

Chavez's Farm Union Seeking to Organize Florida Citrus Workers

By JON NORDHEIMER
Special to The New York Times

MIAMI, Feb. 6—The United Farm Workers, of California, in its first major organizing drive in the East, has sent a mission to Florida where working conditions for indigent and migrant field hands are among the worst in the nation.

For the last six months a group of organizers led by Manuel Chavez, a cousin of Cesar Chavez, the farm union president, have criss-crossed the state's citrus belt, journeying from shantytown to shantytown to sign men and women as the first step toward bargaining with the citrus owners.

Although no contracts have yet been signed, Manuel Chavez contends that his private talks with citrus companies have made progress and that an accord, the first step in the industry, is imminent with at least one major producer.

The Florida campaign should be a major test of the union's ability to appeal to farm laborers outside the Mexican-American rank-and-file it has successfully organized in California and Arizona.

Blacks Hold the Key

In Florida the union must demonstrate that it can win support from black workers, who constitute about 55 per cent of the labor force in the state's citrus industry. This is considered critical if the union is eventually to move into a national position of leadership among farm workers.

There is evidence in California that blacks are having trouble relating to the Mexican-American leadership and the Roman Catholic overtones of the struggle that at times has taken on the appearance of a religious crusade.

Manuel Chavez, in an inter-



The New York Times/Bob Sherman

Manuel Chavez, left, organizer and cousin of Cesar Chavez, of United Farm Workers of California, talking to workers in Miami. For six months, organizers have been signing up workers as first step in bargaining with citrus owners.

view here, discounted the differences.

"I see them as farm workers, not as colors," the stocky former grape picker said. "I don't claim to understand the farm worker problem. I've been a farm worker all my life."

The obstacles to organizing farm labor in Florida are formidable. The regional antipathy of the growers to labor unions is reinforced by tradition and a market squeeze on profits. The difficulty of organizing seasonal workers, especially the 100,000 or more migrants who are now estimated to be in the state harvesting citrus, vegetables and sugar cane, has discouraged other attempts for collective bargaining.

So far, the union has been most active in the groves operated by the large juice concentrate concerns and in groves

where these concerns have contracted to purchase the crop before the beginning of the season. These large concerns would be sensitive to bad publicity associated with a labor strike and vulnerable to the tactics of a nationwide boycott.

For example, Minute Maid, a subsidiary of Coca-Cola, moved quickly two years ago to improve living conditions for migrants at its Florida orange groves when they came under the scrutiny of network television.

More Understanding Seen

If Mr. Chavez does succeed in signing a pact with one of the larger concerns the pressure on the other growers will increase.

"The growers," Mr. Chavez said, "still say their workers don't want a union. But they are more open-minded than in

California. At least here they will talk to me.

"I don't think anyone wants to go through the strikes and boycotts that we had in California," he continued, "and the growers know the workers haven't got much to lose in the struggle. When you have nothing you have nothing to lose, eh?"

Joseph Segor, head of the Migrant Service Foundation in Miami, a privately funded agency that gives legal aid to migrants, said that the labor situation in Florida was ready for widespread union organizing. "The problem," he said, "is to get the union to the workers before they explode."

Mr. Segor said that the migrants, after generations of misery and ignorance, were becoming more aware of their rights. Growers, on the other hand, anticipating an end to an era of cheap labor, are in a

race to mechanize before they come under the restrictions of a union contract, he said.

"If the union doesn't win the race to protect these workers there will be a major human disaster," Mr. Segor declared in an interview yesterday. "No social resources exist to care for the thousands who will be put out of work. One of the objectives of the union is to deal with these problems so the migrants aren't just thrown out into the garbage dump of the big city ghettos."

The agitation of the workers has appeared spontaneously on two occasions in the past year. Migrant tomato pickers near Immokalee staged a wildcat strike last winter to protest wage cuts made after a freeze damaged the crop. A show-down was averted when the market price of tomatoes went up and the wages were reinstated.

The first prolonged strike of

agricultural workers began last month in the sugar cane industry in the rich muck land near the southern edge of Lake Okeechobee. Nearly 200 short-haul drivers employed by the Talisman Sugar Corporation walked off the job on Jan. 7 to protest working conditions, and within a fortnight a majority of them joined the United Farm Workers Organizing Committee, the official name of Mr. Chavez's organization.

Most of the strikers were Cubans who lived in Miami and commuted daily to the sugar mill at South Bay, about 70 miles north of here. They said that during the harvesting season, from November to March, they were required to work 12 hours a day seven days a week and were paid \$2 an hour without overtime or fringe benefits.

Mr. Chavez said, in a telegram to United States Secretary of Labor James D. Hodgson, that the owner of the mill, William D. Pawley, a former ambassador to Peru and Brazil in the Truman Administration and a long-time friend of President Nixon, was using black cane cutters imported from the Caribbean to operate the equipment left idle by the strike.

"It's incredible," Mr. Chavez stated, "that Pawley gets \$388,000 farm subsidy this year and is using it to fight a strike, and then uses offshore labor to break a strike." He said that a union attorney, Judy Peterson, and two ministers attempted to see the cane-cutters last week in their quarters on company property and were arrested for trespassing.

Attention focused on the strike at Talisman when a college co-ed, Nan Freeman of Massachusetts, was struck and killed by a Talisman truck when she attempted to pass out union literature to one of the strike-breaking drivers earlier this month.