

(SACRAMENTO)

Farm Labor Leader Ends his Fast

César Turned to his Ultimate Weapon

By Dick Meister

It was appalling, yet inspirational — the fast César Chávez finally ended last week after 36 days. Once more, he had put his health, if not his very life, at serious risk for a cause that is one of the most vital, but one of the most frequently neglected in U.S. history.

That, of course, is the need to guarantee a decent life to those who harvest the food that sustains us all.

Farm workers have had little choice but to accept the generally miserable pay and working conditions imposed on them by growers. Virtually every attempt to unionize them, going back to the 19th century, has failed.

The key exception has been the organizing drive of the United Farm Workers union, founded a quarter century ago by Chávez and a handful of followers. The UFW founders were aware that their most effective tool would be the boycott. Strikes alone wouldn't do it. There were too many desperate farm workers available to replace those who struck. Besides, nationwide demonstrations calling for stores to quit selling produce of growers who resisted the union's demands for bargaining rights would get the attention of unionists, political activists and others whose support was essential.

But Chávez felt that more was

needed, and he provided it by undertaking a 25-day fast in 1968. He wanted to focus national attention on the UFW's boycott of grapes, and on his insistence that frustrated UFW members not turn to the violence they were threatening.

That ordeal sent Chávez to a hospital, where he lay immobilized for three weeks; for most of the next eight months, he directed the union from a bed at home. But the UFW would never have won the pioneering union contracts eventually signed by California's grape growers had it not been for the fast that had provided an extreme example of sacrifice to farm workers while dramatically calling the attention of outsiders to their cause.

Four years later, César Chávez did it again. That time he fasted for 24 days, in part to focus attention on attempts in several states to, in effect, outlaw UFW boycotts. The fast, which apparently did permanent damage to Chávez's kidneys, was aimed primarily at recalling Gov. Jack Williams of Arizona for signing such a law. The recall drive failed, but the union came close enough to discourage grower allies in other states from trying to pass similar legislation.

The fast also drew attention to the UFW's boycott against lettuce growers in Arizona and elsewhere. Boycott pressure soon forced influential growers to sign union

contracts. That led in turn to the most important UFW victory of all — enactment in 1975 of California's Agricultural Labor Relations Act, the first law to grant union rights to farm workers. The law gave farm workers the right to decide whether or not they wished to belong to a union, and gave them a right to organize a union free from intimidation by employers.

The UFW had high hopes that the California law would lead to enactment of similar laws in other states and eventually to a federal law and widespread unionization of farm workers. But the California law has been virtually abandoned by the staunchly anti-union administration of Republican Gov. George Deukmejian.

The UFW is almost back where it started. It has relatively few contracts and its membership, once up to 100,000, is down to 15,000.

The UFW had hoped the grape

boycott it called four years ago would change that, by pressuring growers to get their ally in the governor's office to administer the law properly. For the past two years, the boycott has been aimed as well at forcing growers to quit using five of the most dangerous of the pesticides that organizers claim cause a minimum 400,000 cases of poisonings and 10,000 deaths each year among farm workers and consumers. The UFW also has demanded that growers set up joint testing programs with the union to determine the effects of other pesticides.

But since neither the growers nor the governor had budged, César Chávez turned once more to the ultimate weapon — himself.

He "upped the ante," as one of the farm worker's supporters said in the past. "And now, we're going to up the ante, too."

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