

DICK MEISTER

I WAS priveleged to watch. in fresno ~~last~~^{LAST} weekend, an extremely fascinating event, and tonight I'd like to try to share it with you. What I saw in fresno was the birth of a union ... the putting together of a farm workers' union, for the very first time.

IT was the first constitutional convention of what is now knpwn officially as the united farm workers of america .. the UFW ... complete with elected officers .. a constitution .. and official objectives .. the main one being simply to survive in the face of serious attempts by farm employers and the teamsters union to destroy the infant UFW.

THERE was plenty of evidence at the convention, however, that the UFW will survive .. partly because of the fundation laid down by convention delegates ... partly because of thw power OF THE SUPPORTERS ~~of the union~~ .. but mainly, I think, because of the union's members themselves.

THEY are incredibly determined, as the convention clearly showed. Just being there was rough for most of the 350 delegates, because they were rank and file ^{FARM} workers and so ~~were not~~

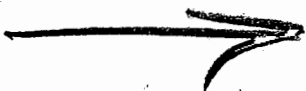


MOST delegates to union conventions these days are union officials who come with fancy clothes and fat expense accounts .. ~~and~~ listen~~ing~~ inattentively to a few speeches, adopt a few pro forma resolutions, and quickly retire to the nearest bar for solcializing.

we're like those of the other unions. They came in their work clothes, and
 BUT these delegates had very little money. They did not have a convention hotel with hospitality suites. They stayed, instead, at the houses of local farm workers. And they ate simple, sparse meals supplied by local churches and served in the convention hall -- sometimes while they continued debate.

There was
 AND the debate ⁴⁸ hours of it in all, in spanish and english, in just three days, including a final session that went 22 hours straight, from 830 am sunday to 625 a-m monday .. presided over by cesar chavez, who subsisted mainly on g_lons of carrot juice, and by vice president dolores huerta, who had her tenth child just two weeks ago.

YET most delegates stayed alert -- and ready, at the drop of a "viva," to chant slogans, to clap rhythmically, to sing -- often along with joan baez -- to laugh, to dance, and to pray sincerely .. opening the last session, for example, with an ecumenical mass for the farm workers who have died or been killed in their eight-year struggle for farm unionization.



THE^{re} was, most especially, juan de la cruz, the 60-year-old union member who was shot by a sniper near a picket line in the delano area this summer, and about whom joan baez wrote a ballad, which she sang during the mass.

THE delegates put together a union as unusual as the convention that fashioned it. Like the union itself, the nine-member executive board ~~is~~^{was} dominated by chicanos, starting with president chavez.

BUT it also includes a black worker, mack lyons, who works in the citrus groves owned by coca-cola in florida ... a philipino, phillip veracruz, who was an officer of ~~the~~ of the short-lived farm unions which presided the ~~ufw~~ -- the national farm workers union and the agricultural workers organizing committee ... a woman, dolores huerta ... and a jew, marshall ganz, the son of a brooklyn rabbi, who has been one of chavez' main strategists for several years.

THE officers are required to work full-time at their union jobs at pay of only \$5 a week plus room and board.

THAT'S the same wage paid union staff members, and to members of the union's boycott committees around the ~~country~~^{AND CANADA} Those people were made eligible for union membership, though not required to pay dues.



FARM workers will pay dues only when working, at a rate of two percent of their wages per week. That is a major constitutional provision which was adopted because of widespread complaints over the previous requirement that members pay dues year-round, whether working or not, and ~~requiring them to~~ ^{Due. They} pay dues owed for periods of unemployment, before they could be dispatched to jobs from ~~the~~ union hiring halls.

THE new constitution~~s~~ also pledges the UFW to act "only by and through totally non-violent means" and says members must "reject the use of violence, in any form for any purpose whatsoever."

IT also creates a public review board of three outsiders to decide the cases of members who charge they have been unfairly disciplined by the union. ^{MEY} ⁰⁰⁰ ^{will} ^{only} ~~that's a provision that appears in the~~
~~constitution of the united auto workers union, that's another~~
~~as is~~

one other union's from the constitution - De

DELEGATES were very careful in adopting the unusual constitution. They took nothing for granted. And they insisted on having the final say in everything. A good ^{SIGN} ~~example~~ of this, and of the fact that farm workers have been denied ~~the~~ education ~~in~~ and experience in self-government ~~is~~ came when one delegate demanded to know why chavez had decided to run the convention according to roberts rules of order.




WHO is this roberts, the delegate wanted to know. Where's he from, and why should we follow his rules? And the delegates were not satisfied until chavez patiently explained that roberts' rules were like the rules of the road -- "so we can all drive in the same direction," he told them, "without crashing into one another."

