

# Grape Boycott: Struggle Poses a Moral Issue

By STEVEN V. ROBERTS  
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PITTSBURGH—The frigid, steel-gray dawn was still hesitating about making an appearance one morning recently when several hundred demonstrators set out on a slow march through the cobblestone streets of Pittsburgh's wholesale produce market.

It was a motley group. There were housewives in well-tailored slacks and students in faded jeans, priests in Roman collars and blacks with Afro hair-do's, a few businessmen in conservative suits and a barrel-chested union leader. But they all had the same message — don't eat grapes.

After several hours the marchers gathered in front of St. Stanislaus, a grimy fortress of a church near the produce yards. Cesar Chavez, the slight, sad-eyed leader of the United Farm Workers Organizing Committee, mounted the steps and began to speak:

## Emotion Two Ways

"I'm proud that we were able to have a peaceful march. Anyone will respond to our cause if we do it in that spirit. We've worked hard in California but that is not enough. Our last hope for success lies with you."

The scene has been repeated dozens of times this fall as Mr. Chavez has toured the country soliciting support for a boycott of California table grapes. He seldom fails to draw an emotional response: While the cheers of his followers still echoed through the market a beefy produce buyer bellowed, "Go home, you bums."

More than four years ago the Farm Workers Union called a strike against the grape



Member of United Farm Workers picketing vineyards in Coachella Valley in California as nonunion workers pack

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growers to force them to negotiate a union contract. About 1,000 families of migrant workers left the grape fields of California's verdant San Joaquin Valley but the strike never seriously hampered the growers.

About 16 months ago Mr. Chavez escalated the attack and started a nationwide boycott of the fruit. After steadily gaining ground for a year, the boycott suffered a setback last spring when 10

growers opened negotiations with the union and foreshadowed an early end to the strike.

The negotiations quickly collapsed but the boycott remained sluggish. Mr. Chavez, who had been bedridden for a year by a back ailment, recovered enough this fall to try to resuscitate the campaign.

It is very difficult to measure the effectiveness of the boycott, but the union con-

tends that it has fully recovered from the negotiations scare. Officials assert that 27 per cent fewer grapes have been shipped from California this year than last.

Moreover, reports indicate that many big chain stores, such as A. & P., no longer carry grapes in their city stores. Some suburban chain stores and many independents still sell them, however.

The growers insist that the drop has not been nearly

as serious and that the boycott has had minimal effect. Whatever decrease they have had in sales, they contend, is a result mainly of the stronger competition from other fruits, such as apples and oranges, which produced heavy crops this year.

Recently, however, 81 growers filed a \$75-million damage suit against the union—their first acknowledgement that the boycott is hurting. They also hired Whitaker & Baxter, a well-known public relations concern, and reportedly contributed \$4-million to finance an anti-boycott campaign.

