

KQED/TV NEWSROOM SCRIPT – 1973

STRIKE IN THE VINEYARDS -- AGAIN

By Dick Meister

The battle has been raging for a week now in the 400 square miles of vineyards that fan out from the little Kern County town of Delano – another strike by the United Farm Workers Union, but this one vastly more significant than the others. For this time the union is fighting for its very survival.

It's a tough, grueling fight. Strikers assemble before dawn, then move out to confront non-strikers with demands that they, too, join "la huelga" – first at the dilapidated housing camps where they live, then at the vineyards, where strikers spend most of the day, in 100 degree heat, watched closely, from air and ground, by deputy sheriffs, highway patrolmen, private policemen, by growers, and, in some cases, by "guards" from the Teamsters Union.

The struck growers – there are 29 in all, and they grow nearly half the country's entire grape crop – are those who gave the farm workers union its first great victory, by signing contracts in 1970 after five years of strikes and boycotts, but who refused to renew those contracts when they expired last week.

The growers said the union was demanding too much this time. Besides, the Teamsters Union was standing by, offering growers the tempting prospect of signing contracts on lesser terms.

Growers elsewhere have done just this – so many that the Farm Workers Union, which just two years had 280 contracts covering 40,000 members, now has but a dozen contracts, covering 6500 members, and is in danger of losing its standing as a union if it does not win the fight in Delano.

The deputies did not make any moves against those "guards" with baseball bats and sticks whom the grower summoned from the Teamsters' local headquarters. But there have been dozens of arrests of pickets for trespassing into vineyards, lots of rock throwing ... damage done to the vehicles of workers and strikers, and even one shooting – of an 18-year-old picket who was wounded in the shoulder while driving away from a picket line in his car.

And there is concern on both sides that it is going to get a lot more violent – a concern shared by the Kern County sheriff, who has put half of his 200-man force on vineyard duty, 12 hours a day, six days a week.

The strikers, most of them Mexican-American, claim the deputies are there as an army for the growers who, like most deputies, are not Mexican-American. Strikers see the deputies' role as one of harassing and intimidating pickets and those inside the vineyards who might want to come outside and join them. The sheriff, however, has another view...

Sheriff Dodge: “They have actually ran into the fields and scattered the crews... run every crew out of the fields... and these people, some of them, have armed themselves against their own will.”

Emotions, at any rate, are running high, and strike leader Cesar Chavez, one of the most celebrated adherents of non-violent action, is admittedly having a rough time keeping his troops in line.

Teamster officials have nevertheless sought contract negotiations with the Delano growers. They contend the Teamsters have membership petitions from an “overwhelming majority” of the vineyard workers – based, they contend on unhappiness over the contracts negotiated by Chavez.

Chavez denied the claims, and he has his own explanation for the teamster presence: “The only reason they’re in here is because the growers invited them... and they’ll have to negotiate with us.”

Chavez claims the growers refused to concede anything in the pre-strike negotiations because Teamsters were waiting in the “back room” with contracts that would weaken the militant farm workers by putting them into a conservative union controlled by others, and strengthen the growers by not requiring them to get their help from a union-controlled hiring hall.

The hiring hall operations have been troublesome. But the union sees it as part of a temporary price that must be paid if inexperienced farm workers are to learn to run their own affairs.

Particular issues are beside the point at this stage, in any case. The question now is whether the strike will become strong enough, as the harvest goes into full swing, to force a resumption of union-grower negotiations.

It appears that the strikers will get financial support to keep going for some time, anyway – mainly from the AFL-CIO, the primary source of strike benefits of \$75 a week which have helped bring out many vineyard workers who previously could simply not afford to strike.

In the meantime, President George Meany of the AFL-CIO is working to get an agreement from the Teamsters to leave the vineyards, and thus greatly increase the pressure on growers to settle.

One thing is certain, however. There will be a grape boycott to go along with the strike, though growers deny that it can become as strong as the boycott which forced them to negotiate those first contracts in 1970.

Perhaps. But Chavez’ forces already have begun lining up the outside support that could upset that prediction.