

Men, not rented slaves

La Causa

The California Grape Strike.

By Paul Fusco

and George D. Horwitz.

Illustrated.

159 pp. New York:

The Macmillan Company.

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By STEVEN B. ROBERTS

There is a gray stubble on the man's time-toughened chin and stains on his tattered jacket. His hands are curled into fists as he stands in front of the grape vines it has been his life to thin, girdle, prune and pick. And he is angry:

"I'm a broken man. I made him a millionaire and got nothing. I worked 40 years and got nothing. I never had anything until the union."

The "union" — The United Farm Workers Organizing Committee—and its leader, Cesar Chavez, have become legends; their struggle to organize farm workers into the first successful agricultural union is well-known. This is a modest book with a limited aim: to give some sense of what life is like for the *campesinos*, the workers who have sacrificed more than four desperate years for *la causa*.

Paul Fusco's spare, bleak photographs—it always seems to be rainy or foggy — and George D. Horwitz's understated text do not glorify the *campesinos*. Their attitude was probably stated best by Chavez in a letter to the president of a growers' organization:

"We are not saints because we are poor but by the same measure we are not immoral. . . . God knows that we are not beasts of burden, we are not agricultural implements or rented slaves, we are men."

Mr. Horwitz sometimes has a tendency to wander. He seems fascinated by trivial and often irrelevant details, and inordinately proud of his own intimacy with the farm workers. But he does capture bursts of insight. For example, listen to George Catalan, a Filipino immigrant, describing his life:

"There was no steady job. One month, maybe 45 days, the job is done, look for another town. That's what life of farm-worker is. . . . As far as I go, Spokane, Yakima, Montana, picking potatoes, picking beets. Then come back to Delano . . . When you are living in a camp,

Mr. Roberts, the Los Angeles bureau chief of The Times, has covered *la causa* for almost two years.

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you have to work when they want you to, or you get fired and kicked out—I don't mind to work, but one time I don't like to do it is when they spray the chemicals or the sulphur on the vines. That day and the next day, I don't want to work because the dust, the pesticide, fall down in my face, burns my eyes, makes me sick. I say to hell with it."

Then there is Horwitz's description of Chavez at a rally last year on the Mexican border: "But each time he recognized the face of someone he knew, he smiled in a way that rejoiced, 'I see you now, my really perfect friend.' An hour is not a long time to wait for such a smile."

As Fusco's pictures show, the *campesinos* have little to smile about. Picket lines in the chill morning fog, plaster falling from the ceiling of crowded hovels, rows of bent backs, cracked hands chopping the dry earth with short-handled hoes, faces seared by heat, sweat, dirt, pain. For a few moments a respite, a tomato eaten under a truck to escape the sun. On Sunday, playing with the baby and drinking a Coke.

Yet it is these men and women who are making a genuine revolution in America. They are making it not with guns but with guts, not with bombs but with faith. Their fight is still just beginning. As soon as the major California grape growers signed contracts, the union became embroiled in a fierce battle with lettuce farmers in the Salinas Valley. After that, there is citrus. And after that, there are New Jersey and Florida and Texas. ■



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