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# Perspective

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## A study in union erosion

By Dick Meister

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It's a rapidly changing and fickle society we live in. Want proof? Look no further than what's happened to the United Farm Workers Union.

Just 10 years ago, a Louis Harris Poll showed the UFW to be one the most heavily supported organizations in U.S. history.

Fully 12 percent of the country's adult population—that's 17 million people—had stopped buying table grapes because of the boycott called by the UFW, which was trying to force grape owners in its home state of California to bargain with their workers for union contracts.

Thanks to the heavy pressures of the grape boycott and related boycotts of lettuce and Gallo wines, the UFW won a collective bargaining law in California in 1975. That forced all of the state's growers to grant union rights to their workers and seemingly guaranteed that the UFW would win similar laws from other states and, eventually, from the federal government, which granted union rights to nonfarm workers way back in 1935.

Yet today, the law in California is barely working and there are no real prospects that union rights will be extended to farm workers anywhere else. What's worse for the UFW, there seems to be relatively little public support for the union's attempts to reverse the drastic shift in its fortunes.

The shift came with the election of Republican George Deukmejian to succeed Democrat Jerry Brown as governor in 1982. Deukmejian, who had heavy grower backing, severely cut back the budget, staffing and operations of the agency that's supposed to hold union representation elections, oversee union contract negotiations, investigate

alleged violations of workers' rights and otherwise enforce the law.

The UFW has tried to get the state legislature's Democratic majority to force Gov. Deukmejian to change his anti-union ways, but the legislators have not been under pressure from their constituents to do that.

So the union has been trying to win support for a new grape boycott, hoping that will force growers to get their ally in the governor's office to administer the law properly.

But it's been more than a year since all the call for a new boycott was first raised by UFW President Cesar Chavez. It's been almost as long since letters went out to some 30 million potential supporters and since Chavez and others began holding rallies in major cities. All that, yet grape sales have not noticeably declined.

Opinion polls show Chavez is as highly popular as ever, and certainly he is as eloquent as ever in pleading the cause of the farm worker. But neither he nor anyone else has been able to overcome the anti-unionism that other polls show as having hit all unions—and hit them hard—since the UFW's initial boycotts won it the legal rights that are now in jeopardy.

Farm workers are as desperately in need as ever of firm union rights, the essential weapon for improving their still generally miserable pay and working conditions, and a grape boycott once more seems to be the surest way of giving them that weapon.

But though the farm workers' need has not changed, popular opinion has changed. It clearly seems too much to expect, in these days of the "me generation," of self-centered "yuppies" and of President Ronald Reagan, that people actually would give up eating grapes for nothing more than helping the people who harvest their food, especially if it meant helping them secure the right of unionization.

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

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