

CHAVEZ AND FARM WORKERS ADAPT TACTICS TO THE TIMES

By ROBERT LINDSEY, SPECIAL TO THE NEW YORK TIMES

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More than 20 years after he began his struggle to unionize the fields of the Southwest, Cesar Chavez is trying to restore the momentum of the United Farm Workers.

Growers and California Republican leaders are trying to reduce the power of the union, which is suffering from internal dissent and a growth rate that has leveled off. In the face of all this, Mr. Chavez is reverting to his earliest and most successful tactic, the consumer boycott, updated with tools of the modern political campaign. He is also seeking to consolidate the union's role as the most influential Hispanic political force in this state.

What union officers call their new "high-tech consumer boycott" is directed against Lucky Stores Inc., the nation's third-largest supermarket chain, in an effort to force it to stop selling a brand of lettuce produced in the Salinas Valley by nonunion workers employed by Bruce Church Inc.

Store Chain Resists Boycott

Officials of Lucky Stores say they have been resisting efforts by Mr. Chavez since November 1979 to persuade them to stop selling the lettuce, because they believe it is inappropriate to take sides in such a labor-management dispute.

"If you give in to one, you have to ask a serious question: where does it end?" James W. Koerlin, an executive of the company, said in an interview. He said the boycott had had no appreciable effect on sales.

The boycott campaign is headed by Richard Ross, 33 years old, the son of migrant farm workers. Mr. Ross said in an interview that 13 years ago he was dismissed as a field hand by Bruce Church Inc. After finishing college, he became a successful political consultant to Democrats in Sacramento.

"Cesar told me, 'I can't afford to pay you,' " Mr. Ross said in an interview. Remembering the day he was dismissed, Mr. Ross said he answered: "You don't have to. I just want to be in the room on the day they sign a contract."

Computerized Analyses Used

Mr. Ross said the campaign was initially directed at 13 Lucky outlets but was being expanded to 45. The heart of the current campaign, he said, is the use of computerized demographic analyses to choose consumers whose ethnic background and other characteristics make them likely to participate in a boycott. They are sent carefully written appeals, and the mailings are followed by

opinion polls to determine if they are having the desired effect. If necessary, the appeals are then rewritten.

"I told Cesar the old days of Xeroxed leaflets were over," Mr. Ross said. "The kids that used to march in parades against the Vietnam war are now driving BMW's and going out for Sunday brunch. You've got to do something different." Grower Cites Union's Politics

Michael Payne, an executive at Bruce Church here, said his company's dispute "has nothing to do with economics - it's over who will control the work force."

He said his company paid field workers a minimum of \$6.69 an hour, based on piecework rates, and an average of \$9.50 hourly. Along with other growers, he said the company objected to a standard provision in U.F.W. contracts allowing the union to take a job away from any worker not in "good standing" with the union. He said such workers in the past had refused to pay into the union's political action fund or otherwise opposed union directives.

"The U.F.W. is not a union," Mr. Payne said. "It's a political movement in which Chavez has latched on to the workers of the 'ag' community and confiscated their resources to get political power."

A Family With Power

Mr. Chavez denies such allegations, but he and his family remain a potent political force. Last weekend Mr. Chavez's eldest son, Fernando, a 33-year-old San Jose lawyer, was elected president of the Mexican-American Political Association. The defeated incumbents said his victory was engineered by the United Farm Workers. The incumbents had been seeking to reduce the association's traditional alliance with the Democratic Party and make it more bipartisan at a time when politicians were paying increasing attention to the state's growing Hispanic population.

Julio Calderon, who lost the presidency by 22 votes, said in an interview that a few weeks before the convention union checks were used to pay dues for more than 440 new members of the 2,200-member organization.

Fernando Chavez denied he was a "front man" for his father or the United Farm Workers. Friends confirmed that he had a reputation for being independent of his father. 21-Year Organizing Effort

Cesar Chavez claims credit for substantially improving the lot of farm workers since he began trying to organize them in 1962. He started out in this state, but he has also made efforts, with limited success, in Texas and Arizona. In 1975 the union was granted official sanction when the California Legislature passed the country's first collective bargaining act for farm laborers.

Since then, the average hourly wage of those covered by U.F.W. contracts has increased to more than \$6 from about \$2. Last month, in the agricultural San Joaquin Valley, the union established the first of what it says will be a network of radio stations to carry its message to Spanish-

speaking farm workers in the state and, if necessary, to arouse support for U.F.W. strikes and boycotts and for the candidates it favors.

Despite its gains, the union has failed to make inroads into the many parts of California's vast agricultural industry where workers barely average \$3.50 an hour, industry and union sources agree. The union has had other problems as well. Asian Refugees Cause Tension

In the San Joaquin Valley, long an organizing goal of the union, refugees from Southeast Asia are causing new tensions by offering to work for less than the immigrants from Mexico who for years have worked in the California fields.

Many of the stronger leaders of the union from its early days have left after breaking with Mr. Chavez. Nine elected officials here have sued Mr. Chavez, charging he dismissed them unlawfully after they resisted his policies.

After the union responded by filing a slander and libel suit against these dissidents, 361 U.F.W. members filed a countersuit in Federal District Court, charging that the union had violated the officers' rights to free speech.

Meanwhile, the rising cost of farm labor that the union has brought about has accelerated development of mechanical harvesting equipment and caused the loss of hundreds of thousands of farm jobs over the last decade. New Legislative Alliances

Since the departure from government last January of Gov. Edmund G. Brown Jr., a staunch supporter of the union, Mr. Chavez has formed an alliance with Democratic leaders of the State Legislature, to whom the union last year contributed more than \$700,000. The money came from a fund raised by deducting one day's pay annually from each of its 100,000 members, according to the union.

Fulfilling a campaign promise, Gov. George Deukmejian, the Republican who succeeded Mr. Brown, took 25 percent out of the budget of the board that enforces the agricultural collective bargaining act.

It was a setback for the union. But because of the alliance formed by Mr. Chavez with Democrats Willie Brown Jr., the Speaker of the Assembly, and David Roberti, president pro tem of the Senate, few politicians expect legislation to be passed that would trim the union's power.