## A Struggle to Death

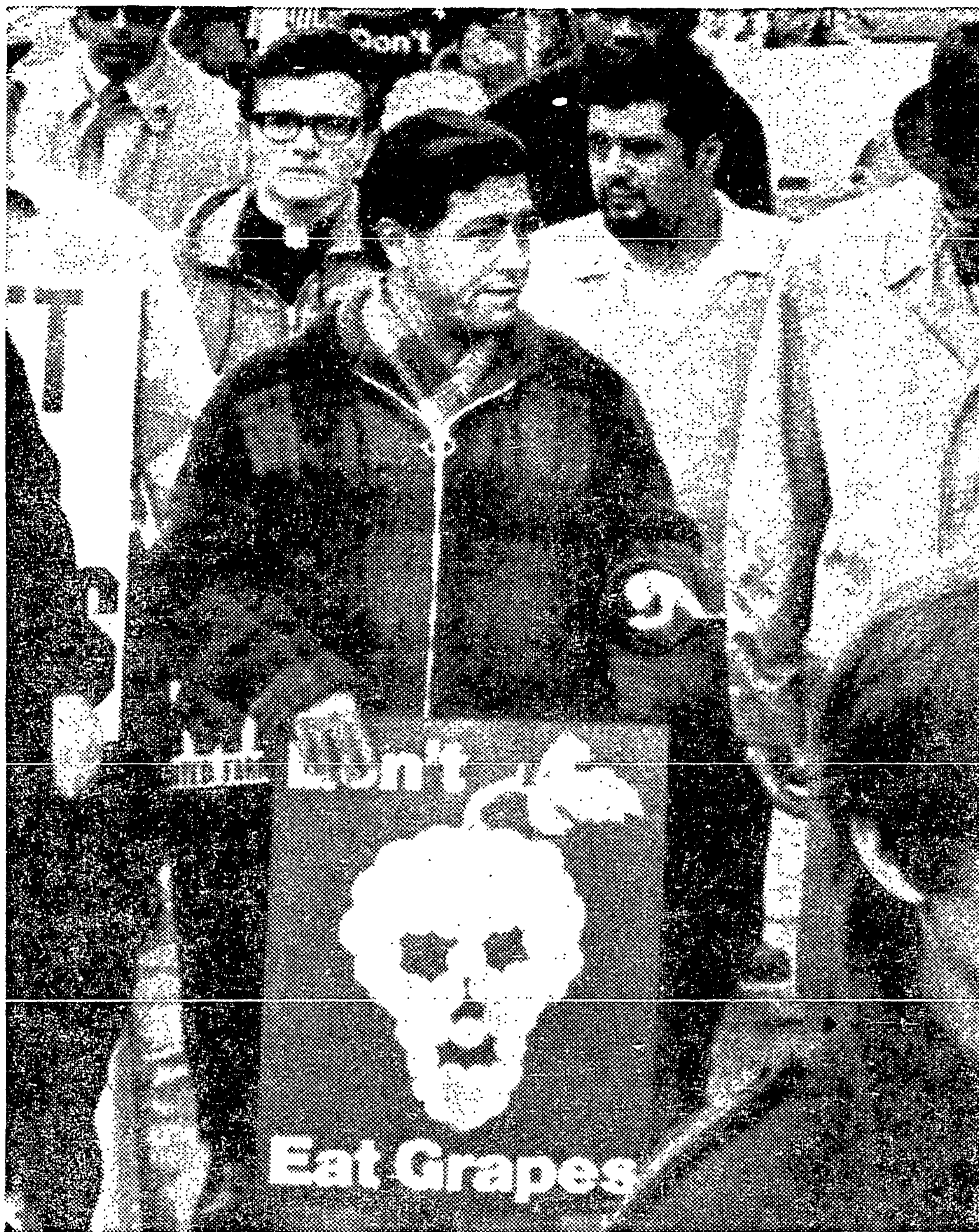
The large majority of these growers will not even talk to the union unless they get Federal legislation that would prohibit strikes at harvest time. Thus, at this point, the strike and the boycott look like a struggle to the economic death.

In that struggle, the union would be virtually helpless without widespread popular support. And here in Pittsburgh, as in many cities across the country, the boycott has become a major liberal cause—and one of the few that most factions can agree on.

"He's fighting for the same things the steelworkers once fought for," Pat Coyne, an international representative of the steelworkers union, said of Mr. Chavez. "Scab is a bad word in Pittsburgh."

But the sources of the boycott's support go deeper. In a time of confusion, Mr. Chavez and his union appear to present a clear moral issue. "They're entitled to a

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Cesar Chavez, head of United Farm Workers Organizing Committee, leading supporters of varied backgrounds in demonstration in Pittsburgh urging boycott of California grapes.



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living wage and decent housing as much as anyone," said one suburban matron on the picket line.

Moreover, the union espouses nonviolence and welcomes the help of everyone. Thus La Causa, as the movement is known, is particularly attractive at a time when white liberals often feel rejected by black leaders and uneasy at the increasing talk of violence.

Most radicals also support the boycott and respect Mr. Chavez, but they sometimes differ on tactics. For instance, Mr. Chavez has denounced Mexican-American leaders who stress the idea of La Raza, or race, which he feels denigrates non-Mexicans.

In New York, an alliance with the Black Panthers was quietly dropped when several stores selling grapes were mysteriously fire-bombed.

In its 16-month life the boycott has become a part of the culture. Buttons and bumper stickers condemning grapes—and occasionally extolling their virtues—are seen in many big cities.

A recent cartoon in the New Yorker magazine showed one angel saying to another: "I honestly never expected to make it here, but I think what may have tipped the balance was my boycotting California grapes."

When the boycott started it was almost a desperation tactic. Migrant workers were too poor and too rootless to organize effectively and the growers had an almost limitless supply of illegal labor from Mexico available to break the strikes.

