

Bitter Lettuce

The David and Goliath of American labor—the giant International Brotherhood of Teamsters and Cesar Chavez's tiny United Farm Workers—are at war in the lettuce fields of California.

This battle between the country's strongest union and the fledgling group that seeks to establish some element of dignity for the most exploited segment of the national work force would be disgraceful enough if it were being fought on equal terms.

But a six-to-one decision last week by California's highest court provides judicial confirmation that the deck had been stacked against the Chavez union by flagrant partisanship on the part of the lettuce growers toward the two-million-member truck union. The court held that the growers had given the teamsters exclusive rights over field labor—in the judges' words, "the ultimate form of favoritism"—without trying to find out whether the workers preferred the farm union.

If farm laborers were covered by the same kind of statutory protections for collective bargaining that exist in the industry generally, the five-year agreement between the teamsters and the growers would have been declared invalid as a "sweetheart contract." However, since migrant farm workers remain the forgotten in almost every form of legislative safeguard, the most the court could do was to throw out injunctions a lower court had issued against picketing and secondary boycott activities by the Chavez group.

No one will argue that this is an ideal resolution of the problem both because it entails the danger of physical clashes in the Salinas and Santa Maria Valleys and because it means picket lines outside supermarkets all over the country. The outcome is doubly sad because it stems from a breakdown of the peace agreement the two unions negotiated two years ago with the beneficial mediation of George Meany and the Roman Catholic Bishops Committee on Farm Labor.

That accord assigned undisputed jurisdiction over field workers to the United Farm Workers while giving full rights over workers in packing sheds and other processing operations to the teamsters. The announced intention of the truck union to administer actively its tainted contract with the growers leaves the Chavez group no option under present law except to use the consumer boycott, the only effective weapon at its command. It is also suing the truck union and its employer allies for \$200 million in damages, but that litigation could drag on for years.

A better remedy will come when Congress acts to extend to agricultural labor the rights of secret election and collective bargaining that have been guaranteed to the rest of American labor for nearly four decades.

The New York Times

Published: January 6, 1973

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