

# Chavez's Farm Workers Union, Once Fighting to Survive, Senses Victory

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LOS ANGELES, Sept. 9 — The United Farm Workers of America, which seemed to be struggling merely to survive a few weeks ago, now appears to be close to winning one of its most important victories since Cesar Chavez began trying to organize the farm workers 19 years ago.

Although a seven-month-old selective strike continues, California vegetable growers acknowledge that when it ends there is little doubt that the new minimum hourly wage for unionized farm workers in California will be \$5, an increase in one year of 35 percent.

For Mr. Chavez's union, the strike represented a major watershed: It was the first aimed at winning wage rates comparable to those paid other workers. His union's earlier strikes had focused merely on winning recognition and collective bargaining rights.

The turnaround occurred largely because of a contractual breakthrough by the International Brotherhood of Teamsters, the Chavez union's antagonist in a bitter decade-long battle to represent California farm workers that was eventually won by the United Farm Workers.

## Growers Rejected Demands

The United Farm Workers began the strike Jan. 19 in the Imperial Valley near the Mexican border after growers ridiculed the union's demands for wage increases of upwards of 40 percent, maintaining that raising rates to \$5 an hour could bankrupt many vegetable producers in California.

Later, as crops matured, the strike spread throughout much of the state, marked by repeated episodes of violence. But although several growers suffered heavy losses, most managed to continue limited production with nonunion workers. As a result, the strike had had relatively little impact on consumers.

Virtually all of the members of Mr. Chavez's union are of Mexican ancestry and most are believed to be Mexican nationals. As the strike wore on, many members drifted back to work, unable to support themselves, and Mr. Chavez warned publicly last month that his union was fighting for its survival.

In the past, Mr. Chavez managed to divide growers and to end up gaining a satisfactory settlement from one that eventually set the pattern for all. This time growers for the most part were united in resisting the demands.

The breakthrough was achieved not by Mr. Chavez's union but by his old rivals, the teamsters. Three years ago, after a decade of feuding between the two unions, the teamsters elected to bow out

of competition to organize farm workers. But they continued to represent some workers, including those of one of the largest producers in the Salinas Valley, Bud Antle Inc.

In late July the teamsters negotiated a contract that achieved what the U.F.W. had been unable to do — a contract providing an hourly wage of \$4.90 for some field workers and \$5 for others.

"Once Antle settled, the rate had been set," said Roland Kemp, an official of Sun Harvest Inc., one of the state's largest lettuce producers. Last week, Sun Harvest signed a contract with the U.F.W. based on the teamsters settlement, putting pressure on smaller growers to follow suit. The contract provides an immediate raise in the hourly rate to \$5 and additional increases over three years that bring the total to \$5.70.

Ed Angsteadt, an officer of the Grower-Shipper Vegetable Association in the Salinas Valley, said that given these settlements, most growers now felt they had no choice but to accept the same economic terms.

Long-term followers of California agriculture say the effects of the higher wages for farm workers would have several effects.

To consumers, they said, it would mean a few extra pennies added to the price of a head of lettuce or a pound of fresh broccoli. But they stressed that labor costs accounted for only a small portion of what consumers pay for fruits and vegetables. Thus, they said, the added cost for consumers would not be anywhere near the 35 percent increase in wages.

For the union, the success is expected to strengthen substantially Mr. Chavez's

hand in organizing farm workers in California and other states.

Growers, meanwhile, say they expect the new contract settlement to accelerate the use of labor-saving mechanical harvesting devices and to speed the flight of farmers from California to other states, Mexico and Central America where prevailing wages are lower.

They acknowledge that higher labor costs are only one of the problems they face. Rapidly rising costs for transportation, they say, have increased the cost of shipping a truckload of lettuce from California to New York to more than \$3,800, an increase of at least \$800.

"Between the great increase in transportation costs and the increase in labor costs and other things, California may have to go out of farming," Mr. Angsteadt said.