

KQED/TV NEWSROOM SCRIPT – 1975

MODESTO – A REVIVAL

By Dick Meister

It's been journalistically fashionable of late to proclaim the death of the United Farm Workers Union – done in at the age of 10 by growers and the Teamsters Union, which has taken over most of the UFW's contracts with the growers. But something very important happened this weekend to change that.

More than 10,000 people marched into the city of Modesto under the crimson banners of the UFW, more than have ever turned out for any of the UFW's many demonstrations over this past decade – even more than converged on Sacramento in the dramatic march of 1966 which started the union toward its first major success.

Obviously no union with that kind of support is anywhere near dying, no matter how few contracts it may have. But it is a union that is undergoing profound change. Its position as a trade union is becoming overshadowed by its position as a movement of farm workers, Chicanos and poor workers generally. That was made clear by the nature of the supporters who joined the march into Modesto on Saturday.

The UFW's early struggles were backed by young people, religious activists, liberal politicians... and by broad labor support. The marchers to Sacramento in 1966 were greeted by top leaders of the AFL-CIO and the major independent unions, including the Teamsters. And those unions played a key role that year in the UFW's first major victory, winning union recognition from the giant Schenley Corporation.

But it was different in Modesto. There were hundreds of priests and nuns and thousands of young people, but relatively few politicians – and, most important, very, very few outside union banners, and no official labor support of importance except from the independent Auto Workers Union. As a matter of fact, the local Labor Council of the AAFL-CIO, with which the UFW is affiliated, sent a message of protest.

The UFW used the boycott as its main weapon against Schenley. But the Labor Council in Modesto deplored its use against the UFW's current major target, Gallo, because two other AFL-CIO unions, the Distillery Workers and Glass Workers, have contracts with Gallo. Marchers endlessly chanted slogans attacking Gallo as unfair, but the Labor Council declared Gallo to be “a fair employer.”

Ironically, the UFW's early success has caused much of the problem which has led to the untimely reports of the union's near death. It was not until the UFW won contracts from Schenley and other growers that the Teamsters took a real interest in representing field workers – and the growers took an interest in the Teamsters as what seemed the lesser of two union evils to them.

As bitter as it must seem to the UFW, this must be counted as a major victory. For the question in agriculture is no longer whether there will be a union. Instead, it is simply a question of which union will dominate.

There's this, too: Ten years ago, grower fiercely resisted the idea of putting farm workers under the labor laws which cover most other workers. But today they are arguing for it – again as what they see as the lesser of two evils because the UFW, which argued for merely extending the old laws to farm workers, now is seeking special coverage that would give farm workers an advantage.

The UFW can take credit for a steady improvement in pay and working conditions throughout agriculture. But the most important thing the UFW has done was shown Saturday in that great mass of farm workers marching into a park in Modesto, thousands of them boldly demanding what they saw as their rights, no longer toiling silently in some dusty field, oppressed and forgotten.