

James A. Nash  
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AN INTERPRETIVE CHRONOLOGY  
of  
A Fact-Finding Trip  
on the UFW Strike  
in California by Massachusetts  
Religious Leaders

In response to a telegram from Cesar Chavez of the United Farm Workers Union, requesting Massachusetts religious leaders to come to California to help restore the morale of his striking union members, a delegation from the Bay State journeyed to the San Joaquin Valley to obtain a first-hand view of the labor strife among grape growers, the Western Conference of the Teamsters Union, and the United Farm Workers. The delegation was composed of

The Rt. Rev. John M. Burgess - Bishop, Protestant Episcopal  
Diocese of Massachusetts

Bishop Edward G. Carroll - Resident Bishop of the Boston Area,  
The United Methodist Church

The Rev. Canon Theodore F. Jones - Canon to the Ordinary, Protestant  
Episcopal Diocese of Massachusetts

The Rev. Avery D. Post - Minister and President, Massachusetts  
Conference of the United Church of Christ

The Rev. C. Joseph Sprague - General Secretary, Massachusetts  
Council of Churches

The Rev. Harry H. Hoehler - President, Massachusetts Council  
of Churches and representing the  
Massachusetts Bay District, Unitarian-  
Universalist Association

The Rev. Darrell Holland, Director of Communications for the Massachusetts Conference of the United Church of Christ, and the Rev. James Nash, Director of Social Relations in the Mass. Council of Churches accompanied the delegation as staff. The delegation had been briefed thoroughly beforehand on the facts and issues in this labor controversy.

The group was greeted at the Los Angeles airport at noon, Sunday, July 22 by the Rev. Chris Hartmire of the National Farm Worker Ministry, who arose, against doctor's orders, from a sick bed to meet us. Chris provided us with further briefing materials and directions.

Following an auto trip over the mountains to Lamont, we were briefed in the Lamont Field Office of the United Farm Workers by Fr. John Banks, a member of the National Farm Worker Ministry and press officer for the United Farm Workers. John outlined the current situation concerning UFW strategy and

arrests of UFW pickets, and answered delegates' questions. John, along with Ray Alvarez, AFL-CIO, COPE Director in Ohio and Michigan, and Fr. Eugene Boyle of San Francisco, guided, directed, and interpreted for us during our sojourn in the Bakersfield-Lamont-Arvin area.

Late Sunday afternoon, for two hours, we met with a large group -- perhaps 12-15 -- local clergy, as well as a few of their lay people. Rev. Russell Paulsen, Lutheran Pastor of the Church of the Valley of the Good Shepherd in Lamont, had arranged the meeting. Only Paulsen clearly sided with the UFW. One or two others clearly were sympathetic to the growers. The remainder equivocated, torn by the divisions within their communities. Few had any clear understanding of the many issues in the conflict; thus, the discussion was mainly attitudinal. Most congregations were composed of "Anglos", including a few growers, and considerable anti-Chicano sentiment existed. The clergy appeared reluctant to raise the labor issue before their congregations lest they reap the whirlwind. Most seem to have maintained public silence. In fact, the clergy as a group had never discussed the problem previously. They expressed gratitude to us for being the catalyst that brought them together to discuss and debate the labor problem for the first time, and hoped future encounters would occur. They helped us to appreciate the nature and intensity of community feeling.

Sunday evening, we met for three hours with six local growers, as well as the head of the Kern County, California Farm Bureau and Al Caplan, labor relations consultant for the growers who has negotiated most of the labor contracts with the Teamsters, and formerly the U.F.W., in Kern County. One grower had two sons who had joined the U.F.W., indicating that the labor strife has divided even families. The meeting was congenial; we attempted to understand their problems objectively, perhaps symbolized by our willingness -- nay, eagerness -- to eat the grapes brought by one grower.

The growers viewed themselves as businessmen, intent upon picking and selling at the largest possible profit. They were against all unions, but recognized that unionism was an inevitable factor in their vocational situations. They adamantly opposed Chavez because of the U.F.W.'s interference in the "internal affairs" of their farms, such as the UFW's ranch committees which settle grievances with the growers. They accused Chavez of running a non-professional union, and some claimed that Mexican-Americans are not yet ready to operate a union. In contrast, the Teamsters were viewed as a lesser evil, dominated

by "Anglos", less persistent on workers' grievances, and more dependable in producing a working crew. In the growers' eyes, the U.F.W.'s union hiring hall, wherein the union assigns a work force based upon seniority, was anathema. They preferred the familiar labor contractor-system operated now by the Teamsters, wherein licensed contractors, for a fee, assign workers with an emphasis on the youngest and the fastest pickers, and without significant grievance procedures on the ranch. (Everyone, including the growers, acknowledged that the labor contractor system has had a history of gross abuses, and everyone, including the UFW, admits that the union hiring halls have not operated with maximum efficiency. The issue of the labor hiring hall vs. the labor contractor system is a major issue in the conflict.)

