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THE TEAMSTERS MOVE IN

By Dick Meister

An astonishing thing happened in the Salinas Valley and environs the other day: About 200 growers announced they had signed agreements with the Teamsters Union.

The growers are perhaps the country's most important targets for union organizers; they had been among the most violent opponents of the unionization of field workers and, until their announcement in late July, they had given no outward sign of changing the position they had held for more than a half-century.

Why the sudden shift? And, if the growers finally were to come to terms with a union, why the Teamsters, which represented only a relative handful of field workers? Why not the United Farm Workers Organizing Committee, the AFL-CIO affiliate which was waging a major campaign to organize California's field workers?

The organizing committee had a ready – and angry – response. The grower-Teamster contracts, charged committee director Cesar Chavez, were “sweetheart agreements” designed to help Anglo growers and Teamster officials at the expense of the Mexican American workers covered by the contracts.

Teamster and grower spokesmen had other explanations. But that did not keep Chavez and his supporters from demanding that the growers sign agreements with the organizing committee instead.

Most growers refused the demand – and that is why pickets have appeared at markets everywhere to urge shoppers to bypass lettuce. That is why the prices of lettuce and some other fruits and vegetables have been up and the supplies down. That is why field workers walked off their jobs at farms in the Salinas and Santa Maria Valleys which grow much of the country's fruits and vegetables, and why sometime violent pickets and counter pickets have appeared at the farms.

It is one of the most significant labor struggles ever, one at least as important as the Organizing Committee's five-year-long effort to organize California's grape industry. It began, in fact, as a direct result of the Organizing Committee's success in finally winning union contracts from the state's grape growers.

Loath as they might have been to admit it publicly, most grower spokesmen conceded privately that the grape settlement signaled the inevitable. California's farm workers finally were going to be organized, and those in the Salinas Valley would be the next target of the organizers.

There were only two apparent alternatives: sign contracts with the Organizing Committee or face a boycott such as that which cost grape growers million of dollars before they signed.

There was, however, another alternative that had been overlooked previously. The growers could arrange to sign with another union that would not demand as much as the organizing committee.

At the same time, the growers also could ease the sting of a boycott by pointing out that, unlike the growers who had been the targets in the grape boycott, they were unionized.

Thus, the growers signed the agreements with the Teamsters Union, just a day before Chavez announced the end of the grape strike and boycott and the beginning of new organizing effort in the Salinas Valley region.

The agreements were by far the most extensive in farm labor history. The growers produce, on the farms that blanket a 100-mile stretch of extremely fertile valley land, most of the country's iceberg lettuce, and much of its strawberries and broccoli, cauliflower, tomatoes, carrots, artichokes, celery, garlic and other vegetables.

The growers include some of the country's most influential corporations and, during the harvest peak each year, they employ between 50,000 and 70,000 field workers, or three to four times the entire membership of the Farm Workers Organizing Committee.

The workers were not asked if they wanted any organization to reach agreements for them. But the agreements nevertheless require them to join the Teamsters within ten days of taking a job and pay union dues of \$1.25 a week, which are to be deducted automatically from their paychecks.

The workers were not asked, either, to ratify the terms of the agreements which are to govern their working lives for the next five years. Besides the union shop requirement and the usual prohibition against strikes during the contract period, the agreements set base pay at \$1.75 to \$1.85 an hour for most workers this year as compared to the previous rates of generally \$1.25 to \$1.75.

Piece-rate bonuses also are provided, as previously, and the basic rate is to rise to \$1.21 to \$2.33 an hour by the end of the five-year contract period. Workers also get unemployment insurance coverage and unspecified health and welfare benefits; a formal grievance procedure is set up, and there are minimum safety standards which require growers, for instance, to provide protective clothing to workers who are assigned to certain jobs.

The contracts demanded by the Organizing Committee, and granted by grape growers, are two-year agreements, meaning workers have the chance to press demands to meet future conditions – an opportunity they do not have under the exceptionally long-term agreements signed by the Teamsters.

The Organizing Committee agreements also call for a bit more pay generally – a base of \$2 to \$2.15 this year, in most cases – and some overtime pay, paid holidays and vacations for some workers, and 12 to 15 cents an hour per worker in employer contributions to health and welfare programs.

However, the crucial differences between the Teamster and Organizing Committee agreements are not financial. The provisions that really set them apart, and which illustrate as much about the current dispute as anything, are those which delineate the power given field workers and their union.

