

Refugees Caught in Union Dispute at Coast Egg Farm

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MOORPARK, Calif., Aug. 8—Phan Than Khiet stands less than 5 feet 6 inches tall. He is thin and wan, and his right arm is gone—hardly someone likely to aggravate a bitter labor dispute. But as he works in the sweltering California heat in a place they call Egg City, he is hearing a word for which there is no counterpart in his native Vietnamese.

The word—and it is always exclaimed emphatically — is "Scab!"

Mr. Khiet, to the people holding red picket flags outside the gates of Egg City, which says it is the largest egg production facility in the world, personifies the fears that many Americans have held about the influx of thousands of Vietnamese refugees to this country. He has taken—or so it is charged—the job of an American.

Such fears are especially acute among people at the low end of the wage scale here in California—those who seek sustenance in farm work and other fields with few requirements for skills, and in some areas, such as the garment industry, where some Vietnamese do



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Phan Than Khiet, who lost his right arm in Vietnam, sorts eggs in Moorpark, Calif.

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Members of the United Farm Workers, who call Vietnamese strike breakers, outside egg plant in Moorpark, Calif.

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have skills.

To a large extent, the Vietnamese have been caught in a crossfire between two rival unions—the United Farm Workers, and the International Brotherhood of Teamsters. The unions have stepped up their five-year organizational battle in the California farmlands because of recently passed legislation that will allow farm workers, for the first time, to choose a union by secret ballot when the law takes effect Aug. 28.

There are indications that the Vietnamese at Egg City are being used as pawns by all sides in the dispute. The United Farm Workers appears to be doing whatever it can to exploit their presence as "strikebreakers"; the teamsters union has taken them in as members and asserts it is doing a good deed; and the Egg City management says that it wants to give refugees who want to work a chance to work.

Mr. Khiet, who is 35 years old, and 13 other refugees have been hired at the sprawling poultry center 52 miles northwest of downtown Los Angeles, where 350 workers, mostly of Mexican descent, walked off the job April 10 after a popular employe was dismissed. And more Vietnamese are on the way.

Last night, the families of some of the Vietnamese arrived. Six more Vietnamese workers are scheduled to come on Monday to work as egg collectors, sorters, checkers, mechanics and in other positions. The owners of the facility have said they are willing to hire up to 100 more Vietnamese, possibly as many as 200.

"They're strikebreakers," says Eliseo Medina, an official of Cesar Chavez's United Farm Workers.

"I'm very, very happy," says Mr. Khiet, who lost his arm as a soldier in South Vietnam and learned English as an employe for the American military forces. "I badly needed a job to take care of my family. I hope to work here all of my life."

The Vietnamese were brought here from a resettlement camp in Northern California by an organization called Food for the Hungry, one of several groups that have been resettling Vietnamese. Originally, six other workers were

hired, but they left after a few days either because they did not like the work or it was too strenuous for them. After a large group representing the U.F.W. demonstrated at Food for the Hungry's offices in Glendale early this week, officers of the organization told the Vietnamese here that it would probably be best if they left. But officials of Egg City urged them to stay on if they wanted to, and the remaining Vietnamese voted unanimously to stay on the job.

They are living in two old houses near Egg City that were rented by Food for the Hungry, and they are using a van lent by the company to get back and forth to the job.

3 Million Chickens

The setting for the dispute is an all but self-contained, 350-acre world situated among citrus groves and rolling hills staked out in the early nineteen-sixties by Julius Goldman, Polish engineer who had fled Nazi Germany. Earlier, he had started an egg business in the San Fernando Valley nearer Los Angeles with 3,000 chickens, but was forced to move here by an onrush of housing developments.

Now, with much of the production automated, Egg City produces eggs at an awesome rate; more than 3 million

chickens lay 1.8 million eggs daily.

Five years ago, at a time Mr. Chavez was trying to organize California farm workers, Mr. Goldman, as did many big California agribusiness entrepreneurs, signed a contract giving the teamsters exclusive right to represent his workers.

The 350 workers who struck April 10 were teamsters, but their union did not sanction the strike, and it in fact helped Mr. Goldman recruit replacements for the strikers. The company says that the man whose discharge led to the original walkout was not doing his work properly; the U.F.W., which took over leadership of the strike, says the man had been active in attempting to organize the workers to support the farm workers in the forthcoming elections to pick between the rival labor organizations.

Calls Them Captives

"The problem with the Vietnamese is that they're a captive labor force," Mr. Medina, the U.F.W. organizer, said. "They've just been through a traumatic experience and are very insecure. When the election is held, they will have to take the company's side and go with the teamsters because they have no place to go. That's why it's important—the election."

While some striking employes

have shouted in anger at the Vietnamese, Mr. Medina stressed that most did not resent the refugees personally.

"It is the Government's fault; the Government shouldn't have allowed them to become strikebreakers," he said.

John Rogers, a vice president of Egg City, defended the decision to hire them, saying: "In the first place, these people were brought by our Government; we feel if there is a complaint to be lodged, it should be lodged with the Government. And, they're not strikebreakers; if anything, the first group we hired after the strike might be called that."

"We hired the Vietnamese because we needed people—we still do," he added. "We're not like a factory where you can turn off a switch and close it down. As it is, we had to sell about one million chickens because we didn't have enough people."

The Vietnamese, for their part, seem delighted. They are paid on a schedule negotiated between Egg City and the teamsters union—\$2.50 an hour to start, \$2.75 after one month, and \$2.95 after three months. With their first weekly pay checks due next week, they plan to take over rent on their houses, which is now paid by Food for the Hungry, and they are talking about buying a communal car to get around in.