

Lettuce Boycott Shows Signs of Gaining After Lagging for Its First Three Months

Cesar Chavez's nationwide consumer boycott of lettuce appears to have rallied little effective support in the three months since it started, but there is evidence that it may now be gaining some momentum.

California growers and shippers of lettuce say that sales are normal for this time of year. They say the market dipped for a time after the boycott received wide support at the Democratic National Convention last July, but then returned to its customary level.

Consumers, for their part, seem confused over what kind of lettuce is being boycotted, which lettuce is union lettuce and which nonunion, and whether it is valid under the boycott to buy lettuce with a union label of the International Brotherhood of Teamsters.

Despite the confusion, however, officials of Mr. Chavez's United Farm Workers Union insist that the boycott is doing well, that it has already reached the stage that their successful grape boycott reached after two years of organizing.

The Chavez boycott of table grapes lasted from 1967 to 1970. It not only resulted in contracts between the U.F.W. and California's grape growers, but also established Mr. Chavez's union as a potentially powerful force among migrant and farm labor.

Not a Single Campaign

Still, while the issues of the grape boycott were relatively simple, those of the lettuce boycott are not.

The conflict began in 1970, just as the grape growers signed their contracts. Almost overnight, the teamsters' union signed contracts with some 70 lettuce growers covering field laborers. These were workers Mr. Chavez had planned to organize.

Thus, while a few lettuce growers signed contracts with the U.F.W., most of them signed up with the teamsters. About 75 per cent of California's lettuce crop is being harvested under those teamster contracts. Only about 10 per cent of the crop is not covered by either a teamster contract or a U.F.W. contract.

Teamsters' union officials and growers assert that their contracts are valid and that the conflict is basically between two unions. Teamsters officials say, however, that they are willing to cancel the contracts if the growers and the U.F.W. can agree on contracts covering the field workers. Until now, the growers and the U.F.W. have not been able to agree on terms.

U.F.W. officials deny that the teamster contracts are valid. They say that the contracts were signed without the knowledge of the field workers and that field labor is not under teamsters' jurisdiction according to an agreement between the U.F.W. and the teamsters. Therefore, Chavez forces say, the dispute is not between the unions, but between the U.F.W. and the growers.

Pay rates in the teamsters' contracts and the U.F.W. contracts are essentially the same. There are some differences in benefits, but the main difference is that the U.F.W. insists on control of who works where and when in the fields. This is centered in the hiring hall and is the point of greatest disagreement between the growers and the U.F.W.

Further confusing the situation is the fact that not all lettuce is being boycotted. The U.F.W. is boycotting only one kind—iceberg lettuce. Iceberg lettuce, or head lettuce, is the kind that resembles a head of cabbage.

The boycott covers all iceberg lettuce that does not have the U.F.W. black eagle label on it. The only exception to this policy is for locally grown lettuce—that is, lettuce not grown on the West Coast.

Most Lettuce Not Marked

Most lettuce on the market is not marked at all, because the union labels—teamsters, and U.F.W.—appear on the boxes in which the heads are shipped, not on the heads themselves. However, a few California growers now ship their U.F.W. lettuce with each head wrapped and bearing the black eagle.

Given these complications, many consumers have not known how to join the boycott. Indeed, even those sympathetic to the Chavez cause find it harder to do without lettuce than grapes.

In a Redwood City, Calif., supermarket, for example, a young woman stopped at the produce section not long ago and examined carrots and celery. She waited for other shoppers to pass on and then quickly dropped three heads of iceberg lettuce into her cart. Moving away, she seemed to be trying to hide them under other packages in her cart.

Irene Ricklefs, a checker at the store, said that such behavior was not uncommon, that people often made excuses at the checkout counter for having bought lettuce.

A customer of the same market commented, "I want to support the boycott as I understand it, but I don't want it to affect my lettuce eating."

Whatever individual reactions to the boycott may be, checks in supermarkets and restaurants in a dozen major urban areas across the nation indicated recently that its impact had been only minimal.

"Right after Miami Beach, having received a great deal of



United Press International
Cesar Chavez announcing lettuce boycott in May.

publicity, the boycott was going strong," said Harold G. Bradshaw, president of Interharvest, a company with a U.F.W. contract. "The industry was losing the profit equivalent of 100,000 cartons of lettuce a day."

Normally, he said, the industry ships about 400,000 cartons a day.

"Right at the moment, he went on, "we're not particularly able to point to any effect of the boycott. Demand is coming back up and people are buying lettuce."

Floyd Griffin, district manager of Monterey County for Freshpick Food, Inc., said: "As a shipper of lettuce, we just don't even realize that the boycott exists. It's the same for others."

At the Hunts Point terminal in the Bronx, a manager of one of the larger vegetable receiving companies said that the boycott was not effective. "They're not paying any at-

tention to it because lettuce is a necessary item," he said. He estimated that 75 per cent of the lettuce that goes to New York City and to its suburban areas—except for large supermarket chains—goes through the terminal.

Despite the growers' insistence that the boycott was having no effect on their sales, indications have begun to reveal that the union's campaign may be taking hold.

During a tour by Mr. Chavez and several other U.F.W. aides last month, several city and state officials endorsed the boycott. Among them were the Governors of Ohio and Pennsylvania, the Mayor of Boston and the City Council of Cincinnati.

Marshall Ganz, national coordinator of the boycott, said the union had received support from "a lot of religious groups, community groups and union groups."

He also said that Mr. Chavez met with the heads of several major supermarket chains. "Most of the chains took a cooperative position and expressed a desire to support the boycott," he said.

"We think we have progressed in the first three months to the point we progressed to in two years in the grape boycott," Mr. Ganz said. "There hasn't been any picketing yet. The first job of the boycott is to get the word out to the public. Of course, the Democratic National Convention was a very good help."

Mr. Ganz said that the union had received "hundreds of thousands" of pledge cards from people who said they would join the boycott, tell friends about the boycott and raise the issue wherever they saw lettuce.

Asked how long he thought the boycott would have to go, Mr. Ganz replied, "However long it takes, that's how long it will last."