

Conservative Groups Mount Campaign Against Chavez Union

By STEVEN V. ROBERTS
Special to The New York Times

KEENE, Calif., March 25—Less than two years after it won landmark contracts in the California grape industry, the United Farm Workers is under fierce attack, and its leaders are fighting for survival.

A well-organized, well-financed campaign has been mounted against the union by a loose coalition that includes the American Farm Bureau Federation, large corporate growers and shippers, right-to-work committees—and a variety of other conservative organizations.

The main target is the boycott, the weapon the farm workers union used successfully against the grape growers for three years ending in 1970 and is now employing against iceberg lettuce harvested by nonunion workers and against nine California wineries.

"They are using everything to hit us over the head," said Cesar Chavez, the union's director, whose headquarters are now in this mountain hamlet about 30 miles east of Bakersfield. "The right wing is spending a tremendous amount of money against us. They want to stop the boycott. They know it's the only way we can organize and they will do anything to take it away from us."

Boycott a Key Weapon

The United Farm Workers is the first union to organize America's migrant agricultural laborers, and Mr. Chavez has gained an almost saintly reputation among workers for his leadership of La Causa, Spanish for "the movement." The boycott has been indispensable in that organizing campaign, because the migrants are too poor and too transient to conduct an effective strike.

To the union's opponents, however, the boycott is a "vicious weapon" and Mr. Chavez is a dangerous and power-hungry man. As the Free Marketing Council, an organization of growers, shippers and chain stores, put it recently:

"Forces of coercion threatening a massive take-over of the nation's food supply in the field must be brought under control through state and Federal legislation."

These attacks are growing at a time when the union has scored several notable successes. In recent weeks the farm workers have won two major contracts in the Florida citrus industry, their first victories outside California and Arizona. In addition, the American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations upgraded the farm workers from "organizing committees" to a full-scale union.

N.L.R.B. Seeks Curb

The most immediate threat to the union is a petition filed in Federal Court by the general counsel of the National Labor Relations Board. That petition asked the court to enjoin the farm workers from conducting boycotts, which are prohibited



The New York Times

Cesar Chavez at the farm workers' union headquarters in Keene, Calif. The dog's name is Boycott.

by the National Labor Relations Act. Arguments will be heard in Fresno on April 6.

The case presents a complex legal problem, since farm workers have always been explicitly excluded by the act.

However, the Free Marketing Council and other groups have charged that the union represents some workers who help pack produce for shipment. These workers are covered by the act, and, thus the union should be subject to its restrictions, the complaints contend.

Korbel, one of the nine wineries now being boycotted, has also asserted that the union wanted to represent workers who were not agricultural laborers.

The requested injunction would stop boycotts until the labor board judges the case on its merits, a process that could take a year.

The farm workers reply that the workers in question account for one-tenth of 1 per cent of their total membership working under contract, which is about 60,000 workers. Moreover, they contend, the N.L.R.B. has consistently ruled in the

past that farm workers were not covered by the board.

The difference, they say, is that until last August, the general counsel of the N.L.R.B. was Arnold Ordman, a Democrat first appointed by President Kennedy. When his term expired, the Nixon Administration replaced him with Peter G. Nash, a 35-year-old Republican from Rochester.

The N.L.R.B. decision to pursue the case, the union stated last week, was a "purely political" one "made at the highest level" of the Republican party. "It is nothing less than an effort to destroy our union," the statement said.

Union officials point out that large corporate farmers are generally strong backers of both President Nixon and Gov. Ronald Reagan. For example, C. Arnholt Smith of San Diego, an old friend of the President, controls a number of large ranches and finances other growers, the union said.

Cited by Life Magazine

Life magazine charged last week that the Nixon Administration had "tampered with justice" by quashing an investigation of Mr. Smith's campaign-financing activities.

A spokesman for the N.L.R.B. called the union charges "bull" and added: "The only question is whether the evidence indicated there was a violation, and the general counsel concluded there was."

According to well-informed sources, however, there was some disagreement among the board's staff over whether to authorize the complaints against the farm workers.

One staff member expressed sympathy for the union and said it would be "very unfair" to subject the farm workers to the limits of the law, without the advantages. But that is what would happen if the complaints are upheld, he said.

The union has also been besieged on the legislative front. Lobbyists in about 15 states, often led by the Farm Bureau, have pushed for laws that would prohibit boycotts by farm workers. Usually the bills also contain clauses that would require elections before union recognition and hinder strikes at harvest time.

Adopted in 2 States

Such laws have already been adopted in Idaho and Kansas. One passed the Oregon Legislature last year but was vetoed by Gov. Tom McCall. A similar bill was killed in the California

Legislature, but a campaign is starting here to place an initiative on the November ballot.

Just last week, a bill was introduced in Congress that would create an Agriculture Labor Relations Board. Its provisions are similar to the National Labor Act, but it would allow growers to demand arbitration if farm workers struck, and impose a 40-day waiting period.

Historically, farmers have opposed placing workers under Federal legislation, but when the grape boycott proved so successful, they changed their position. In its early years, the union wanted legal protection. Now it feels that any legislation would be so restrictive that it could not organize effectively, and it would do better outside the law.

The third arena of conflict is the lettuce fields of the Salinas Valley, the "salad bowl" of America. In 1970, after the grape victory, Mr. Chavez announced that Salinas would be his next target. Almost immediately, most of the growers signed contracts with the International Brotherhood of Teamsters as a way of warding off Mr. Chavez.

Contract Denounced

The farm workers denounced the contracts as "sweetheart" deals and struck the lettuce fields in August. A month later a boycott started and four large growers signed with the Chavez union, but the rest held fast.

Last March, the teamsters agreed to give up their contracts with the farm laborers. Mr. Chavez opened negotiations with the Salinas growers and imposed a moratorium on the strike and boycott. But after six months of no progress, the talks collapsed in November.

Last week, Mr. Chavez declared that the boycott would resume, and a new strike

against the Salinas growers was imminent. The mood here in Keene is that the campaign will be a long and costly one. The lettuce growers are larger, wealthier and "more savvy" than the grape growers, according to Marshall Ganz, the Harvard graduate who directs boycott activities.

The union has already dispatched 200 organizers around the country to resurrect the boycott machinery.

The whole idea of a consumer boycott has lost some "freshness since the grape campaign," Mr. Ganz conceded. "But the American public is better educated about farm workers, and that's all helpful," he said.

"Lettuce is a tricky problem," Mr. Ganz added. "You can eat

it in a sandwich or a salad and you don't think about it. It will take a lot of public education. Grapes became very stigmatized during the boycott—lettuce has to become a similar kind of symbol."

The tactics will again be grass-roots organizing among those who will listen: housewives, students, labor unions, civic groups. There will also be the publicity from a dramatic strike. As Mr. Ganz put it:

"The grape boycott never depended on the romance of it, but on grinding work. There is no substitute for that kind of commitment, and it's something the growers can't buy with money. It's a classic confrontation between money power and people power."