

Grape Strike

Still a Hard Road to Settlement

LOS ANGELES — A young matron well-known for her political liberalism served grapes the other night to her somewhat startled dinner guests. When she was questioned about it, she replied, "It's all right to eat them now, the strike is almost settled."

The woman's attitude points up a major problem facing Cesar Chavez and his United Farm Workers Organizing Committee, which last week entered negotiations with 10 grape growers after almost four years of strikes and boycotts against California table grapes.

Not Settled

The strike is not "almost settled." The union and the 10 growers are still far from an agreement; and the 10 growers represent only about 12 per cent of all California grape producers. The rest still refuse even to talk to the union.

But the negotiations could becloud what has been a clear precept for many liberals: Don't eat grapes. And if the boycott begins to lose force, the union will lose its power to win recognition and contracts even from the most receptive growers.

The nationwide boycott of table grapes sponsored by the union appears to have been quite effective. Most growers continue to insist that they have not been hurt, but the 10 who agreed to talk with the union tell a different story.

Such major markets as Bos-

ton, Chicago and New York have been badly cut by the boycott. Some growers admit they are losing money on the first grapes of the new season now being harvested in the Coachella Valley.

The union's success rests mainly on the inspiring leadership and shrewd maneuvering of Mr. Chavez, a former grape picker himself who started the union in 1962. His ideals of non-violence have remained attractive to many liberals who are frightened and uneasy at the growing militancy of some black leaders.

Moreover, not eating grapes is an easy way of "doing something" for the poor and down-trodden—like giving \$10 to a civil rights organization. Indeed, the grape strike has become chic. You aren't really "in" the New York liberal scene until you've been to a fund-raising party for the union at George Plimpton's apartment.

Whatever their motives, however, a great many people have stopped eating grapes, and they have given the union its first breakthrough with the grape growers. But a final solution is a long way off.

The strike began in September, 1965, in the little town of Delano in the vast San Joaquin Valley, but it was not very effective. The farm workers were so poor, and moved so often, that it was almost impossible to organize a cohesive strike force

in the traditional sense.

About two years ago, Mr. Chavez decided to concentrate most of the union's resources on the boycott, and union leaders became familiar figures at political rallies and meetings across the country, urging support of the ban on grapes.

The union demands are fairly simple: wage increases to about \$2 an hour plus bonuses (they now run about \$1.65, but were much lower before the union began organizing), provisions for job security, better housing, and other fringe benefits. Several big wineries, whose products are easy to boycott, have signed contracts, but the table grape growers continue to remain adamant for at least four reasons.

The Reasons

First, the growers can still utilize a huge pool of cheap labor living just across the border in Mexico. Many of these workers hold "green cards," or American residence visas, and commute to jobs in the fields of California.

Second, the growers complain that they cannot afford to pay the higher wages and fringe benefits demanded by the union. They are under increasingly heavy competition from fruit grown in Mexico and other countries, and many talk about switching crops or selling their ranches entirely.

Third, there are no ground rules governing labor disputes in agriculture, which has always been excluded from the National Labor Relations Act. Recalcitrant growers could refuse to recognize the union indefinitely, even if every one of their workers supported it.

Fourth, the union is intent not only on winning a decent living for its members, but also on changing the hierarchical social structure that has dominated the agricultural regions of California.

The white landowners have reigned almost as feudal lords over the Mexican and Filipino workers, and they feel deeply threatened by the union. They believe they are fighting a band of "social revolutionaries"—and in many ways they are.

In the end, class and race prejudices could prove a bigger obstacle to a settlement than economics.

—STEVEN V. ROBERTS