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MARCH TO SACRAMENTO

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Lodi

“Huelga, huelga... Viva la huelga... Viva la causa... Viva, viva...”

It sounds endlessly over the flat, green San Joaquin Valley. “Long live the strike... Long live the cause,” chant the sun-burnt, footsore marchers, 200-strong.

Swarthy Mexican-American and Filipino farm workers; intense students; union men and women from the city; Negro civil rights workers; nuns in flowing habits; priests and ministers in somber black suits; children, uncomfortable in the broiling sun, but chanting rather than crying.

This is the 25-day, 300-mile march of California’s striking vineyard workers from their Delano, Kern county, headquarters to Sacramento.

There, on Easter Sunday, they’ll demand “justice, freedom and respect,” in the form of laws which would grant them the protections long granted most other workers – mainly the right to bargain collectively with their employers.

This has been the main demand, too, in their seven-month strike in Kern and Tulare counties, under the banners of the National Farm Workers Association and the AFL-CIO’s Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee.

On Tuesday, five days short of the capital, they started out early from tiny Washington Park in Stockton for the 13-mile walk to Lodi. Here is the picture:

They line up in quick order. At the head of the march a man wearing a broad-brimmed straw hat and rumpled work clothes carries a silk tapestry of Mexico’s patron saint, Our Lady of Guadalupe. Flanking it are the U.S. and Mexican flags.

Behind, in bold profusion, wave the banners of the Farmers Workers Association, brilliant red, a stark black thunderbird symbol in the center.

A leader announces another of the donations – at least \$3000 worth so far – which have financed the march, and they’re off through Stockton, Highway Patrolmen leading the way, marchers’ chants filling the air.

Onlookers smile, even cheer, a few jeer, some glare, as the marchers move two-by-two in an arrow-straight line. They march onto the asphalt of the Lower Sacramento road, off U.S. 99, past rows of garish hamburger stands and gas stations and into the fertile countryside.

Without incident, they walk for nearly two hours, then stop to drink, eagerly, cups of chilled water served from one of the trucks following. They sit in the hot sun of an open field, ignoring the shadowed lawn of the sparkling “Pacific Arms Apartments” next to them.

A few songs of the Mexican Revolution, and the marchers set out again. The Rev. David Havens of the Protestant Migrant Ministry brings up the rear, pulling a red wagon by a rope attached to his waist. In it are his two daughters, aged 3 and 4, enjoying themselves hugely.

A little way down the road the line stops again, and the girls run to try to give a cow a glass of water.

It’s time for lunch. Frijoles and tortillas, sandwiches, iced tea, fruit, cake and cookies. It came to the marchers, as all their food has come, through local Mexican-American organizations, unions, churches, fellow farm workers and other sympathizers, who also provide marchers their nightly shelter.

The Rev. Thomas Fry of San Jose sits in a circle of marchers, trying to sew a tear in his black trousers with bright green thread (“because the march started on St. Patrick’s Day”).

Two nuns who had been with Father Fry in the Selma March join the others to clean up the area and, within minutes, there’s not a shred of evidence that 200 people had just finished a picnic lunch by the roadside.

Inside the marchers’ press truck, as they move out, is Terry Cannon, an extremely articulate 26-year-old from the student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee. He explains, between a stream of calls on a mobile telephone, what he thinks the march has accomplished.

“We’ve left a trace of ‘huelga’ behind us,” Cannon says, by planting the seeds for worker organizations in farm communities up and down the valley.

He speaks, too, of rallying “an enormous amount” of farm worker support from church groups, unions and liberals in general, and of making the strikers’ cause a political issue.

But what of the immediate goal, to get those legal protections from the Governor and the State Legislature?

Few of the marchers seem to expect swift action – not even Robert Bustos, the 23-year-old grape picker elected to captain the march.

“But since Governor Brown won’t come to us,” he said, toying with the whistle he carries proudly on a string around his neck, “we’ll go to him. Then we’ll see what happens.”

He smiles and points to a large button pinned to his gray shirt. “If we had him, we’d already have won” – him being Emiliano Zapata. A fierce likeness of the legendary hero of the Mexican Revolution glares from the center of the button, ringed by the words, “We Shall Overcome.”

The marchers, in any case, are certain they’ll make it to Sacramento.

“Tired?” asks Carolina Franco, a 22-year-old marcher in bright green slacks. “Never. This is too wonderful a chance to do better. I couldn’t finish school – I had to work to help my mother. But I want my brothers to finish.”

At the other end of the age scale, Librado Chavez expresses similar sentiments. He’s 82, but here he is, with his wife, marching tall and patriarch-like, the father of strike leader Cesar Chavez.

Chavez, the 38-year-old director of the Farm Workers Association, is away, at a meeting in Los Angeles. (A meeting, it was disclosed later, which brought the strikers a major victory – recognition of their association as the sole bargaining agent for workers on the farms of Schenley Industries, one of the largest of the struck growers.)

But though Chavez is away, the marchers’ chants, as usual, include “Viva Cesar Chavez.”

These chants, and others, continue, as the marchers reach Lodi’s Legion Lake Park to sprawl on the banks, eat dinner and hold another of their nightly rallies.

Friendly policemen guide about 350 people to the grassy spot where they sit facing the flatbed of a truck in the chill evening air. The lead banners are marched to this stage, song sheets are passed out, a visiting minister delivers an invocation.

Welcoming speeches are made by local Mexican-American leaders. There are songs, money is collected, and a broadly satirical skit on the strike draws loud laughter.

Master of ceremonies Luis Valdez, his flowing mustache quivering, dramatically reads the “Plan of Delano” in Spanish. He calls for the audience to join in “a social movement” that is spreading “wherever there are Mexican people, wherever there are farm workers...”

“In order to survive we are ready to give up everything, even our lives, in our fight for social justice... without violence... for the purpose of ending the poverty, the misery, the injustice with the hope that our children will not be exploited as we have been.”