

# WAGES NOT ISSUE IN CHAVEZ STRIKE

## Grape Growers Opposed to Hiring Hall Giving Union Hold Over All Jobs

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Oddly, money is the one thing that is not an issue in the farm workers' strike that has now spread across much of the San Joaquin Valley.

That is surprising, for the wages of farm workers have always been considered inadequate.

However, since the workers were unionized three years ago, wages have risen to \$2.30 to \$2.40 an hour and in the grape harvest, bonuses paid to encourage production have jumped from 10 cents a box in preunion days to the present 25 cents.

Instead of money, it is the union hiring hall that is the basis of the dispute that has brought the most serious labor problems ever to the San Joaquin Valley.

When the United Farm Workers Union, headed by Cesar Chavez, first signed contracts with the grape growers here three years ago, a key segment of those contracts gave the union a hold over all jobs by stipulating that workers had to be employed through hiring halls.

### Dramatic Breakthrough

When the contracts were signed, the establishing of the hiring halls was seen by labor officials as a dramatic breakthrough.

"It took other unions 20 years to get what Chavez got the first year," one long-time observer of the labor movement said.

However, the growers are no longer willing to let the union have such control over employment.

As Eugene Nalbandian, one of the largest growers in the Lamont-Arvin area, said, the hiring hall was not the prime issue, it was in a sense the only issue.

"Sixty days ago," he said, "I was ready to sign with Chavez. We asked only one thing: That they eliminate the hiring hall. He had a million demands, but we were ready to meet them all except the hiring hall."

The dispute here and the strike that ensued involved the Farm Workers Union, the grape growers and the International Brotherhood of Teamsters.

Rather than renew with the farm union the growers have signed pacts with the teamsters.

There are basic differences between the U.F.W.U. and teamster contracts. The major one is that the teamster agreements with the growers make no mention of hiring halls. The teamsters have agreed to leave hiring to the owners. In addition, their contracts also promise that there will be no strikes and no secondary boycotts.

### Growers Drop Union

Given that choice, one by one the growers have dropped Mr. Chavez and his union and signed with the teamsters. Mr. Chavez charges that his union is the victim of "sweetheart contracts" between the growers and the teamsters. To force the growers to deal with the farm union, he called a strike and ordered a renewal of the grape boycott that was so helpful when the grape industry was first unionized.

Why is the hiring hall such an important issue? Each side has its own version. But its importance is reflected in the fact that the growers chose to face another strike and boycott rather than accept the hiring hall.

And the union made it clear how important the hiring hall was to it by choosing to lose virtually all of its contracts rather than sign agreements that ended its hold over hiring.

Before the workers were unionized, it was the farm labor contractor who supplied the growers with their help. The contractor hand-picked his crews. He decided who would work and who would not. He decided who was too young and who was too old. He set the pay rate.

In most instances, the growers supplied the contractor with a certain amount of money. The contractor took care of the rest, rounding up the crews and paying them what he wanted. He also made certain that the work was done.

Now it is the union—through its hiring hall—that has taken that responsibility. Nobody goes into a vineyard or a field or an orchard that is unionized unless dispatched by the union hiring hall. With what authority, the union can make certain that seniority is respected, that workers are not used up when they are young and turned away when they are old and that in slack times the work is not given only to those who are willing to labor for the least amount of money.

The question, Mr. Chavez says, is whether the worker must submit totally to the whims of the labor contractor. "We have hiring halls," he said, "where rules are established by the workers rather than the crew chief, where one man has the power to hire and fire."

Mr. Nalbandian said that no union was needed. "All our our lives we've been nonunion and happy, and then he (Chavez) comes along," he said.

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