In Defense of Chavez

By MARTIN GARBUS

George Gannon's article [Dec. 20, 1971] makes serious allegations that César Chavez's United Farm Workers Union deals dishonestly with management and its union members in its West Coast organizing drive. Because the West Coast drive is so important to this country, a reply is necessary.

Mr. Gannon, like other farm owners on the West Coast, brings to the negotiating table the same attitude that the Southern whites had as they approached negotiations with civil rights activists in the South. I've been told in Delano, Calif., Mabton, Wash., Selma, Ala., and Jackson, Miss., that "everything was all right before you people came down—they were happy until you got here." I remember particularly one man in Washington telling me "there is something you do not understand—these people are just different than us—we are more responsible. If we didn't have the money, we wouldn't have children like they do and we wouldn't live in the kinds of houses they live in. It's our job to take care of them."

Mr. Gannon, the co-owner of one of this country's largest hop ranches, tells how his original high regard for the Farm Workers Union and its leaders dissipated when the union leaders started insisting on security clauses and hiring halls. He sees his role as protecting Washington farm workers from an exploitive union, a union that the workers do not want.

But that is not the problem. Late last year, a picket line was thrown up against Gannon's Yakima Chief Ranch. Eighty per cent of the workers struck. The chief issue was low wages and poor housing conditions. The wages were $1.65 to $1.75 an hour. Mr. Gannon may be right when he says that this is "the highest agricultural wage paid in the United States" but it is still too little. A week later, in an election at Gannon's farm, 105 of his employes voted for the union and two voted against it. As a result, wages were immediately raised to $2 an hour and negotiations began.

Gannon is right. The union wants to have control over hiring. Every union does. Mr. Gannon fired the migrants who helped form the picket line and struck; he refused to hire their leaders back. He said they could come in, be interviewed by him and then he could decide (without the union's help) whether or not they should be hired.

The Farm Workers Union said after the contract is signed it should be the union that determines who works in the field. The Yakima Valley growers objected, taking the position that they could hire whomever they wanted. If the growers had their way, they could hire all nonunion employes, thereby discouraging migrants from joining the union. No union permits this.

Gannon is correct when he says the United Farm Workers wanted a provision in the contract providing that a worker who fails to pay union dues must be discharged by the employer. Payment of dues is essential to the survival of the union. More important, it assures the workers' participation and commitment to the union. It is standard in every union contract and is provided for by the Taft-Hartley Act.

The basic problem about who represents the workers, the owner or the union, came up in many different ways. It proved to be an irreconcilable issue during the one full year of negotiations. Gannon wanted the union constitution made part of the contract and wanted to have some say in how the union was operating, for he felt he had the responsibility to represent the workers who would otherwise be manipulated by the union. Gannon said that it was not Chavez that he distrusted but those who might follow him. He asked "how do we know who will be alive and active tomorrow; what happens when there is no longer the idealism of César Chavez?" The farm workers had to constantly remind Gannon that the United Farm Workers were there only because 98 per cent of the workers wanted them.

Mr. Gannon Is wrong when he says that the union has been against legislation that attempts to protect the farm workers from abuses by union leadership. They are against grower-sponsored legislation that would have made it impossible for there to be a farm union of migrants. The legislation submitted in California, Oregon and Washington would ban hiring halls, compulsory dues and the use of seniority lists—the very items that were the subject of the Yakima Valley negotiations.

I was first in Delano in 1962. I saw beaten people—old women running at the snap of the owner's finger; children badly needing food; families in unlivable barracks and homes. The situation in Delano is a bit better now—not so much because the economics have changed but because of the rediscovered dignity in the lives of the migrants. The dignity comes in large part from a feeling that they now control their own lives. Tragically, no one other than the Farm Workers Union is attempting to help America's five million farm workers.

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The New York Times
Published: January 12, 1972