Under the Organizing Committee's agreements, growers must follow the employment system commonly used by waterfront employers, building contractors and others, including many of those who employ Teamster truck drivers and warehousemen.

This requires the growers to seek workers from the committee's hiring hall before going to other sources such as labor contractors whom they favor but who are opposed as parasites by many farm workers.

The Organizing Committee agreements also require foremen to be union members, although they remain responsible to management, prohibit growers from using seven dangerous pesticides including DDT, and require them to consult with workers' committees before using any other.

Chavez and his supporters say they seek these things as a way to finally give farm workers some control over their work. But Herb Fleming, chief grower spokesman, says the Organizing Committee "is demanding the right to run our companies" and is seeking to "promote the union and its leaders."

The Teamster agreements, on the other hand, "promote the welfare of the workers." They do not call for a hiring hall. Growers can get their workers anywhere, as long as they deduct Teamster dues from their paychecks; foremen need not be union members, and workers have no voice in pesticide use.

Field workers, it is also important to note, have less voice in union operations under Teamster agreements. The Organizing Committee is quite purposely run from the bottom up by farm workers themselves, in contrast to the way the previous – and therefore unsuccessful – organizing efforts were run, from the top down by outside organizers.

Teamsters operate in the old style, however. Their officers negotiate contracts for workers and provide other services in exchange for dues, meanwhile showing little interest in the broad social issues that also concern the Organizing Committee.

Teamster views on the broader issues seem more in line with those of the growers. They were among the Anglos who swarmed into the valley as migrant Dust Bowl refugees in the 1930s and who today resent the Mexican-American farm workers in the same way they once were resented as invading "okies."

Some growers even took part in strikes in those days before rising to farm management and ownership. But poverty and powerlessness are behind them; their concerns now are those of white middle-class America – and so, it appears, are those of Bill Grami, Teamsters' chief farm organizer.

For instance, Grami complained in a recent outburst against the Organizing Committee of “getting so fed up with the lack of law and order in this country that it is driving me, a life-long Democrat, to vote for the conservative candidates this time... The conservative candidates symbolize the changes we need to get some law and order in this country again.” (Yes, he meant Ronald Reagan, among others.)

Teamster officials, it is also clear, have been far more concerned with the position of the workers – also large Mexican American – whom they have represented for many years in canneries, frozen food plants and other parts of the food processing industry. For the Teamsters’ principal interest in the field workers has been to see that they do not disrupt the flow of food to processing plants.

This is why the Teamsters was the only major union in the country to support the bracero program, which, until 1965, allowed growers to import masses of Mexican field workers and so depress wages and working conditions and make it virtually impossible to carry out effective strikes, union organizing drives and other disruptions.

Even the union’s only previous move into field worker organizing – signing of contracts with two Salinas Valley growers in the early 1960s – seemed to confirm the belief that the Teamsters wanted to control rather than truly represent field workers, because of the lesser terms in the contracts as compared with those of processing workers and the slight rank-and-file voice.

(One grower, Bud Antle, got a \$1 million loan from the Teamsters after signing his contract, but he said this was coincidental – an opinion which some of his fellow growers did not voice at the time.)

Even now, Teamster officials acknowledge they moved into field worker organizing in large part because of concern for the 60,000 processing workers they currently represent. But Grami claims numerous field workers asked the Teamsters to represent them and that the contracts Teamster officers got for them are “superior in benefits to the worker” as compared with Organizing Committee contracts.

Grower preference for Teamster contracts, adds Fleming, does not mean they are “sweetheart agreements.” He asserts they are the result of hard negotiations which started after Teamsters demanded field worker contracts as one condition for ending a truck drivers’ strike that curtailed lettuce shipments for a week this July.

Teamsters had represented the produce drivers for 30 years, Fleming notes, and had been “most reliable in honoring their contracts.” So it was appropriate for Teamsters to represent field workers as well, and this was “an appropriate time to provide these workers with additional benefits.”

Fleming says the growers nevertheless would have preferred to wait until passage of a bill which has been introduced for them by Republican Sen. George Murphy of California, but which apparently is mired permanently in Congress.

Fleming says the growers would like the “orderly procedures” called for in the bill, and the reason is obvious. They prohibit boycotts and strikes at harvest time – the very weapons which finally forced the growers to the bargaining table.