DELEGATES were as careful in adopting resolutions. Most were concerned with the problems of farm workers. But a few showed us how the farm workers view the outside world. Those condemned the junta in chile .. the marcos dictatorship in the philippines ... and the oppression of black workers in south africa. Chavez, showing a healthy perspective of such resolutions that is rare at union conventions, complimented delegates for knocking off three governments, as he said. "If we could do that with growers," he added, "we'd be in fine shape."

ON subjects closer to home, the largely mexican-american assemblage ^{ADOPTED A RESOLUTION} carefully praised philipino farm workers for starting the strike in 1965 ^{DATE} which led to creation of the union .. which many philipino workers have ^{SINCE} come to resent ...

THEY also voted against seeking unemployment insurance from growers. That's a standard provision in ^{THEY} teamsters' farm contracts, ^f but the delegates said it is ~~is~~ meaningless because ^{of} of rules which keep most farm workers from taking advantage of it. They preferred to get more pay in lieu of in insurance payments and to press for including farm workers in the state unemployment insurance system which would benefit them all.

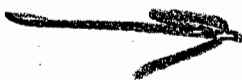


DELEGATES also defeated a resolution ~~was called~~ ^{CALLING} for the end of piece rate payments which, as the measure stated, "are used by employers to play off one group of workers against another and increase profits at the expense of the workers' income and health."

ABANDONING of ~~S~~ piece rates has long been a goal of agricultural reformers. But as with other reformers elsewhere, they found that the people they want to help do not necessarily want ~~the~~ what ~~they~~ ^{They} say they need .. in this case younger members of the union who feel that they can make more under a piece rate system because of their strength and speed. They prevailed in the convention vote. But wait till they get older, as Chavez remarked in private after the vote, they'll be slow and tired and ^{then} they'll want to be paid ^{STRICTLY} by the hour.

ANOTHER interesting resolution committed the union to training young farm workers to be reporters for the union newspaper, rather than following the standard union practice of hiring journalists from outside.

IT was typical of this convention, by the way, that the delegates rejected a motion to refer ~~the~~ some of the resolutions to their executive committee for action. This is common at union conventions when they are running late. But though this motion came at 230 a-m on the last day of the convention, the delegates would have none of it.



CHAVEZ' handling of the convention, incidentally, was as skilled a performance as his handling of the union generally. He sought -- and got -- full participation, making certain that the unsophisticated delegates knew what was transpiring, and making sure they had a real voice in the decisions rather than just being rubber stamps in the manner of delegates to most union conventions.

CHAVEZ did not speak at all on the resolutions, and hardly at all ~~at~~ the debate on the constitution. This is not to say ~~that~~ he did not engage in ~~any~~ maneuvering, however. His aides were all over the convention floor lining up votes when the need arose -- especially when a serious challenge arose to the candidacy of the lone philipino on the executive board, phillip veracruz.

IN stalling for time while the votes for veracruz were being rounded up, chavez prompted one of the most unusual displays of ~~any~~ ^{the} ~~convention, since the lean, hungry and informal~~ ~~days of the industrial unions in the 1930s and 40s~~

A DELEGATE from texas arose to complain that some people were smoking scab cigaretes -- meaning those produced by the reynolds tobacco company. So chavez had sergeants-at-arms go around the floor collecting ~~the~~ packs of the offending cigaretes .. tossed them on the floor in front of the podium .. and ~~asked~~ ^{asked} all candidates for office, including himself, to "show their good trade union spirit by stamping in these scab cigaretes." Which they did for some minutes, avcompained by guitar music, and the spirited excitement of delegates .. though they were in their 14th hour ^{of that} ~~of~~ ^{Days} ~~of~~ ~~convention sessions, that day.~~

OF the constitutional provisions that were adopted, one of the most important comitts the union to, quote, protect the moral and legal rights of agricultural laborers to exert economic pressure on recalcitrant employers, including the unrestricted right to strike, boycott and engage in other non-violent activities calculated to secure union recognition and collective bargaining agreements."

THIS constitutional insistence on the "unrestricted right to boycott" is going to greatly complicate attempts to reach a compromise between the UFW and the teamsters, since ~~the~~ teamster leaders say they will not abandon farm organizing unless the UFW quite boycotting, because the boycotted produce is handled by teamster truck drivers.



THE boycott provision also seems to complicate attempts to get farm workers covered by federal labor laws which, while protecting workers' rights to organize, prohibit them from boycotting.

SOME prominent supporters of the union promised, however, to back legislation that, while granting full union rights to farm workers, would exempt them from the prohibition against the boycott. The prohibition was put into the law only after most industrial unions had managed to establish themselves, and the ~~farm workers (UFW) and its support~~ reason^s that farm workers should have the same opportunity to use every possible weapon in ~~the arsenal~~ established, especially since the other major weapon, the strike, is not nearly as effective in agriculture as it is in other industries.

