

Farm Workers

Chavez Tackles the Teamsters

WASHINGTON—"La Causa" is in trouble. This name—The Cause—is used by Cesar Chavez and his United Farm Workers Union for their crusading campaign to organize the poor migratory farm workers of America.

The Cause has had its greatest success in the grape vineyards of California. There, three years ago, after a long struggle and a nationwide boycott campaign, the United Farm Workers forced the grape growers to sign a contract permitting the union to represent the more than 60,000 grape workers, many of them Spanish-speaking. Now that success is in the process of being erased—and the existence of the union itself is threatened.

The three-year contracts with the growers began expiring over the past two weeks and the growers are not renewing them with the Farm Workers Union. Instead, some 40 grape growers in the Coachella Valley of California signed a contract giving the International Brotherhood of Teamsters the right to represent their workers. The 40 represent only a small percentage of the grape growers in the state, but most of the rest are negotiating with the Teamsters.

Mr. Chavez charged that the Teamsters were not interested in the welfare of the grape workers and that the workers wanted to be represented by his union. He was not precise about the reasons but suggested that the Teamsters were greedily seeking to extend their power. The Teamsters charged in turn that the farm workers union did not adequately represent the grape workers.

Under the National Labor Relations Act, representation disputes between unions are settled by the workers in secret ballot. However, the law does not apply to agricultural workers and the farm workers in California have not voted for their union representatives.

Last week Mr. Chavez came to Washington seeking help in his battle with the Teamsters—help from Congress, from the A.F.L.-C.I.O. to which his union belongs and from the public in supporting a new grape boycott.

At a press conference on Capitol Hill, Mr. Chavez charged that Teamster officials had taken illegal cash payments from growers in what he said was a "conspiracy" to crush his union. The soft-spoken labor leader asked for a Congressional investigation of the alleged conspiracy. He also claimed that Government authorities had known of payoffs to Teamsters for more than a year and had failed

to take any action.

The labor committees of both houses of Congress indicated they would seek additional information to determine if an investigation were warranted. But George Meany, president of the A.F.L.-C.I.O., responded immediately and energetically.

In a statement that was harshly worded even by his own blunt-speaking standards, Mr. Meany accused the 2.2-million-member Teamster union of a "vicious," "disgraceful" attempt at "union busting" against the weak farm workers. He called the Teamster agreement with the grape growers a "sweetheart" contract reached in "collusive secret meetings." And he dispatched the head of the federation's organizing department, William Kircher, to California to help Mr. Chavez.

Mr. Meany also accused the Teamsters—who were thrown out of the A.F.L.-C.I.O. in 1957—of seeking to revive "the most vicious of employer practices—the use of the labor contractor." The labor contractor is a straw boss who signs on workers and then sells their labor to the grower—pocketing a percentage of their wages.

Frank E. Fitzsimmons, the president of the Teamsters, responded by accusing Mr. Meany of "show-boating and name-calling." He said that the Teamsters gave the grape workers a better contract than Mr. Chavez who, he asserted, was again seeking "to represent farm workers with propaganda, libel and slander instead of collective bargaining know-how."

