

Grape Strike Prospects

United Front Against Union Is Broken, But Majority of Growers Stand Firm

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LOS ANGELES, June 18—Last weekend's agreement by 10 major growers of table grapes to discuss a settlement of the long strike and boycott against them by the United Farm Workers Organizing Committee represents a potentially major advance for the union and its charismatic leader,

News Analysis
Cesar Chavez. Even the growers themselves concede as much. But major obstacles remain before Mr.

Chavez can claim clear victory.

The 10 growers are centered mainly in the Coachella Valley about 125 miles southeast of Los Angeles and represent a small fraction of the California grape industry. But their action ruptured the united front of the grape growers, who had previously refused to recognize the legitimacy of the union, and put added pressure on the holdouts.

The majority of the grape growers pledged Monday to continue the fight. A spokesman said for them at a news conference that the growers would "not sell out the American consumer" by yielding to the union demands.

Service to Help

Meanwhile, in Washington, the Federal Mediation and Conciliation Service announced today that it would lend its services to the two sides in the weekend agreement. The service has no legal authority to enter into the matter because farm labor is specifically exempt from its purview. But both sides had asked for the service's help.

Mr. Chavez and the union made little headway after they started their strike in September, 1965, in the little town of Delano. The grape pickers were too poor and too mobile to be organized into a cohesive union, and the strike did little more than annoy the growers.

After several years Mr. Chavez switched strategy, and threw most of the union's resources into a nationwide boycott of table grapes. Even this ploy did not work too well until the union concentrated on a secondary boycott — through picketing and publicity campaigns that forced large chain stores not to stock grapes at all.

Last year, the growers began to feel the pinch of the boycott. Many would not concede it, but their prices dropped as much as 15 per cent. Even a huge increase in the amount of

grapes purchased by the Defense Department and shipped to troops in Vietnam could not support the price.

About three weeks ago, when the growers started harvesting the first grapes of the season in the Coachella Valley, the price barely exceeded \$6 a box — so low they had trouble breaking even. A few of them started meeting secretly with the union, and as one explained: "We have to settle this thing to survive." Now the negotiations are public.

But all parties agree that a settlement will not come easily. The growers in Coachella, who produce only about 10 per cent of the state's crop, are under greater pressure than other growers because they can only grow grapes for table consumption.

The growers in the vast San Joaquin Valley to the north have the proper climate and soil to convert part of their crops to raisins and wine and are thus less threatened by the boycott.

Big Rises Ruled Out

Moreover, all the growers complain that grape prices have not kept up with rising costs and that they are in no position to offer significant wage increases.

Some growers even insist that the only real answer to the farm workers' plight is for the Federal Government to provide better housing, food and unemployment programs.

Most important, many of the growers are fiercely independent and conservative men who view Mr. Chavez and his followers as "social revolutionaries" who ultimately aim to expropriate their property. Their economic motivation in fighting the boycott is compounded by a conviction that they are fighting a battle for the right of free enterprise.

The halting efforts of the growers and the union to reach some agreement also points out the lack of any formal ground rules governing labor relations in agriculture, which is not now covered by the National Labor Relations Act.

The conflicts over these two issues—the contract between the union and the growers, and the long-range rules governing agriculture—will not be resolved quickly. But labor experts agree that *la causa*—the movement of farm workers for economic security and human dignity—has made a significant step forward.