Hence, when contracts negotiated with the U.F.W. in 1970 expired in 1973, and the Teamsters brought petitions with the names of workers expressing a desire to be represented by that mighty union, the growers signed agreements with the Teamsters. No secret ballot elections were held to determine the will of the workers. The growers were hardly fans of the Teamsters, but they felt this union was infinitely preferable to the UFW. They were freed of the persistent demands for a redress of grievances by the UFW, but they were beginning to wonder about the future in light of the Teamsters' reputation for violence and intimidation.

The growers signed with the Teamsters on the assumption that the UFW could not achieve a successful boycott again. Now they are worried. They fear that if a successful boycott occurs and if they cannot be released from the Teamster contracts, they could be ruined financially. (According to UFW spokesmen, however, legal procedures, such as elections, exist to circumvent this dilemma. No one's interest is served by driving small growers out of business.)

At 4 a.m. on Monday morning, July 23, the religious delegation was in the Lamont town square, where UFW pickets gather daily for a brief rally and strategic instructions prior to driving to the picket lines. It was still dark and cool. We were introduced as a fact-finding delegation from Massachusetts, and confidence was expressed that our discoveries would lead us to side with the UFW. We were cheered.

Holland and Nash went to the sheriff's sub-station, and told the numerous deputies that the religious delegation was here to observe. We wanted to avoid the adverse publicity that our arrests might generate. We were told to talk

with the deputies on the line which we did later. No problems were foreseen.

We drove to the picket line on the Roberts Ranch. Only one UFW line operated that morning. About 1000 UFW strikers were on the line, waving their red flags with the Black Aztec Eagles and shouting to the strikebreakers -- including some alleged illegals from Mexico -- to join the strike. They were young and old, but really all farmworkers, not college students as some critics had alleged. The strikers remained on one side of the road, while the strikebreakers boarded trucks in a lot on the other side. At least two dozen deputies in riot gear functioned as a barrier. No violence occurred; no arrests were made. We talked with numerous pickets, hearing their grievances.

We returned to the Lamont town square, to observe another rally. Again, we were introduced individually, this time by being placed on an improvised platform. We were cheered wildly. UFW leaders spoke, articulating the grievances of the crowd.

Meanwhile, one of us was told that the Kern County Sheriff was on the edge of the crowd watching. Three of the delegation then talked with him. Sheriff Dodge said that the court injunctions, which his men were obligated to enforce, were unwise. The deputies could not maintain order if pickets were required to stand 100 feet apart, not to mention that such picket lines could not be effective. Violations of the unjust injunctions by UFW strikers had led to more than 1500 arrests the previous week, with many of the arrestees being without beds or adequate clothing. The Sheriff and his deputies were no longer enforcing the letter of the injunction, as we plainly saw. The Sheriff also said that the strikers' rallies here would not help their cause; "the boycott did it the last time and only that will do it this time."

Late morning, we traveled to LaPax, the national headquarters of the UFW and the permanent residence of Cesar Chavez. It seemed like a mountain retreat, 25 miles from the nearest community, but the business activity contradicted the appearance. We talked with the heads of the research department, the legal department, and the workers' health program. Questions about contracts, wages, profit margins, union hiring halls, UFW strategy, etc. were answered convincingly, often with documentation. Acknowledgments of difficulties with union hiring halls were made readily, and planned improvements were indicated. As a sidelight, the humble home of Cesar Chavez stood in dramatic contrast to memories of Teamsters' headquarters in Washington.

