

Viewpoints

Can a Grape Boycott Succeed Again?

In the '70s, a grape boycott yielded union protection for farm workers in California. But today's conservative political climate means a tougher struggle for Cesar Chavez and his allies.

By Dick Melster

It's time again to stop eating grapes; it's time, once more, to head a cry of "boycott!" — according to Cesar Chavez, president of the United Farm Workers, and other UFW advocates.

The last time people did that — some 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 nonfarm 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 by the anti-labor forces that are battering unions and union members all over the country.

That, in essence, is why the UFW is once again calling for a nationwide boycott of California grapes. It is simply attempting to keep — if not to get back — what it had won previously, a defensive position that has become common among unions in recent years.

The UFW's earlier struggle was extremely difficult. But farm workers face perhaps an even more difficult task this time than they did back in the 1960s and '70s. Those were the days of the civil rights movement, of the war on poverty, of Vietnam War protests, and of pro-labor Democrats in the White House and in the California governor's office.



Newsday Graphic

Cesar Chavez, president of the United Farm Workers



But these are the days of the "me generation," self-centered "yuppies," and of Ronald Reagan and George Deukmejian, the Republican governor of California who is as staunch a union foe as Reagan.

Deukmejian has made good on his promises to the anti-union interests that contributed more than \$1 million to the election campaign that brought him into office in 1982, succeeding a Chavez ally, Democrat Edmund G. (Jerry) Brown Jr.

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Deukmejian has slashed by almost 30 percent, or nearly \$3 million, the already sparse budget of the Agricultural Labor Relations Board that administers the farm labor act. He also has reduced the board's staff of less than 200 people by one-fourth and has appointed a grower ally, former GOP State Assemblé David Sterling, as the board's general counsel.

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

Chavez may be exaggerating — but 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 the board's field examiners. There have been similar delays in setting up union representation elections and certifying the results.

Most of the complaints are against growers who refuse to bargain or reach contract agreement with the UFW despite their employees' votes for UFW representation. Other complaints accuse growers of firing union sympathizers, denying union organizers access to their workers or otherwise violating the law.

The overwhelmed farm labor board has a backlog of more than 1,000 such complaints. At least as many other complaints have been dismissed or settled arbitrarily by Sterling, whose post gives him the power to decide if a complaint will be dismissed, delayed, settled administratively or brought to the board.

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. Some grape producers were, in 1970, the first employers 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 pressure

of a boycott will force growers to press Deukmejian to properly enforce the law.

Generating sufficient pressure obviously is not going to be easy. The union has been losing members steadily, largely because of its inability to protect workers' legal rights, and now represents probably no more than 20 percent of California's 200,000 or so farm workers.

The UFW nevertheless managed to put more than \$750,000 into the election campaigns of friendly members of the state legislature's Democratic majority over the past two years. But though the legislators have fended off attempts by pro-grower Republicans to weaken the law, they have not mounted strong attacks against the pro-grower manner in which the law is being administered.

The legislators' reluctance to attack stems in part from a lack of public pressure on them. That,

in turn, stems from a lack of dramatic, highly visible UFW activities such as the strikes and boycotts that brought the union the broad public support it used to win the farm labor law. The victory caused the UFW to necessarily lose its standing as a penniless outsider, join organized labor's not-so-popular establishment and shift to quiet legal and political activity. Even Chavez concedes that the UFW isn't likely to draw the heavy support — 10 to 12 percent of the adult population — cited by 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 to hurt the growers economically.

Chavez is banking on the new boycott reviving public enthusiasm, especially among "those who helped us before when they were young students and who are now in position 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 modern 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, Mayor Raymond Flynn of Boston, Gov. Michael Dukakis of Massachusetts, the Massachusetts State Legislature and 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.

They'd better hurry, though. We've only got 16 years to go in the century, and they're still arguing in the Labor Department and in Congress over whether growers should be required to provide their employees with toilets and fresh drinking water.

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