

COAST GROWERS THREATEN TO MOVE

Fear Chavez Successes in Organizing Field Hands

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IMPERIAL BEACH, Calif., April 24—Several leading produce growers of San Diego County said this week that they might move their farming operations into Mexico, or go out of business entirely, if Cesar Chavez succeeded in organizing their field workers.

Most of the so-called stoop labor on the farms is performed by 3,000 Mexicans who cross the border near here each weekday to tend vegetable and fruit crops for \$2 an hour.

"This could mean the loss of a \$143-million annual business and the area's fourth largest industry," said Emil Ghio Jr. of the Egger-Ghio Company. The company's two farms, totaling 580 acres, were chosen by Mr. Chavez's United Farms Workers Organizing Committee as its initial target among 500 commercial farms in the county.

The company's lettuce and tomato fields along the border had been picketed since March 28 by union members, supported by militant students from Tijuana and other Mexican nationals who paraded across the border chanting "Huelga" (strike).

Called Scare Tactic

Waving the black eagle banners used by the Chavez forces in earlier battles with California grape and lettuce growers in the San Joaquin Valley, Salinas and the Imperial Valley, the Mexican demonstrators joined forces with San Diego State College students and members of Chicano organizations in demanding recognition of the union as bargaining agent for the field workers.

Mr. Ghio commented, "If Cesar Chavez succeeds in his efforts, we probably will sell off our properties to the real estate developers and set up operations in northern Mexico, as many Southern California growers already have done under economic pressures and others are prepared to do."

Spokesmen for the union called the threat a scare tactic used by the big operators "in their union-busting efforts." State and local agricultural officials insisted, however, that farm shutdowns or transfers of operations to Mexico appeared to be "a very real possibility."

The San Diego County Farm Bureau's executive secretary, Fred Hinrichs, said that many of the big farmers had made plans to sell their fields to subdivision and industrial developers rather than sign contracts with the union.

"They will either go out of business or move their operations over to Mexico, to areas on the mainland or down the Baja California Peninsula, where the land is rich and labor plentiful and where they can operate at greater profit without all this harassment," he said. "Others will simply take long vacations if their fields are struck."

At weekend, operations were at a virtual standstill at the Egger-Ghio farms, where a ripening \$250,000 tomato crop was blackening on the vines for lack of spraying. The company normally employs about 120 field workers.

Judge Franklin B. Orfield of the Superior Court upheld the union's picketing and bargaining rights Wednesday but limited to 30 the number of pickets at each of the two Egger-Ghio farms. Earlier in the week from 80 to 120 pickets were on the lines.

Allen Grant, president of the California Board of Agriculture, confirmed that a flight of commercial farming across the border has been going on for some time, at a recently accelerating pace. He estimated that American ownership now accounts for about 15 per cent of Mexico's agricultural exports.

Last year Mexican farm exports to the United States amounted to about \$225-million and 80 per cent of those products were said by Mr. Grant to have been in competition with American produce.

In Mexico a farm laborer can be hired for \$2.65 to \$3.80 a day, against the \$2 an hour paid to those who commute to and from work on this side of the border under United States work permits.

Mr. Grant explains that it was difficult to determine the extent of American involvement in farm operations in Mexico because of a legal requirement there for a 51 per cent Mexican ownership of any business.

A number of Americans have taken up farming around Hermosillo and farther south in the Ciudad Obregon region.

Donald Weinland of the California Department of Agriculture said that the movement of United States farmers into Mexico "has been growing by leaps and bounds." The migration began in 1964, when the United States, over the protests of Southwestern farmers, canceled the program that had permitted farmers to bring in low-wage Mexican workers and install them in labor camps during the harvest.

Since then, Mr. Weinland said, the application of American money and methods to Mexican farming has sharpened competition.

In addition to farming American capital is financing many plants in Mexico for canning, freezing and packaging agricultural products for export.

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