

Chavez's United Farm Workers Union Facing a Crucial Test as White California Grapes Near Harvest

By JON NORDHEIMER
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Thermal, Calif., April 20 — The slow ripening of the white table grape in the vineyards of the Coachella Valley is bringing the beleaguered United Farm Workers union closer to a crucial test of its ability to remain a potent force in the American labor market.

In less than six weeks the grapes will be ready for picking, a harvest that will open a new round in the chronic labor disputes that have produced anger and discord as regular as the rich land has yielded seasonal crops.

As the Mexican-American laborers tend the vineyards, other workers are busy in New York, Chicago and other urban centers preparing for a new drive to urge consumers not to buy grapes.

At the center of the struggle once again is Cesar Chavez, who hopes to repeat the success of the 1968-69 boycott that won major concessions for California's 300,000 farm labor force and forced the state vegetable and fruit producers to agree to union representation.

But the last two years have been difficult for Mr. Chavez. He has had to contend not only with resentful growers but also with a competing union, the International Brotherhood of Teamsters. Meanwhile, the strength of the U.F.W. has fallen from a peak of 55,000 members under contract to level somewhere below 10,000 today.

Meany Backs Boycott

In its current efforts, the farm union has the support of George Meany, president of the American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations. Mr. Meany is encouraging the membership of the federation's 111 affiliate unions to participate in the boycott, arguing the liberal church-minority coalition that made the first boycott so effective.

However, to win Mr. Meany backing the farm union has agreed to suspend its most potent weapon of previous struggles with California growers: the secondary boycott, in which consumers are urged not to purchase anything from stores that sell produce picked by non-U.F.W. hands.

Moreover, the struggle of Mr. Chavez's fledgling union for survival is complicated by the emergence of the Mexican American farm worker in California from grinding poverty and scandalous working conditions.

Zeal was the first casualty



Keene Larson conferring with foreman, left, during thinning operation in vineyards in Thermal, Calif. Mr. Larson, one of first California growers to sign a contract with U.F.W. in 1970, now has contract with Teamsters.

worker's combined wages and fringe benefits nearly doubled in the five years after the first nationwide grape boycott.

Added to this is disillusionment among some workers over the union's inability to administer its affairs effectively. Complaints of bureaucratic red tape, inefficiency and broken promises have been heard, with many of the complaints connected with the U.F.W.'s pioneering attempt to replace the traditional farm labor contractor with union hiring hall.

Part of the problem centers on the fact that the farm worker movement was so much the embodiment of one man, Mr. Chavez, who is still adored by the workers.

"Every worker believed his complaint about the union should be personally handled by Cesar," remarked a man who asked that his name not be disclosed. "They didn't want to work through assistants; they needed Cesar's word on it. Similarly, the growers learned that they couldn't get any action—only harassment—by dealing with intermediaries. They had to buttonhole Cesar whenever they could catch him in town."

Another man who counts himself an admirer of Mr. Chavez said that a basic flaw

complaints were based on fear and were being overcome as the union passed through the "growing pains" phase of development.

The union's attempt to implement a hiring hall was an evolutionary move in a labor market where the growers and labor contractors had traditionally dictated who would work.

When the U.F.W. tried to impose union seniority over ranch seniority (most California farms are called ranches), disaffection ran high among seasonal and migrant laborers who traditionally traveled and worked as a family unit. Team seniority innovation split the units, assigning members of a family to different ranches in consideration of seniority alone.

Conversely, permanent workers who had worked on one ranch found themselves assigned to other ranches, or else saw workers from other regions dispatched to the ranch in place of them.

Mr. Chavez contended that the real cause of tension in California agriculture was the Teamsters' Union which, he has charged repeatedly, began signing contracts with growers two years ago in a conspiracy to undercut the U.F.W.

Two growers and a former teamster official are scheduled to stand trial this month in Federal court in San Jose on bribery-kickback charges stemming from union activity in the California lettuce fields.

"If there were no teamsters we'd easily have a \$3 base pay scale instead of \$2.50," Mr. Chavez said, "and our union would have 100,000 workers organized in the state. Don't forget that the teamsters don't organize workers—they organize growers. They sign sweetheart deals with the growers

and tell the workers they now belong to a union."

The teamsters reportedly have embarked on a campaign budgeted at \$100,000 a month to counter some of the bad publicity associated with their efforts in California, and to organize farm workers instead of dealing directly with the growers to work out contracts before the field hands are signed up.

In addition, teamster officials have been assigned to major markets around the country to argue against the grape boycott on the basis that

the twin horse (teamster) union bug on lettuce or grapes is as good as the black eagle (U.F.W.) bug.

Perhaps the individuals most apprehensive over the developments are the growers, who in the span of a few years have moved from intransigence to perplexity over the fact that despite union representation, and union wages, they still face a boycott and economic damage.

"The only way to end this conflict is for Congress to finally bring the farm worker under the National Labor Rela-

tions Act and bring some control to all this madness," said Keene Larson, owner of a 160-acre grape "ranch" in Thermal and one of the first growers in California to sign a contract with the U.F.W. in 1970.

Last month, in what Mr. Larson described as a secret election requested by his workers and supervised by a local Roman Catholic priest, the U.F.W. was voted out of his ranch.

Mr. Larson, rejecting farm union contentions that the election was a sham, said that his workers wanted to be free of all unions after their experience

with the U.F.W., but this week he negotiated a contract with the teamsters.

"Between the time of the election last month and the negotiations with the teamsters," his wife explained, "the Chevistas [U.F.W. organizers] came in and started threatening the workers and they had to run to the teamsters for protection."

"Besides," Mr. Larson added, "our broker in Chicago told us we had to be in one union or the other — he couldn't sell our grapes unless they were picked by union labor."