

CESAR CHAVEZ TRIES NEW DIRECTIONS FOR UNITED FARM WORKERS; News Analysis

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Cesar Chavez, who led the successful battle to establish America's first farm workers' union, is moving in several directions in an effort to transform his union into a broader-based political force. At the annual convention of the United Farm Workers last week in Fresno, Calif., Mr. Chavez told reporters that he had formed what he calls a "Chicano lobby" to help Democratic candidates and had ordered computerized direct-mail equipment to help spread a political message to members and supporters. He also indicated that the union was interested in representing the needs of urban Hispanic Californians as well as farm workers, its traditional constituency.

As well, Mr. Chavez gave new details of a previously announced effort to resume the consumer boycott, the union's oldest and most successful weapon.

Many Advances Jeopardized

There are some farm union specialists in California, however, who wondered whether the plan he described was not more a wistful effort to relive triumphs of the past than a realistic strategy for the 1980's.

Twenty-one years after Mr. Chavez, a migrant worker from Yuma, Ariz., began his campaign to organize field workers, and eight years after California passed the nation's first collective bargaining act for farm workers, many of the tentative gains he made are in jeopardy.

In Sacramento, Gov. George Deukmejian, a Republican who received large campaign contributions from farmers, has sharply cut the budget of the Agricultural Labor Relations Board, which enforces the act. One result, farm union officials say, is a huge backlog of unresolved complaints against growers by workers. Problems Beset Union

The Governor has also tried to make the agency less sympathetic to the union. In the past, some Democratic appointees to the board have been accused of favoring Mr. Chavez.

Meanwhile, economics, internal problems and a changing public perception of the United Farm Workers have caused problems for the union.

According to Mr. Chavez, the union has contracts covering 43,000 jobs in the state, a minority of the state's farm workers, which state officials estimate may number 250,000 in the peak harvesting season, about half of them illegal aliens from Mexico.

Even Mr. Chavez's critics in the produce industry admit that workers covered by U.F.W. contracts have made remarkable gains in wages and fringe benefits. Typically, the union's members receive more than \$6 an hour, plus pension and health benefits. Higher Wages for Farm Workers

Some growers even concede that because of the threat of unionization they have raised wages for nonunion field workers since 1975, to about \$4 an hour from a little more than \$2 an hour.

The acres in the state under cultivation grew by one million, to 8.6 million, in the late 1970's. But the United Farm Workers appears not to have shared proportionately in this growth, in part, it seems, because of the success it has had in raising farm wages.

The increased cost of labor in recent years has spurred growers to invest increasingly in harvesting machinery that requires fewer workers.

As well, the continuing flow of illegal aliens to California from Mexico has helped create a large surplus of labor and thus made it more difficult for the union to recruit new members.

Against this backdrop of difficulties, Mr. Chavez is seeking to recapture some of the former momentum of the union by organizing a boycott against Lucky Stores, a major supermarket chain that sells a brand of lettuce picked by nonunion workers. A Boycott for a New Era

There was an edge of nostalgic pride to his speech in Fresno when Mr. Chavez, after angrily denouncing Governor Deukmejian for what he called the undermining of the Agricultural Labor Relations Board, told delegates:

"Let us take off where we left off in 1975 with the most effective weapon which served us so well - the consumer boycott - and see how they like it."

In 1975, the year California passed its farm labor law, a national opinion poll indicated that about 12 percent of the population had joined in a boycott of table grapes organized by Mr. Chavez.

It remains to be seen, however, if the public will be as responsive to the charismatic union leader as it once was.

Much of the U.F.W.'s early success, especially in winning the support of liberals, stemmed from its role as a downtrodden David battling the corporate Goliaths of the farming industry, a battle that had echoes of the grim tales of exploitation chronicled by John Steinbeck. An Aura of Conventionality

Since 1975, as the U.F.W. has made a transformation from a kind of social movement to a conventional labor union, there are indications here that public perceptions about the union have changed, too.

To many middle-class young people and their parents, the \$6.50 an hour that unionized farm workers earn is scarcely an exploitative wage.

And, increasingly, news reports have focused more on the kind of activities that many associate with unions, such as occasional reports of violence during strikes, assertions by dissident members that their rights have been abused by the union leadership and disclosures that the union's lobbyists have become big contributors to state legislators in Sacramento.

Aides to Mr. Chavez say they expect to deal with changing perceptions by what they call a high technology campaign, including the use of computers and demographic studies to select people who are most likely to support a boycott and an attempt to change their buying habits by "altering the image" of Lucky Stores.