

# CHAVEZ AND UNION FIGHT FOR LIVES

## They Seem to Be Losing in Battle With Teamsters

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COACHELLA, Calif., April 28 —The red and black flags of the United Farm Workers Union are again flying along the hot, dusty roads, and the cry of "huelga" (strike) is again echoing across the lush California grape fields.

Cesar Chavez and his farm workers, who have formed the first successful agricultural union in history, are fighting for their lives, and right now they appear to be losing. Growers across the state are rushing to sign up with the International Brotherhood of Teamsters, and within a few months the "Chavistas" will probably lose almost every one of the 200 contracts that it took them 11 painstaking years to win.

Mr. Chavez has accused the teamsters' union and the growers of collusion in a plot to destroy his union. George Meany, president of the American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations, has attacked the teamsters' move into agriculture as a "disgraceful" and "vicious" attempt at union busting.

But even some of Mr. Chavez's friends are a bit disillusioned with the farm workers union. Lionel Steinberg, one of only two growers in this region to renew his contract with the farmworkers, put it this way:

"All of Chavez's people are not wearing the white hats, and all the teamsters are not wearing the black hats."

Attention has focused on the Coachella Valley, a small farming region hacked out of the desert southeast of Palm Springs. Here, the first grapes of the season will be ready for market in about a month.

It was three years ago that Mr. Chavez made his breakthrough and gained his first contracts with California grape growers. But when those contracts ran out on April 14, most of the growers switched to the teamsters. Mr. Chavez called an immediate strike and announced that the union would renew the boycott of table grapes that won worldwide attention in the late sixties.

It is a highly charged situation, with temperatures on both sides rising well above the 100-degree desert heat. Probably the basic reason for the growers' shift is that they never wanted a union in the first place and agreed to sign only because the grape boycott was strangling them economically. This left them angry and resentful, and as Mr. Chavez put it in an interview this week:

"The growers signed the contracts, but they never intended to live up to them."

A second reason is race and ideology. The white growers never felt comfortable with the farm workers union, which is largely Mexican-American, and many of them continued to believe that Mr. Chavez was a wild-eyed radical whose ultimate aim was to expropriate their land.

### Hiring Hall Eliminated

In this light, the teamsters provided several advantages. The monetary demands of the two unions were about the same, but the teamsters agreed to eliminate the union hiring hall and reinstitute the old labor contractor system of hiring workers.

A third factor is that the teamsters have been warring with the farm workers for years, and they threatened economic reprisals against any grower who renewed his contract with Mr. Chavez.

Another major problem is the farm union itself. Mr. Chavez has always seemed more interested in the battle to win contracts than in the administration of those contracts, and that attitude caused problems. As Mr. Steinberg put it:

"There is a great misconception in the public mind about Cesar Chavez. There's no question that he's an honest, dedicated leader. In 1969 and 1970, many people equated him with Martin Luther King, Bobby Kennedy and Mahatma Gandhi all rolled into one, and he won a great victory. But unfortunately he's turned out to be the world's worst administrator. He did not know how to run a routine trade union.

"It should have been a very dull, humdrum business, but instead Chavez brought in people exuding hate and malice. They wanted to shout and fight and tell people off rather than doing their job."

### Administrative Problems

Union officials acknowledge that the hiring hall had administrative problems, and that the adjudication of grievances was frustratingly slow. But they attribute the problems to inexperience and the continuing attempts of growers to "subvert" the contracts and insist that the problems could have been ironed out in negotiations.

The key question at the moment is, Who represents the workers? The teamsters contend that many workers are "fed up" with Mr. Chavez and produced petitions on which several thousand field hands said that they preferred the teamsters.

Mr. Chavez calls the petitions a "fraud" and points to a poll conducted by various churchmen two weeks ago. In that survey, the workers favored the farm workers union by about 8 to 1. The teamsters call that poll a "fraud."