

LONG BEACH
PRESS-TELEGRAM

Comment

The call goes out again: boycott grapes

By Dick Meister

It's time again to stop eating grapes. It's time, once more, to heed a cry of "boycott!" from President Cesar Chavez of the United Farm Workers Union and other UFW advocates. The last time people did that — 17 million of them between 1968 and 1975 — it led to enactment in California of the first law anywhere to grant farm workers the union rights most non-farm workers won a half-century ago under federal law, and raised high hopes for enactment of similar laws elsewhere.

The workers, however, have won nothing in the decade since then. On the contrary, the rights they won through California's pioneering Agricultural Labor Relations Act are being seriously eroded. Gov. George Deukmejian, making good on his promises to grower interests that put more than \$1 million into his election campaign, has slashed by almost 30 percent — nearly \$3 million — the already sparse budget of the Agricultural Labor Relations Board that administers the act. He also has reduced the ALRB staff of less than 200 people by one-fourth and has appointed an anti-union grower ally, former GOP State Assemblyman David Sterling, as the board's general counsel and thus chief enforcement officer.

"The law that guarantees our right to organize has been shut down," declares Chavez. "It doesn't work anymore."

Chavez may be exaggerating — but certainly not by much. The farm labor board has been taking months, and sometimes years, to rule on unfair labor practice complaints, even after they are upheld by ALRB field examiners. The board is taking almost as long to set up union representation

elections and certify the results.

Most of the complaints are against growers who refuse to bargain or reach contract agreements with the UFW despite their employees' votes for UFW representation, who fire union sympathizers, deny union organizers access to their workers or otherwise violate the law.

The most prominent of those charged with violations are the state's grape growers, currently the subject of some 400 unsettled unfair labor practice complaints. They were the first to grant union contracts to the UFW, but virtually all of them have long since refused to renew the contracts, originally signed by 140 growers.

Now, says Chavez, "it's time for us to place our faith in the court of last resort — the grape boycott that symbolized the farm workers' struggle in the past."

The UFW's hope is that the economic pressures of a boycott will force growers to press Deukmejian to properly enforce the law.

Generating sufficient pressure obviously is not going to be easy. Even Chavez concedes that the UFW isn't likely to draw the heavy support — 10 to 12 percent of the adult population — cited by opinion pollsters during the union's previous boycotts. But he says the UFW is certain to get 3 to 5 percent of the public behind the new effort, and that will be enough.

Chavez is banking on the new boycott reviving public enthusiasm, especially among "many of those who heped us before when they were young students and who are now in positions of power in their communities — as elected officials and religious leaders, for instance — and who will give us access to a lot of new people they have access to. We made a lot of

friends and they are still out there."

The UFW expects to reach its old friends and make new ones in part through the "high-tech" methods used in political campaigns. The union has been feeding census data into computers at UFW headquarters that will enable it to pinpoint, in direct mail pitches, members of the traditionally liberal groups most likely to help — blue collar union members, racial and ethnic minorities, young college-educated professionals and others.

The old-fashioned tried and true methods are not being neglected, however. Chavez has been touring the country in recent months to meet with groups of supporters on college campuses and elsewhere, lead a few low-key demonstrations and appear on talk shows. He already has won boycott endorsements from the city councils of Boston and Detroit and from Mayor Raymond Flynn of Boston, Gov. Michael Dukakis of Massachusetts, the Massachusetts State Legislature and, among others, the AFL-CIO's national executive council.

Although the UFW has been talking about the boycott for almost 10 months, the effort actually is just getting started. But that doesn't disturb Chavez, whose major weapons always have included patience. He is confident, he says, that farm workers eventually will attract enough public support to win this latest of their constant struggles to drag agricultural employers and the employers' government allies into the 20th century.

Dick Meister, a San Francisco writer, is co-author of "A Long Time Coming: The Struggle to Unionize America's Farm Workers."