The afternoon visit with Teamsters' officials in their offices in Arvin turned the tide. Any in our delegation who were hesitant about proclaiming support for Chavez and the boycott were no longer so. Teamster John Macias introduced himself as an American of Mexican descent, who disliked the Chavistas because they were revolutionaries intent upon retaking the Southwestern United States for themselves. Because of their growing ethnic pride, they seemed to Mocias as un-American. Mr. Mocias introduced us to his two "organizers", whose task is to persuade workers in the fields to sign petitions in favor of the Teamsters. The organizers were "Anglos", while most of the workers are Chicano or Filipinos. While most of the workers are small in stature, the "organizers" were ominous in size, with extremely strong arms. Their mere presence would be tacit coercion; they seemed to be not organizers as much as enforcers or intimidators. Moreover, the Teamsters indicated that they supported elections to determine union representation only after farm workers are included under the National Labor Relations Act, which all observers agree is not likely to occur for many years. In the meantime, "organizers" would solicit signatures in the fields.

Ironically, the meeting with the Teamsters had convinced the delegation to stand unequivocally with the UFW. A statement was drafted and approved which claimed that the scale of justice leans in favor of the UFW, and pledged to promote an effective boycott in Massachusetts.

After meeting with a few UFW strikers in the evening to hear further about the vices of the union contractor system and the comparative virtues of the union hiring hall, we were asked to attend a meeting of UFW workers from Delano. The meeting was in Lamont. About 150 workers were gathered in a small room. We were all introduced, and greeted with cheers. Bishop Burgess then read our statement, which was translated into Spanish. The response was deafening. We knew then why Cesar Chavez had said our presence would boost the morale of his members.

On the third day we arose again early. Some of our delegation had already departed, but those who remained soon were back on the picket lines, talking with strikers. An old man told us woeful tales about his first time in jail four days earlier. He had violated the "crazy" injunction because he believed in the strike. "My labor belongs to me, and I refuse to give it under the Teamster contract." Pablo Ortez, UFW strike director in the Lamont-Arvin

area, told us about the improvements in working conditions since the advent of the UFW, including field toilets and sanitary drinking facilities. Wages had also improved dramatically. Ortez said that farm workers in Massachusetts and elsewhere in the East are "eight to ten years behind us, but they will catch up when they have a union."

After farewells to our guides and interpreters, we were soon winging our way back to Boston -- exhausted but smiling and resolute.

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The delegation's experiences in California confirmed the essential testimony of the UFW, and strengthened our resolve to mount an effective boycott. We believe the following interpretation of the labor struggle is an accurate account:

The Western Conference of the Teamsters' Union -- the mightiest and richest of labor unions, with 2.2 million members -- and the agribusinesses of California have joined ranks to defeat the small and poor United Farm Workers led by Cesar Chavez. The struggle is reminiscent of the legendary David and Goliath encounter, but the outcome is uncertain.

The United Farm Workers' successfully negotiated contracts with many grape growers in 1970. These contracts are now expiring, and many fruit and vegetable growers in California are signing agreements with the Teamsters. Apparently, most growers prefer to sign contracts with the Teamsters, since the latter have not pressed for sufficiently high wages, decent working and living conditions, or protection of the workers from pesticides, unlike the United Farm Workers.

Moreover, the Teamsters have maintained the antiquated and tyrannical labor contractor system, wherein the labor of migratory farm workers is bought and sold arbitrarily. In contrast, the United Farm Workers have established a union hiring hall based upon seniority and other fair procedures, though not without operational difficulties in some places.

The fundamental issue in the conflict between the Teamsters and the United Farm Workers is the moral right of farm workers to choose which union will represent them in negotiations with growers. Many growers in California have selected the teamsters to represent the workers and imposed it upon these men and women without consultations, let alone elections. A person's need to exercise some control over his or her destiny -- to manifest self-determination --

has been denied in these paternalistic acts. The California Supreme Court, in a 6-1 decision in 1972, has confirmed that Teamsters and growers have engaged in "the ultimate form of favoritism" through these "sweetheart contracts." The Court acknowledged that a majority of farm workers would prefer to be presented by the UFW. Similarly, a poll of approximately 1000 workers by Congressman Roybal of California and other prominent civic and religious leaders discovered that 795 preferred the UFW, 80 the Teamsters, and 78 no union. The UFW justifiably has requested secret ballot elections to determine the will of those who will be either the beneficiaries or victims of union-management negotiations.

Organizational power to advance the needs and rights of an oppressed minority is at stake here. The empowerment of the Chicano population is largely dependent, for the present at least, upon the survival of the United Farm Workers.

Economically, a 15 or 20% decline in grape -- or lettuce -- consumption will be sufficient to cut into growers' profits and pressure them into holding elections to determine the will of their workers.