Although the workers were not asked to vote on whether they also think it “appropriate” that they be covered by Teamster contracts, there may be a clue as to how they would vote in the results of an election held in 1966 among workers at the DiGiorgio Corporation’s vineyards. They were the only field workers who have been able to choose formally between the Teams and the Organizing Committee, and they voted overwhelmingly for the Organizing Committee.

Following that vote, another grape grower, Perelli-Minetti, nevertheless signed with the Teamsters. This prompted a major Teamster/Organizing Committee battle, which ended in 1967 with the signing of a peace treaty by Chavez and Grami.

The Organizing Committee took over the Perelli-Minetti contract and got sole jurisdiction over the field workers everywhere. In exchange, Teamsters got sole jurisdiction over food processing workers.

The peace treaty was all but ignored by Teamsters when they moved into the Salinas Valley, but the Organizing Committee, though apparently caught by surprise, moved swiftly. Chavez declared “all-out war” and marched into Salinas with several hundred field workers and no less an AFL-CIO representative than William Kircher, the labor federation’s national director of organization.

Pickets went immediately to a farm where 250 field workers had been fired for not joining the Teamsters, and nearly 1,000 workers struck at another farm. Growers got a court order against what was ruled an illegal jurisdictional dispute, but the pickets kept marching nevertheless and Chavez began “a penitential fast against injustice.”

Higher Teamster officials, notably Director Einar Mohn of the union’s Western Conference, concluded that peace had to be restored and, within a few days, a treaty was arranged through the committee of Roman Catholic Bishops that had been instrumental in settling the grape dispute.

The treaty, signed on August 12, was almost a verbatim reiteration of the treaty signed in 1967 by Chavez and Grami. In re-allocating jurisdiction over field workers to the Organizing Committee, Grami also agreed that growers holding field worker contracts with the Teamsters could sign contracts with the committee.

There was a catch, however. Growers who signed Teamster contracts would not agree to give them up, and Grami claimed the union treaty bound both unions to honor growers’ wishes.

“If we could get the Teamster contract from Chavez,” said Fleming, “then maybe in the long run Chavez would have to shape up and act like a businessman and it would work out. But as of now, we growers here re ready to fight to protect our workers from intimidation (by the Organizing Committee) and our rights as farmers.”

The bishops' committee and Chavez' forces tried for nearly two weeks to get the Teamsters and growers to relent. But they remained firm, helped at least indirectly by a State administration which was not about to intervene, and Organizing Committee members finally voted to strike.

It was, in the first days, the largest and most effective farm strike since those days in the valley in the 1930s, when John Steinbeck was there to record the drama. More than 5,000 workers walked out and shipment of produce was cut to a trickle. Unlike the grape strike, it also was violent, with serious beatings suffered by Teamster and Organizing Committee partisans alike.

Hundreds of Organizing Committee members, mostly Mexican-American migrants and most under 30, lined the roads in front of field that sprawled out before them around Salinas. They glared defiantly at sheriff's deputies and private guards' they waved the brilliant crimson and black banners of their organization and they chanted endlessly, "Huelga, huelga... strike, strike..." Boisterously determined, they shuttled constantly between the picket lines and a crowded, noisy and ramshackle headquarters.

In town, alone in a quiet, sterile motel suite strikingly like those which once housed men who directed the battles of grape growers, Bill Grami directed two dozen Teamster organizers by telephone. The Organizing Committee had "flagrantly violated" the peace treaty by striking, Grami reasoned, so he was free to begin organizing field workers again.

The growers went to court again, to get more than 30 restraining orders. There were dozens of arrests, but pickets ignored these orders, too.

Within a week, Inter Harvest, the area's largest grower, was calling for contract negotiations with Chavez. Inter Harvest, which grows almost one—fourth of all Salinas Valley lettuce was extremely worried over the Organizing Committee's threat to call a boycott against the products of all firms which, like Inter Harvest, are owned by United Brands. That would mean, among other things, Chiquita Bananas sold through United Fruit, goodies peddled at A & W Root Beer stands and ice cream cones sold at Baskin-Robbins.

Cal Watkins, personnel manager for United Fruit, claimed Inter Harvest had signed with Teamsters as the result of a meeting of growers in Salinas on July 23. He said the growers there instructed Herb Fleming and other officers of their association to "feel out the Teamsters" on contracts – even though the Teamsters "did not even claim to represent field workers" at that time.

The idea, Watkins added, was to keep the Organizing Committee out. But after a week of efforts, the Teamsters were able to sign up only 108 of Inter Harvest's 1,000 workers, he said, and the company had no choice but to negotiate a contract with the Organizing Committee, since most of its workers belonged to that organization.

