

Seeds of Tragedy

What with empty meat shelves and skyrocketing prices for almost everything else in the supermarket, housewives have little inclination these days to complicate their shopping problems by sitting in judgment on a farm labor dispute whose merits few even pretend to understand.

Perhaps that is why the consumer boycott weapon which proved of such help to Cesar Chavez in organizing his United Farm Workers a few years ago seems much harder to marshal in that tiny union's current effort to stay alive in the face of combined hostility from the huge International Brotherhood of Teamsters and California growers of lettuce and grapes.

Mass arrests and violence have swept across the San Joaquin Valley in the renewed battle over union representation for farm laborers, but the Chavez group has been putting most of its hopes for ultimate victory in picket lines urging big-city shoppers to shun grapes or lettuce that does not bear the black-eagle label of the farm union.

When it comes to idealism or trade union decency, we have no hesitancy in giving Mr. Chavez's crusading organization a long edge over the teamsters, a union still pocked with corruption of the kind that resulted in its expulsion from the A.F.L.-C.I.O. sixteen years ago. George Meany, the federation's president, had ample warrant last week for terming the tactics used by the truck union to smash its infant rival as "the worst thing that has happened in my lifetime from a trade union point of view."

But the choice on which union, if any, ought to represent pickers of grapes and lettuce is not for The Times to make, or Mr. Meany, or housewives in supermarkets from New York to San Francisco. That choice belongs to those who work in the fields, and it should be made in an atmosphere free of physical or economic coercion.

For nearly four decades—first through the Wagner Act and now through the Taft-Hartley Act—Federal law has provided an instrument for assuring that millions of workers in industry generally can express their preferences on unionization by secret ballot in elections conducted under Government supervision. These same laws also make the National Labor Relations Board a watchdog over unfair practices by either management or labor. It is shameful that farm workers are specifically excluded from such legal protection.

Over the years a great deal of sophistry on both sides has helped block action by Congress to end this exclusion through a straightforward extension to agricultural labor of all the provisions that have so long been standard for the rest of American workers. It is time for the Administration and Congress to join in this needed broadening of industrial democracy. Neither bloodshed in the fields nor boycotts in the stores represent a fair or sensible alternative.