

Grape Strike Comes to the Coachella Valley

By STEVEN V. ROBERTS
Special to The New York Times

COACHELLA, Calif.—Dawn was slipping into the Coachella Valley, etching the ridges of the Chocolate Mountains in deep purple, as several cars rumbled along the dusty road and stopped next to a vast, green vineyard.

In the field, workers were bending to their task, plucking the lush bunches of waxy fruit from the low vines. The men, lean and brown, wore colorful bandanas under their straw hats. The women gave an eerie appearance in the white kerchiefs they tied around their faces, leaving only their eyes exposed to the scorching sun.

Picking Up the Cry

About a dozen people piled out of the cars, grabbed crudely made picket signs and lined up along the road. A short, elderly man waved a red flag with a black eagle in the center—the emblem of the United Farmworkers Organizing Committee. A loudspeaker started booming across the field toward the workers. Periodically, the demonstrators would pick up the cry, "Viva la huelga."

La huelga — the strike — had come to the Coachella Valley, 125 miles southeast

of Los Angeles, where the first grapes of the season are being harvested. It marked another phase in the organizing committee's campaign, now in its fourth year, to win recognition and labor contracts from the growers of California table grapes.

The strike here started late last month when the harvest began. Crews of pickets have been roaming the area every day, starting at 5 A.M., badgering workers to leave the fields and join the strike.

Little Interruption

Although the growers concede the strike is a "nuisance," they insist that few workers have left and that the crop is being gathered with little interruption.

The union contends that at least 600 workers have quit the harvest.

"I think we're hurting them, but it's hard to judge how much," said David Averbuck, the union's lawyer, as he sat in the strike headquarters, a shabby church building.

Mr. Averbuck estimated that there were 50,000 workers in the area, while only about 3,000 were needed to harvest the grapes. Many of these workers are Mexican. They hold "green cards," or

American residence visas, but live in Mexico, where living is cheaper. They commute almost 100 miles every day to Coachella.

The use of these workers to break a strike is prohibited by law. But the union contends that the law is not enforced.

"The source of labor around here is a bottomless pit. We can cause them headaches and make them go out and get new people, but there are just so many people."

Eight-Day March

Several weeks ago, the union staged an eight-day march from Coachella to the border to appeal to Mexican workers not to break the strike. Officials think the march had some effect, but not enough to make an appreciable difference.

The growers believe that their workers do not support the union. Milton Karahadian, a young college graduate, stood in the field he had recently taken over from his father and said:

"If my workers wanted me to sit down at the negotiating table, I would. But my work-

ers don't want union recognition. If they did, they would have walked out and joined the strike."

Some of Mr. Karahadian's workers disagree. One older man looked up from the wooden crate he was packing with plump grapes and said:

"I belong to the union but I'm working here because I have bills to pay. The union can't pay them and I can't work anywhere else. A lot of people like me are forced to do this. How can you stand on a picket line when your family is hungry! It's hard for me to work here when the union is out there picketing, but I can't help it."

Another problem facing the union is the large Filipino contingent—older men who were imported during the nineteen-twenties and know no life outside the farm labor camps.

"They don't have houses or families," explained Pete Velasco, a union organizer, "so if they go on strike, where are they going to live! They depend on the growers for a roof over their head."

Strike Began in 1965

Moreover, Mr. Velasco noted, wages have increased substantially since Cesar Chavez began the strike in the San Joaquin Valley, several hundred miles to the north, in September, 1965. Workers can now make between \$2 and \$3 an hour during harvest season and are less dissatisfied with their lot.

"Though we keep telling them that no matter what they get paid, those wages can drop to nothing and they will have no power to stop it," the organizer continued "Unless the union puts those wages and benefits into a contract, they will have no security."

The union has concentrated most of its efforts in the last year in promoting a nationwide boycott of table grapes. Even the growers concede that the tactic is working.

One local grower estimated that last year, the boycott reduced the price of grapes by as much as \$1 a box. A box of grapes now costs about \$7.50.

The Major Obstacles

There appear to be two major obstacles to a settlement:

¶The growers insist that they cannot pay higher wages and stay in business.

¶The growers remain deeply suspicious of Mr. Chavez and the union.

The union feels that the basic aim of the strike is neither money nor security, but freedom.

"One of our biggest problems is that these workers are so afraid of their employers, it's a real racial thing," explained Dolores Huerta, a union vice president. "If we can get them to overcome that fear, it's one of the biggest things we can do in terms of freeing people and giving them some dignity."

"The growers are property owners and upstanding members of the community, and the judges and the police and everybody else is on their side," added Robert Bustos, another union leader. "They're shocked when some little Mexican stands up to them."