, like coal miners, as they crawl around the beds to do their work. "Its like working in a dark, steaming, stinking cave," says UFW negotiator Liza Hirsch.

Sanitation facilities at the plant are inadequate. Some crews are only allowed to use the rest rooms at scheduled times. In some rooms the only drinking water available is the water the workers bring themselves in old plastic milk jugs. The jugs sit in the corners of the growing rooms uncovered and are shared by the entire crew.

The majority of the workers start their day at 4:30 a.m., working eight hours a day, six days a week, for wages varying from \$2.50 to \$2.95 an hour depending on their job classification.

A special health problem for the West Food workers is the company's extensive use of toxic chemicals. The mushroom beds are sprayed systematically with Dithane (Z-78) a very dangerous organo-phosphate. Vapona, a pesticide that is a known carcinogen (a cancer causing agent) is also used. The workers are required to use Santobrite, another dangerous organo-phosphate that can be absorbed through the skin, as a boot and tool rinse.

The West Food Teamster contract had never effectively dealt with any of these problems.

In April of this year, the West Food workers elected a thirty man negotiating committee representing every job classification in the plant.

This committee and UFW negotiator Liza Hirsch had their first negotiating session with the company on May 10. They had a total of twenty-six meetings with the company before the July 13 boycott vote meeting.

Hirsch says that most of the negotiations have been fruitless because the company representatives have not agreed to some of the most basic contract provisions. They want a probationary period which would allow them to arbitrarily fire a new employee. They will not accept the hiring hall. They will not allow the union to be the sole judge of a union member's good standing. They will not agree to a subcontractor clause which prevents the company from contracting outside work that can be done by the plant farm workers. They will not agree to a successor clause which protects the jobs of the workers if the company is sold.

Juan Medina of the negotiating committee told the Tuesday night meeting at the Oxnard field office that the company "has not accepted one good word for the workers in the contract." In the past six months the company has saved \$51,000 in medical benefits it kept from the workers. (When the ALRB certified the UFW as the bargaining agent at the plant the company cancelled its employee medical plan.) "Since April the company saved \$75,000 from our wages because it did not give us our April 1 raise." (The company ignored wage increases provided for in the Teamster contract.) "For them these negotiations are great because they are saving more money. They always move a little bit so that they can say they are negotiating, but only on issues that give us no power. So what do we do to move ahead?", Medina asked in conclusion. "We need the strength and unity of all of us to deliver a strong message to the company." Medina's remarks and the reports from the other committee members who spoke Spanish were translated into English for the Black and Vietnamese workers who attended the meeting.

Edmundo Corona, another committee member told the workers, "This is an historic moment for. Our vote will affect all of our future relations with the company - we have won an election but not a good contract for ourselves and our families."

Ricardo Olivarrleta, who has worked at West Food since 1957 added, "This struggle is not just for us but for our children and their children too."

Following a teatro, negotiating committee member Victor Delgado gave the committee recommendation. "We recommend a boycott vote," he said. "The boycott is ready to start all over the country."

Negotiator Liza Hirsch called for the boycott vote, asking all in favor of the committee recommendation to stand. All of the workers rose to their feet to vote unanimously for the boycott. The meeting ended with all present singing "Solidaridad Pa' Siempre."

Castle and Cooke's revenue for the first quarter of 1976 were \$186,222,000. The corporate earnings for the first half of the year were \$21.7 million. Approximately 83% of these earnings came from the company's food operation. Through Dole, Castle and Cooke accounts for 40% of the American banana market, and 48% of the worldwide processed pineapple market.