

# 'La Huelga,' a Step in the Struggle

DELANO. The Story of the California Grape Strike. By John Gregory Dunne. Photographs by Ted Streshinsky. 176 pp. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux. \$4.95.

By GLADWIN HILL

**B**ECAUSE the historic Delano grape strike, which started two years ago, has been off the front pages, and because union contracts were reached with several large growers, many people have surmised that the cause of "La Huelga" ("The Strike") was won.

On the contrary, John Gregory Dunne observes in "Delano," the strike is still being pressed against 30 remaining Delano growers, and the cause in many respects is in a critical phase. The ice has been broken in establishing a more viable wage (\$1.65 an hour) and working guaranties. The A.F.L.-C.I.O. has allotted \$10,000 a month to support the strike. Cesar Chavez's tatterdemalion union has acquired 17,000 members, and extended the strike weapon to Texas's Lower Rio Grande Valley.

The cost of maintaining the strikers has risen to \$40,000 a month. A sizable portion of the Delano grape workers remains nonunion. And the cause has encountered the twin hazards of labor organizing: the ener-

vating effect of a modicum of success, and union politics.

Even if it goes no further, Dunne shows brilliantly, "La Huelga" represents an epochal step in the struggle of generations to push California's reactionary agriculturists out of the 19th-century sweatshop ethos that they have been rationalizing, with undue success, all the way to the halls of Congress.

Dunne, a magazine writer, went to Delano, in the Steinbeckian "Grapes of Wrath" district of the San Joaquin Valley, 10 months after the strike started, and has kept in close touch with its developments ever since. His book is an exceptionally incisive report on the anatomy of the strike; a colorful, perceptive examination of its impact on the community; and an analysis of actions of both employers and labor so realistic as to make it important reading for current students of economics and public policy.

"La Huelga" was almost accidental in its inception. Yuma-born Cesar Chavez, a migrant worker from childhood, had been toiling along the strike-fraught farm labor organizing trail that had frustrated aspiring leaders for decades. He felt the requisite strength for a strike was several years away. But a sudden walkout of Filipino grape pickers forced his hand; his nascent union had to jump into leadership of the parade or admit

impotence. Fortuitously, the growers made one strategic blunder after another that gave the movement impetus.

Aware that "La Huelga" was not viable as a conventional labor effort, Chavez cleverly turned it into a religio-civil-rights crusade, enlisting widespread church support on the "moral" issue of human dignity, mustering aid from freedom-marching activists. A master organizer, he then invoked the weapon of the boycott against two national corporations with Delano vineyards, Schenley and DiGiorgio, even planting propagandists on the freight trains that carried their products eastward.

His National Farm Workers Association made enough headway that the rival A.F.L.-C.I.O. Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee eagerly annexed it. Then the combination bested a scavenging incursion by the Teamsters Union.

But now, says Dunne, "Chavez is gradually being forced into a position where he must choose between the welfare of his workers and continued subordination to the A.F.L.-C.I.O."—in which the impoverished farm workers inevitably are a minor concern. "As I left Delano," the author says, "I could not help but think it would be a long time before *Nosotros Venceremos* ["We Shall Overcome"] became the song of the Great Central Valley."

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