

UNION'S FUTURE COULD HINGE ON BATTLE WITH LETTUCE GROWER; GLORY DAYS ARE FADING FOR CHAVEZ AND U.F.W.

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A figure that seemed out of the past appeared on the nightly news in California last week - Cesar Chavez, waving a picket sign and doing what he perhaps does best, attracting the attention of television cameramen as a spokesman for farm workers.

These have been rough times for Mr. Chavez. Twenty-two years ago, in the dusty vineyards of California's Central Valley, he launched his ultimately successful effort to organize a union of farm workers. Almost a decade ago, his work produced the nation's first collective bargaining law for field hands. The one-time migrant worker managed well as leader of a social movement. But the operating union he organized has been torn by internal dissent and complaints that Mr. Chavez refuses to share power.

Almost all of the inner circle of aides who helped Mr. Chavez achieve his dream of creating the United Farm Workers of America - Jerry Cohen, Marshall Ganz, Gilbert Padilla and Eliseo Medina - are gone now. Some were victims of purges from the top, others resigned in frustration or bitterness.

Mr. Chavez's best political friend, former Democratic Gov. Edmund G. Brown Jr., left Sacramento in 1982 to run a losing campaign for the United States Senate. The man who succeeded him, George Deukmejian, a Republican, has sought to reduce the tight control granted Mr. Chavez and his union by Mr. Brown's appointees to the state board that administers the collective bargaining law.

Last summer, the International Brotherhood of Teamsters, the once bitter foe of Mr. Chavez that in 1977 gave him a monopoly to organize field hands, refused to renew an agreement not to compete with the U.F.W. Mr. Chavez, the teamsters said, had failed to exploit the opportunity of the fields of California.

The liberal press seems also to have turned on Mr. Chavez. He has been the subject of a series of recent critical reports. Last month he sued The Village Voice, the New York weekly, for what he called a "corrupt and immoral attack" on the union and for "creating the false and defamatory impression" that he had become "ineffective, paranoid, incompetent, defensive, immoral, bitter, despotic and a close associate of criminals." The reference was apparently to Charles Dederich, founder of the Synanon organization.

But even Mr. Chavez's harshest critics, California growers, acknowledge that once-exploited farm workers as a group have benefited richly from his organizing efforts, and merely from the threat of them. Paid an average of less than \$2 an hour in the mid-1960's, California agricultural workers - a labor force of about 300,000 made up mostly of illegal aliens from Mexico - now earn an average of about \$5.30 an hour. Fewer than 25,000 of the total are covered by United Farm Workers contracts. Those who are covered average nearly \$7 an hour.

The 'Good Standing' Clause

Such gains notwithstanding, Mr. Chavez's union is at a pivotal moment. Its future, perhaps survival, is linked closely to the outcome of a bitter dispute with a single large lettuce producer here in the Salinas Valley of Central California.

Bruce Church Inc. was among the first California growers to sign a contract with the United Farm Workers after the state's Agricultural Relations Act was passed in 1975. That contract expired in 1979 and the two sides have been battling over terms of a new one since then. The company says that it pays about \$7 an hour to unskilled field hands and substantially more to other workers. The contract battle, it claims, is not over economic matters but over insistence by Mr. Chavez on a clause, accepted by some growers, that allows the union to order the dismissal of members who are not in "good standing" with the union. The clause allows the U.F.W. to deny work to members who disagree with Mr. Chavez or refuse to give a day's pay annually to the union for distribution to political leaders in the state. Michael Payne, an executive of Bruce Church Inc., contends that the "good standing" clause and other contract provisions demanded by the union "would give Chavez absolute control over our work force, which we aren't going to give to anybody." For his part, Mr. Chavez calls the good standing clause essential to his efforts to build a strong, permanent union in a business where workers tend to move often and where union organizing successes are constantly under threat from an influx of immigrants willing to work for lower pay. The State Agricultural Relations Board, which administers the farm labor law, has accused both parties of bad-faith bargaining in the long dispute. To force Bruce Church Inc. to capitulate, the union for the past year has been conducting what it calls a "high tech" boycott - a direct-mail campaign against certain retailers that sell Church lettuce. A computer is used to select potential sympathizers, identified by the union as "white liberals, blacks, Jews and union families." Letters go out to them accusing the retailer of doing business with a company that exploits farm workers.

There is no evidence yet that consumers have reacted in large numbers by refusing to patronize the targeted retailers. But executives of three large chains targeted in the campaign - Lucky Stores, A.&P. and the McDonald's fast food chain - responded to threats of such a campaign by stopping their purchases from Church. The lettuce company says that it recently had to lay off 100 workers, about 10 percent of its labor force, because of the boycott.

For Mr. Chavez, who was demonstrating last week in front of Alpha Beta Stores, the latest grocery chain targeted in the campaign, the boycott has provided hope of a comeback for the union after his long series of setbacks. He announced recently that the U.F.W. would embark soon on a similar boycott against non-union producers of table grapes. "If this doesn't work," he said, "it's the end of the union."

