

DICK MEISTER


BY now, I suppose you've heard a great deal about that strike in the vineyards around delano, down in kern county. And, if I've been listening right, you've been getting quite a load of mis-information...

DISTORTED reports from partisans...designed, not to inform you, but to enlist your support...to twist the facts, consciously or unconsciously, as a way to further the cause...

OR reports from those who are trying to tell the ^{WHOLE} truth, but whose enthusiasm far outstrips their knowledge and understanding of the farm labor situation...or whose wishful thinking has badly obscured their vision.

NOW, please don't get me wrong. I'm certainly not attacking these people. They've done a very good job of lining up support for the strike. And that, after all, ^{is} ~~is~~ and should be, their main goal... a very noble goal.

AND I, too, hope you will join in support of the strikers. They need it, and you could hardly find a worthier cause. But, in return, I think you're entitled to a clearer picture of just what is really going on.

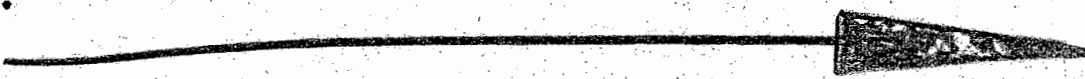


LET'S start with the basics. First, the strike area. We're talking about roughly four-hundred-square-miles of rich vineyard land in northern kern and southern tulare county. In approximately the center lies delano, the little town that serves as strike headquarters. Delano is about three-hundred miles south of here, along highway ninety-nine in the san joaquin valley.

WITHIN that four-hundred-square-mile-area, strikes have been declared at something like thirty vineyards. The vineyard owners, in most cases, are big, wealthy operators...dominated by the di giorgio corporation and schenley industries, who own the biggest chunks of land in the strike area.

A GOOD part of california's wine and table grapes is cultivated in the area. And the men who own the land pocket a good part of the one-hundred-seventy-five-million-dollars or so that the state's grape crop brings in every year.

THE five-thousand men and women who work in their vineyards aren't so fortunate. Their pay is extremely low by any standards. But exactly how low is difficult to determine. The rate varies, depending on which grower they work for, what sort of work they're doing, their experience, and the like. Currently, the basic wage scale is one-dollar-and-twenty-cents-an-hour...although through piece-rate bonuses some workers can make more at certain times of the year.




~~GROWERS~~, in fact, will tell you that most of their workers make far above the basic rate. The strikers deny it, of course. But neither side can really prove its case. Nor is there any way to settle the argument over the far more meaningful figure of how much the workers earn on an annual basis.

STRIKERS say the yearly earnings average less than two-thousand-dollars. Growers, while providing no figures of their own, contend that the annual figure is much higher than this.

BUT the precise figure, as significant as it may be, really isn't all that important. You need only look at how the vineyard workers live, and how their employers live, to grasp the crucial point in this argument.

AROUND delano, the farm workers live in rural slum conditions. The conditions aren't nearly as bad as they are in some of california's other rich farming areas. But they're poverty conditions nevertheless.

THE workers' employers live in the usual upper middle-class surroundings enjoyed by growers throughout the state. And, of course, the corporate executives, bankers and the like who really control the growers, ^{... THEY} live as well, or better, in the suburbs of san francisco and los angeles.



THIS disparity has existed for years, and in farm areas all over the state. For farm workers have never had the weapons to force growers to treat them any better than the growers wanted to treat them.

THE basic need, then, has not been just to raise farm wages to this level or that...though god knows that has been a great, great need...the basic need has been rather to give farm workers the power to stand up to their employers as something approaching equals.

AND the best way, perhaps the only way, to gain this power for the workers is unionization. The law, however, does not require growers to recognize unions. And it allows them to engage in the sort of union-busting that was so familiar in urban centers before the labor laws of the 1930s were enacted.

UNIONS themselves have been unable, in many cases, and unwilling, in far too many others, to force growers to bargain with their employees, to do what the law says they do not have to do.

WHY, then, did the unions make their move in delano? Why a strike in the vineyards? There are three principal reasons, I think. One lies in the person of an unusual leader named cesar chavez. Another reason involves ~~the~~ the civil rights movement. The third reason stems from a foolish miscalculation by the grape growers.

LET'S go into that third reason first. For some years now, the grape growers in the delano area have ~~NOT~~ hired imported mexican braceros, ^{BUT} ~~as have so many other growers...including~~ the growers ^{SOME OF} in the areas ~~IMMEDIATELY~~ adjacent to their vineyards *have.*

THUS the delano growers ignored the government rulings last year that any grower who wished to ~~continue importing~~ ^{IMPORT} mexicans must first offer local workers at least a-dollar-forty-cents-an-hour. Neighboring growers, still wanting mexican help, did make such offers. So, quite naturally, the delano workers asked their employers to make them the same offer. The delano growers turned them down.

