

FOCUS IS SHIFTED IN GRAPE STRIKE

Pressure Against Growers Is Exerted in Boycott

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Special to The New York Times

LOS ANGELES, Feb. 18 — Two pickets, their faces impassive, trudged slowly past the entrance to a busy market in West Los Angeles. A woman paused and asked, "Are you picketing the store?"

A picket replied, "It's not the store. We're picketing for the grape pickers movement."

"What movement?" the woman asked, but the picket was already on his way.

What the picket described as "the movement" started six months ago as a minor strike for higher wages in the grape vineyards of Central California. It has since burgeoned into a rather amorphous, highly ideological cause célèbre involving farm workers, churchmen, civil rights groups, zealous social activists, college students and leaders of organized labor.

The once modest grape strike is already being widely hailed as a milestone. Churchmen say their militant involvement in the strike symbolizes a massive awakening of the religious community to its responsibilities for social action. The ministers are leading the boycott, manning picket lines and supplying about 30 per cent of the funds for the strike.

Boycott's Impact Disputed

Labor officials say the strike marks a new era in the long, bitter struggle to achieve agricultural unionism. Never before, they say, has such national attention been riveted on a labor dispute involving only a few hundred workers and having no impact on the general economy.

This week, significantly, the focus of activity in the grape strike shifted from the vineyards to some 70 cities around the nation where organizers are attempting to open a broad boycott in support of the grape workers.

The boycott's coordinator, the Rev. James Drake, a 28-year-old Protestant minister, contends that the boycott is already having "a significant impact." Its principal target, Schenley Industries, Inc., a major grower and user of California grapes, insists the boycott has had negligible effect.

The strikers turned to the boycott because picketing in the vineyards has failed to win higher wages and recognition of the farm workers' unions.

Bumper Crop of Grapes

Despite the refusal of hundreds of farm laborers to work in the vineyards, the growers, who supply more than a quarter of the nation's table grapes, have grown, packed and shipped a crop that is at least 10 per cent larger this season than last.

Output is so high that it is depressing prices.

Meanwhile, in Los Angeles, some 25 ministers, farm workers and members of civil rights groups picketed a luncheon held by Schenley Industries to announce a scholarship program for Negro college students.

"Scholarships, yes, 30 cents per hour, no," said a sign held by one picket. The pickets con-

tended that some Negro leaders who had planned to attend the luncheon had refused to cross their lines.

The strike, which began in September, has been led by two unions, the Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee and the independent National Farm Workers Association, which together say they have recruited some 5,000 members. Most are Filipinos and Mexicans.

Over all, California's \$3.7-billion agricultural industry employs about 500,000 workers. The average annual family income of the seasonal farm workers is estimated at about \$2,500.

"Agricultural strikes have always failed in California because the rich industrial unions have never given anything more than token support," one labor leader said. "The grape workers pulled a surprise. They came up with a secret weapon."

This weapon consisted of

picketing by hundreds of churchmen, Protestant and Roman Catholic, plus college students, professional agitators and representatives of such civil rights groups as the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and the Congress of Racial Equality.

The strike assumed new drama and attracted financial support from many sources, including some of the big labor unions. Morale rose and reported incidents of violence diminished sharply once the ministers joined in.

"No one wanted to be cited in the newspapers for beating up a minister," one young churchman explained.

The active support by ministers, nine of whom were arrested in a single day last fall on charges of failure to disperse, has stirred controversy across California. Local minis-

ters from the grape country were bitterly critical of the visiting churchmen.

Last week the Los Angeles Presbytery refused to support a "vote of confidence" to the California Migrant Ministry, the church group that has been the most active in the strike.

The Rev. Wayne C. Hartmire Jr., director of the Migrant Ministry, a branch of the California Council of Churches, said:

"If men of conscience ignore the crucial social issues of our times, things will continue as they are, and that cannot be tolerated. There is too much human suffering, too much resentment and separation of men from men."

To Mr. Hartmire and many other participating ministers, the grape strike was less a labor dispute than a social move-

ment. Cesar Chavez, the 38-year-old director of the Farm Workers Association, talks of expanding his union into voter registration, direct political action and the construction of a vast spectrum of "autonomous community organizations" that would operate consumer cooperatives and other welfare organizations.

Before achieving these objectives, however, the strike leaders must solve some severe short-term problems.

Many of the workers have suffered from loss of pay and housing. Finances for the strike are skimpy. A new union, the Independent Farm Workers Organization, which opposes the strike, says it is expanding rapidly. And the growers still reject proposals for secret ballot elections to determine if the farm workers want to be represented by the striking unions.