AMONG those who backed the union in these legislative demands was jack henning, the head of the state afl-cio in california and one of the most influential lobbyists in sacramento, and senator edward kennedy, who was a principal convention speaker.

KENNEDY promised delegates the same full support as had been given the farm workers union by both his brothers, and he drew something at least approaching the warm, overwhelming response which his brothers once elicited from similar audiences.



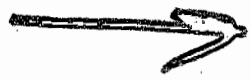
DELEGATES heard from many other political figures, most via congratulatory telegrams. One of them, mayor thomas bradley of los angeles, said he would nominate chavez for a nobel peace prize. But there was no greeting, incidentally, from mayor alioto of san francisco, a man who ~~has~~ boast^s/of his support for labor but who apparently fears offending his teamster friends.

AND PLEDGES OF SUPPORT

THERE also were greetings from some of the country's leading churchmen, including roman catholic bishops and the president of the protestant national council of churches.

AND there were many messages from prominent labor leaders, several of them delivered personally. Henning spoke. So did ~~leonard~~ leonard woodcock of the united auto workers .. paul hall of the seafarers .. and jam herman of the international longshoremens and warehousemens union.

Reuter, LIKE his predecessor ~~woodcock~~ as president of the auto workers, *Winton* woodcock promised "total and continuous support" to the ufw until, like the uaw, it is "strong and powerful and can deal on equal terms with large and powerful corporations." Woodcock pledged to continue sending \$10,000 a week to the union, and to cooperate with the afl-cio in helping the ufw and fighting, not just growers but also the teamster leaders who have so successfully raided the UFW's members.

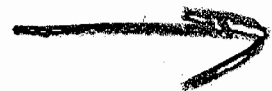


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~~Hall~~ Hall of the seafarers spoke for president george meany of the afl-cio, as well as for himself and his union. And he, too, promised continued support which, in the case of the afl-cio, already has amounted to several million dollars. Hall was particularly bitter about teamster leaders for deciding, as he put it, "to fink out on this organization." Hall called the director of the teamsters' farm organizing drive, bill grami, "an unmitigated fink whom god himself will never help."

HERMAN, a member of the ilwu's executive board who was speaking in part for ilwu president harry bridges, was almost as harsh on the teamsters, despite the close alliance which the ilwu has with that union. "If that alliance must continue by virtue of degrading this union," herman declared, "th~~an~~ that alliance will be disowned."


LONGSHOREMEN were key supporters of the grape boycott ~~that~~ that ~~brought~~ brought the farm workers their first ~~contracts~~ contracts with ~~grape~~ grape growers ~~--~~ -- until court rulings came down to keep them from refusing to handle grape shipments. And now, herman told the convention, "our union is committed to take another look, the law notwithstanding, at what we have to do to stop the grapes on those boats, in some manner, shape or form."



IT is interesting that woodcock, hall and herman were active when their unions also were weak and just getting started, and so they had some important lessons to convey -- especially herman, whose union, the ilwu, ~~has~~ organized all the farm workers in hawaii.

THE united farm workers, on the other hand, currently represents only about 18,000 of the country's other three million farm workers. It holds only a dozen union contracts. It has a bank balance of less than \$200,000 and is spending money far faster than it comes in. It has no law to protect it in trying to organize more workers and sign more contracts. It is fighting the country's largest union, the teamsters; some of its most powerful corporate interests, and the administrations of both the state and federal governments.

YET it had the audacity to hold a constitutional convention, and to act very much like a union that is here to stay. And I think ~~it's~~ ^{THAT'S} right. The union's base is small, but it is solidly rooted, for the union ~~is~~ put together in fresno is a democratic rank and file union, to be built and ~~run~~ ^{DIRECTED} by and for its members. It is racially mixed, committed to non-violence, and led by one of the most extraordinary men of our time.



THAT combination would seem to be unbeatable, if only because it has drawn such powerful outside support ... from political figures, the churches, other unions and, most importantly, from the general public.

FOR make no mistake, the boycott is still the union's main weapon, and it will take alot of people refusing to eat alot of grapes and lettuce to win it for the united farm workers.

THE union will test its ~~S~~ strength very soon, in an intensified nationwide boycott against grapes and lettuce as well as against the wines of gallo, guild and franzia. It will be tested, too, in new discussions with teamster leaders, where ~~union~~ ^{UFW} officials will demand, as their new constitution says, "jurisdiction over ALL farm workers in the united states."

~~AND they will get it, eventually. I've already explained why I think they will get it, so let me conclude with the union's explanation as to why ^{WE MUST} ~~it should~~ have a genuine farm workers union. The statement is from the preamble to the farm workers' new constitution, and it ^{PUTS} ~~states~~ the case as eloquently as anything you'll ever ^{COME ACROSS} ~~read or hear~~ ~~STATEMENT TO READ~~.~~

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