In June, 1968, Mr. Chavez threw the union's resources behind the boycott. He sent about 40 trusted lieutenants, including the two nurses at the union's clinic at Delano, to various cities to start organizing.

## Paid in Encouragement

The couple who came to Pittsburgh were Helena and Albert Rojas, both third-generation migrant workers. The union provided them with food, housing, \$5 a week in spending money, and plenty of encouragement. The rest was up to them.

"It was horrible, I cried for weeks," said Mrs. Rojas as she fixed coffee for Mr. Chavez and his companion, who travel by car and stay with friends wherever they stop. "A lot of people had to be educated to the problem. They had no idea there even were farm workers — they just thought their food appeared on the shelves."

The last year has been an endless series of meetings, picket lines and speeches — describing the plight of the

farm workers and, lately, warning that grapes are covered with harmful pesticides. "We've been thrown out of more places than you can count on your hand," Mrs. Rojas said, laughing, "but we bounce right back, like a ball."

The tactics, and the effects, of the boycott vary in different cities. In Youngstown, Ohio, for instance, the campaign is supported by a union of insurance workers who distribute leaflets every time they go to collect a back bill.

In Boston, massive demonstrations forced almost every chain store in the area to take grapes off their shelves.

## Grapes Dumped in Harbor

Students also staged a modern version of the Boston Tea Party and dumped grapes into Boston harbor.

In San Francisco, demonstrators staged a candlelight vigil in front of the Pacific Coast Stock Exchange and a sit-in at the headquarters of Safeway, the biggest chain that still sells grapes.

One irate store manager recently squirted a group of demonstrators with a hose, and at other markets shoppers sat in front of the marchers quietly eating grapes.

In Atlanta, demonstrators were greeted by counter-pickets from the John Birch Society. However, the campaign has received strong support from such black leaders as the Rev. Ralph David Abernathy and the Rev. Martin Luther King Sr., and grape shipments to the city last September were down 46.5 per cent from last year.

In New York, Assemblyman Andrew Stein gave a chic party to raise money for the grape strike, and it was attended by such luminaries as Mrs. Ann Ford Uzielli and Mrs. Robert F. Kennedy.

Grape sales are down more than 50 per cent in the city, in part because Mayor Lindsay strongly endorsed the boycott and ordered all city agencies to stop buying the fruit.

The boycott has drawn strong opposition from the John Birch Society, the National Right to Work Committee, the American Farm Bureau Federation, such conservative politicians as Gov.

Ronald Reagan of California and a number of store owners who feel their customers "have a right to choose" whether to buy grapes or not.

California growers have formed "truth squads" to follow Mr. Chavez on his tour and give their side of the story. "He just tells wild lies," said John Giumarra Jr., one of the largest growers. "California farm workers have among the highest wages of any farm workers in the country. And our grapes are completely safe — that whole pesticide scare is phony."

During his campaign last year President Nixon conspicuously ate grapes on several occasions and strongly condemned the boycott. His Administration has opposed suggestions that the farm workers be placed under the protection of the National Labor Relations Act, and the Defense Department has increased its shipment of table grapes to Vietnam by 800 per cent.

## Simplicity of Manner

Much of the popular attention has inevitably focused on Mr. Chavez himself, a quiet, almost shy man who has retained a simplicity that is rare in such a public figure.

He still lives on the \$5 a week all union workers receive and he invariably dresses in the same gray work pants and plaid wool shirt. His rough appearance caused several Secret Service men to question him closely when he attended the funeral of Robert F. Kennedy, who was probably his strongest public supporter.

One sometimes has to strain to hear his soft voice, with its slight Spanish accent, and some of his followers look upon him as at least a minor saint. But his mellow demeanor belies a streak

of inner toughness. His hero is Gandhi, but as one aide said, "He's capable of being quite Machiavellian."

Mr. Chavez has been called a "Mexican Martin Luther King" and "the most charismatic union leader in the country." But he has resisted pressures to broaden his activities and has remained focused almost entirely on the farm workers' cause.

He does not relish the spotlight. He recently refused to pose for a magazine cover unless several of his aides were included, and he would not appear in person to accept the annual award of the American Civil Liberties Union.

Part of the reason is that he has been bothered for the last year by a back ailment that until recently kept him bedridden. More important, an aide said, "He has a terrible fear that he will die and the movement will die with him. He really wants to believe the fiction that every man is a leader."