

Farmhands Seeking a Union Walk 400 Miles to See Texas Governor

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AUSTIN, Tex., April 4—On a sweltering summer day nearly 11 years ago, a band of Mexican-American farm workers set out on foot from the lush Rio Grand Valley to carry their hopes for an organized labor union to John B. Connally, then the Governor of Texas. Mr. Connally advised them in advance that he would not be at the Governor's mansion when they called.

Thirty-seven days ago, a second delegation of farmhands left from San Juan Tex., on the Mexican border, carrying the same hopes over the same 400 dusty miles. Today, the delegation's leader, Antonio Orendain, was formally received by Dolph Briscoe, the current Governor.

The farm workers still have no recognized union here but, considering the state of farm labor relations in Texas, the Governor's reception amounts to a large step forward.

Three days after the group began the long walk, Gonzalo Barrientos, a Texas state representative who is a Mexican-American, introduced a bill that would allow farm workers here to hold union elections and bargain collectively.

Drive Began in 1966

Although efforts to obtain such a law began here in 1966, about the same time as they did in California, no one, including Mr. Orendain, thinks that the current bill has a chance of passage before the legislative session ends in May. There will not be another opportunity to consider it until the Legislature, which convenes biennially, meets again in 1979.

Two years ago, the California Legislature adopted a bill granting collective bargaining rights to farm workers.

On Saturday, Mr. Orendain sat on the cement steps of the local university gymnasium and tried to make himself heard above the music of the mariachis inside, where members and friends of his Texas Farm Workers Union, tired after the long trek, were dancing and drinking beer.

"Texas is not like California," he said. "California is more progressive."

But Mr. Orendain, a long-time associate of Cesar Chavez, the California farm workers' leader until he broke with the Chavez organization in 1975, seems optimistic despite an almost complete absence of public and political support.

The obstacles that Mr. Orendain and his followers face are formidable and, in some ways, peculiar to Texas. Although the landowners in California make up a powerful segment of the establishment there, in Texas they are the establishment.

Owning land is almost a social and political prerequisite in this vast state and, while the farms and ranches of the Houston surgeons, the Dallas gas and oil men and the Austin politicians are often small compared with the agribusiness enterprises of South Texas, their owners frequently come to view the world from the perspective of the landlord, or patron, as he is known to the hired hands.

Legendary Ranches

The late Lyndon B. Johnson's LBJ Ranch is legendary, and former Governor Connally owns a similar one. The family of Democratic Senator Lloyd Bentsen, whose holdings in the Rio Grande Valley include citrus groves, employs Mexican-American laborers, and a spokesman for Governor Briscoe, who owns a ranch southwest of here, said that he "would imagine" that Mr. Briscoe employed some, too.

Another obstacle to Mr. Orendain's efforts has been the large force of Mexican

laborers on the south side of the border who, upon obtaining temporary permits known as "green cards," can cross into the United States to pick the oranges, grapefruits, melons and chili peppers that grow on the fertile land.

An attempted strike by Texas farmhands in 1966, their first, was broken by the increased use of "green cards," Mr. Orendain said, and by Texas Rangers who arrested strikers and sympathizers in large numbers.

The second attempt, in 1975 to organize a walkout in the fields also failed, he said, but not because of an influx of cheap labor from across the border. It was in that strike that C. L. Miller, a ranch supervisor, opened fire on the strikers and wounded 11 of them.

"After that," Mr. Orendain said, "the Mexican people no longer come to break the strike."

The third difficulty has arisen from what some of the Texas farm workers see as a lack of political and financial support from Mr. Chavez and his United Farm Workers organization.

The long march ended yesterday as 800 of Mr. Orendain's followers, many of them picked up in the last few miles, arrived at the state capital for more speeches and music. Most of the walkers seemed glad for a chance to sit on the grass and rest. But Mr. Orendain was thinking ahead. He was thinking of President Carter's concern for the treatment of minorities abroad.

"Carter keeps talking about human rights everywhere around the place," he said. "Maybe we have to walk all the way to Washington to say to Mr. Carter, 'Why don't you give us the human rights before you give it to people outside?'"



Gonzalo Barrientos, a state representative from Austin, Tex., speaking to a group of farm workers Sunday on the steps of the state Capitol.

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