Other grower spokesmen scoffed at Watkins' explanation as what one called "more or less face-saving" and counter-pickets shut down the firm's operations after it signed with the Organizing Committee.

The counter-pickets – Teamsters and right-wing grower allies who carried American flags and signs proclaiming them to be “Citizens Against United”- kept produce haulers off the job for about a week, but finally obeyed a court order which they had ignored. Then, several other major growers followed Inter Harvest to the bargaining table, also largely for fear of national boycotts against products sold by affiliated companies.

Many of the small unaffiliated growers continued to hold out, however, and finally got a court order which most strikers obeyed. It was issued after the State Supreme Court set aside the earlier orders because the Monterey County Superior Court had heard from only one party – the growers – before the orders were issued.

This time, Superior Court Judge Anthony Brazil call in lawyers for both parties before reiterating the ruling that growers were the victims of a strike by workers who illegally demanded that they tear up valid teamster contracts.

The judge waved aside the Organizing Committee’s argument that the contracts were invalid because the workers had not voted to be represented by the Teamsters. He ruled that there could be only one informational picket at 22 of the farms making up the strikers’ prime targets, none at the eight others.

An even greater blow came in the form of what has been a fact of life for all farm union organizers: Farm strikes, although often effective during the first few exciting days, just do not work.

There is too much territory to picket, and there is a ready supply of marginal workers to replace the farm workers who risk walking off the job – despite their poverty and almost total lack of legal and financial protection that make it much easier for other workers to strike and to stay on strike for more than just a brief period.

Thus most strikers were back on the job by mid-September, crop shipments rose to at least two-thirds of normal and the Organizing Committee had to do what it had done with great success in the vineyard dispute. It called a boycott.

Officially, the strike continued, but the major effort was at food markets in 64 cities across the country, where committee members and supporters have begun to urge shoppers to ignore lettuce from growers who “are denying farm workers the right to negotiate their own contracts and determine their own future.”

This will be more difficult than the grape boycott, however. Lettuce, after all, is a staple, and the growers, in a national anti-boycott campaign they have launched, can point out that lettuce is “grown, harvested and shipped by union workers.”

It is, grower spokesman Fleming announced, a “petty jurisdictional boycott that would penalize the vast majority of our (Teamster) union field workers and deprive the housewife of her right to free choice.”

The growers can be certain, at any rate, that Teamster truck drivers will not refuse to handle lettuce, as they sometimes refused to handle grapes and grape products during the earlier Organizing Committee boycott.

The lettuce growers also can be certain of support from the directors of the big supermarket chains who also supported the grape growers. In some cases, in fact, the directors are the same individuals who also sit on the boards of major farming corporations and thus are eager to ignore union demands to take lettuce off their shelves.

While described themselves as unselfish defenders of free enterprise, the lettuce growers describe Chavez as a ruthless, all-powerful union boss, often in the same terms as righteous editorial writers once described Teamster President James Hoffa.

Why are the growers resisting Chavez' organization? "Out of concern," declared Caryl Saunders of the Western Iceberg Lettuce Association, "for the safety of our nation's economic structure if so great a portion of the control of our food supply falls into the hands of one man."

Many of the growers, adds a United Fruit spokesman," feel that Chavez must be stopped for the good of the country; they think he is tied up with communism."

Chavez and his supporters are no slouches, either, when it comes to described their opponents as uniformly evil and, as Chavez charged, locked in "an unholy alliance."

They, too, speak of "conspiracies" – a favorite one being that Governor Reagan and Teamster leader Einar Mohn engineered the Teamster-grower agreements.

But behind the rhetoric, and the pledges on both sides to hold firm at all costs, the hints are the dispute will be settled far more quickly than was the grape dispute.

Teamster leaders have withdrawn most of the field organizers they had sent to the Salinas Valley and they may be looking for a graceful, face-saving way to reach a new peace agreement, possibly through the AFL-CIO's top national officers, if not through the bishops' committee.

Ranking Teamster officials, at any rate, indicate privately the odds are too heavily against their union because of Chavez' position as a near-messiah.

Whatever happens, the most significant development already has occurred. Unionization has come to the great Salinas Valley. Now, the only questions are whether it is to be of the Teamster variety or that of the United Farm Workers Organizing Committee, and when, not whether, it will spread to orchards and fields everywhere else.