AND there you have the basis for the strike. If the delano growers had raised their wages to a-dollar-forty-an-hour, just twenty cents an hour more...if they had honored the requests for a raise, it's extremely doubtful that the strike would have been called...or, indeed, that the workers would have listened to such a call.

^(OF COURSE...) BUT the strike was called, on september eighth of last year, by the agricultural workers organizing committee. This criminally under-financed and ineptly led af of l-cio organization had called--and lost--many strike before, however...and at first there appeared to be little hope that it could accomplish anything in delano either. But there were some special circumstances in delano, which have since raised hopes higher than they have been in any farm labor strike for some years.


FOR one, there is the nature of the organizing committee's membership in the vineyard area. It's composed almost entirely of local filipinos...long-time residents who perform most of the skilled work of packing grapes for market. Unlike other farm workers which the af of l-cio has attempted to organize, they are not migrants, drifting from area to area. They live in one place, making organization so much easier.

AND the committee's members have worked with each other for years. They're old friends and neighbors...a tightly-knit community. This provides the essential unity which has been lacking in so many previous farm strikes.

AND the af of l-cio has wisely left day-to-day leadership of the committee in the hands of a local organizer who knows his members well...a very able man named larry itlliong.

WHAT really has raised hopes, however, is not the actions of the organizing committee, but those of a second organization which joined the strike two weeks after it was called...the independent national farm workers association. This group is composed almost entirely of mexican-americans who, along with filipinos, dominate delano's farm work force.

LIKE the af of l-cio's organizing committee, the association's members are almost all local residents. And the association is even more of a community organization than is the committee.




THE director of the farm workers association, cesar chavez, had skillfully forged the group into a tightly-knit organization during three years of hard work. Then, when the right moment came, he led his members out on strike.

THEY immediately drew the active support of student, civil rights and church groups. Thanks to the nature of the Chavez group, these supporters saw the strike as something more than just a labor dispute in the hands of an af of l-cio which they had good reason to mistrust. They saw it ^(IN PART) as a move to bring mexican-americans into the mainstream of the civil rights struggle.

THIS is what makes the strike different than most of those of the past in agriculture...this alliance between two closely-knit community groups and imaginative, influential outsiders. For it has given the strikers an unusual unity and staying power, and armed them with some new tactics.

BUT what else has it accomplished, beyond keeping the strike going long enough to convince the skeptics and the faint-hearted in other unions to throw in their support...to ^{BEYOND BRINGING} wide public attention and support to bear on the battle...What has ^{THE STRIKE} done beyond raising ~~the~~ hopes to unusual heights?

~~IT~~
ACTUALLY, ~~IT~~ has done little else. For the strike has not even begun to inflict the financial damage that must be inflicted on growers if they are to give in to the strikers' demands.



ALTHOUGH growers are even more prone to ~~gross~~ exaggeration than the strike supporters, they are essentially correct when they say that the strike so far has been little more than an irritation to them. They harvested a record crop this summer, and no amount of talk by the strikers can explain that away.

PERHAPS, as the strikers contend, the growers did it with huge crews of inexperienced workers brought in from outside the strike area. I doubt it, since perhaps the wildest exaggeration of all in the strike claims is the assertion of the unions that they have two to four thousand men and women on strike. They have not even approached such a figures.

IN any case, the grape crop was harvested this summer. And the pruning of vines now under way also will get done. Growers need far fewer workers for this than they do during harvests. And they've got them, whatever the source.

AND, let's be honest. That ~~kind~~ consumers boycott of the products of Schenley industries--the owner of the second largest vineyard holdings in the strike area... that ~~is~~ ^{SCHENLEY} boycott ~~is~~ ~~is~~ is not going to get very far.

IT may, in fact, prove ^{EXTREMELY} troublesome to the strikers. For it already has begun to loosen the tenuous alliance between the af of l-cio and the farm workers association.



EXCEPT in its fields, schenley is a one-hundred percent union operation. And the af of l-cio's distillery workers union, for one, is not taking kindly to a boycott called against the wines and liquors whose production earns its members their living.

THIS is ~~the~~ the major problem facing the strikers...the need for far more cooperation and trust between the three groups conducting the strike--the farm workers association, the af of l-cio, and the civil rights, church and student organizations.

SURELY, the great potential is still there in delano. And so is evidence that the strikers can hold out for the months and months it will take ^{IF THEY ARE TO GAIN} ~~to~~ concrete successes...to draw to their ranks the workers they need...to increase their irritation of growers to the point where it would be alot easier for the growers to recognize their unions.

BUT they must rid the strike of its hit-or-miss quality. The three groups in the strike must join together in a clear, unified battle plan. And they must expand such joint operations beyond delano. Otherwise, their struggle will never amount to anything more than just a source of long-range hopes.

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