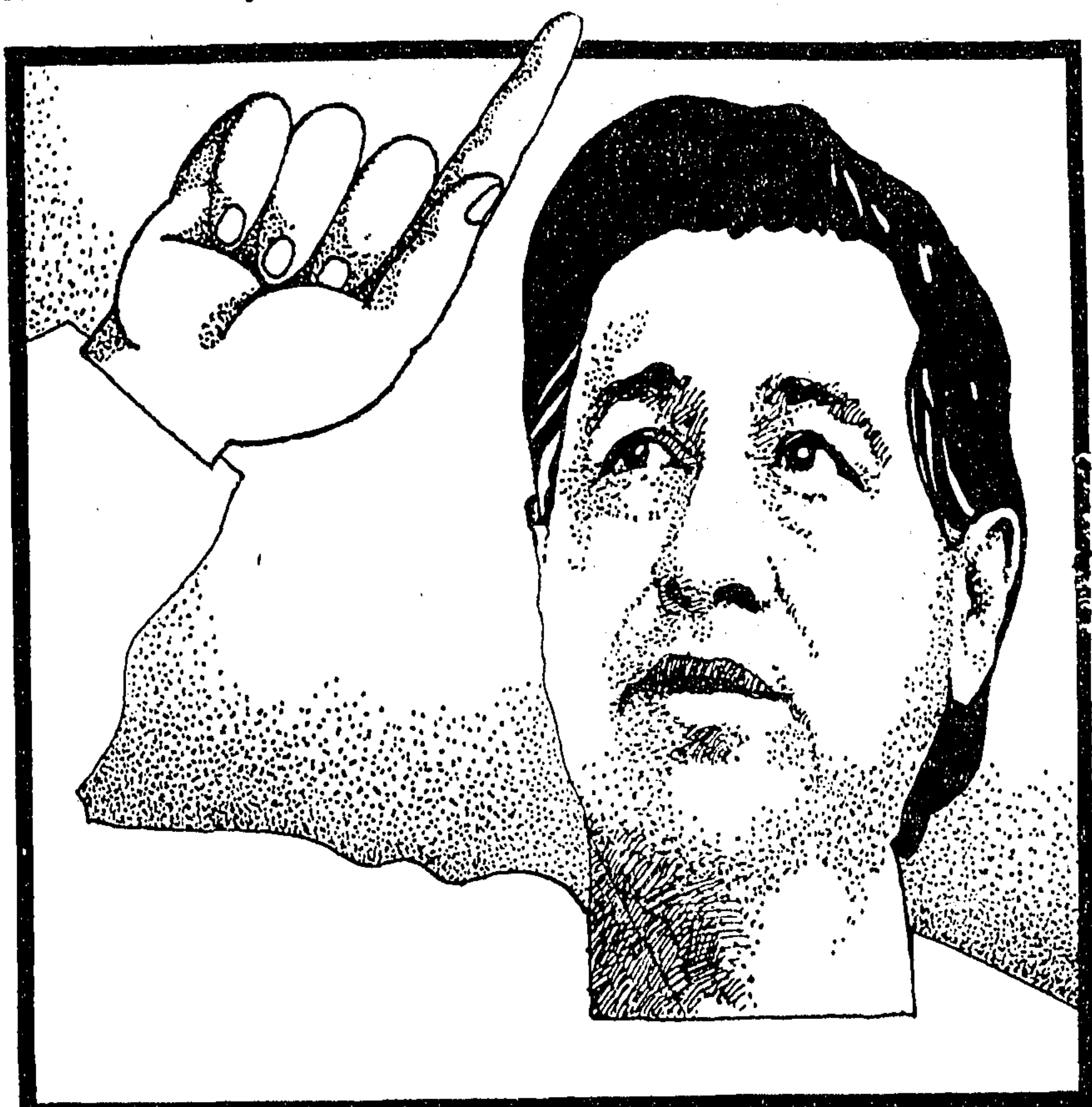
The Teamsters said they had a petition from 4,000 grape workers in the Coachella Valley asking to be represented by the Teamsters. However, Representative Edward Roybal, a Democratic Congressman from Los Angeles, said at a news conference that he had been a part of a team of political, civic and church leaders that had polled the Coachella workers and found that the overwhelming majority wanted to belong to the United Farm Workers.

Mr. Fitzsimmons "challenged" Mr. Meany last week to join him in calling on Congress to seek National Labor Relations Act coverage for farm workers. But Mr. Chavez and his union have resisted coverage under the act in the past because it prohibits secondary boycotts, which have been one of the farm workers' most effective organizing weapons. A secondary boycott occurs when consumers refuse to buy any products of a merchant who sells a boycotted product.

It seems certain that a great deal of public sympathy will go to the farm workers union, the David to the Teamsters' Goliath.

Msgr. George C. Higgins of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops, a veteran labor expert and respected mediator, wrote last week that "the Teamsters—in a moment of sheer madness which they will most certainly live to regret—have decided, in flagrant violation of trade union ethics, to destroy the United Farm Workers which alone can legitimately claim to represent the workers in the field."

—PHILIP SHABECOFF



John Siovani