



Bob Fitch & Diane Koos Gentry/Black Star; Gil Trevino Ortiz  
California farm workers.

# A Bit of Peace in the Fields of California

By WINTHROP GRIFFITH

**SALINAS, Calif.**—Though nobody in California is as euphoric as a few months ago and predicting "peace in the fields," a major advance has occurred in the decade-long effort to give some rights to the farm workers.

The state's farm-labor law that went into effect last week assures the workers, for the first time, full collective bargaining rights and the power of a secret ballot to choose which union, if any, should represent them. The law also establishes a more orderly procedure for resolution of conflicts among the growers.

Even after the elections are held in coming weeks, however, labor tensions will continue. Cesar Chavez says he believes that, whether or not his United Farm Workers Union wins most of the elections, the union will have to keep up with boycotts and strikes against growers to achieve its contract demands.

Both Chavez's union and the rival Teamsters union are publicly predicting victory in the elections, but privately their leaders are nervous about the outcome. The United Farm Workers now holds a dozen contracts, representing less than 5,000 workers; the Teamsters hold nearly 400 contracts representing about 55,000 workers.

The choice for many of the workers will not be easy. It will depend mainly on the special circumstances on the particular farm on which they happen to be working at the time an election is held there.

The wages, benefits and services offered by each union are similar. Workers average about \$3 an hour. That's a big increase over the wage 10 years ago, before Mr. Chavez began organizing the workers, but, with seasonal work limitations, the annual

income of most farm-worker families is still below the federally defined "poverty level."

Farm workers once suffered or profited in other ways at the whim of individual growers. Today, contracts of both unions include grievance procedures, some job security, medical care and pension privileges. The unions' staffs also assist members with immigration problems and applications for unemployment and food stamp benefits.

Beyond the provisions for basic wages and benefits, the unions are vastly different in style and substance.

Mr. Chavez remains a hero among most of the farm workers in the Southwest because of his early efforts in their behalf. He and most of the United Farm Workers leaders and organizers are Mexican-American, and their meetings are conducted in Spanish. The great majority of California's farm workers are Mexican-American or Filipino.

The Farm Workers Union is militant on many issues affecting the workers: the use of pesticides, the power of farm-labor contractors, the flow of illegal aliens across the border and the use of the back-breaking short hoe. Though some workers resent the strife generated by the union and the inefficiency of the hiring halls established by Mr. Chavez to supplant the farm-labor contractors, most are grateful that the union's efforts led to a banning of the short hoe by the state government this year.

The Teamsters Union claims organizational efficiency and power behind it to enforce the union's contracts. Many of the workers don't like Mr. Chavez's militancy, preferring the more stolid approach of the Teamsters and the friendly relations between Teamster officials and the growers.

The Teamsters, however, have had some organizational setbacks after winning away most of Mr. Chavez's contracts since the summer of 1973. In mid-1974, the Teamsters announced the charter for union local 1973, the appointment of a Mexican-

American to head it and the establishment of the local's headquarters in a building surrounded by lettuce fields just south of Salinas.

A few months ago, the Teamsters fired the local chief, David Castro, absorbed the local's officers into other locals around the state and shifted the headquarters out of Salinas and back to the Teamsters Western Conference offices in the San Francisco suburb of Burlingame.

The field workers—toiling in the early-morning cold and the hot afternoon sun, their feet moving sideways through the mud or the shifting dust—may not be aware of the history, arguments and contract provisions which favor one union over the other.

William Farley, who supervises the foremen and field workers for a corporate grower based in Salinas, says the workers feel an "esprit" for Mr. Chavez that they don't feel for the Anglo-dominated Teamsters, but they "respect" the power of the Teamsters. He also speculates: "The workers won't want to rock the boat to jeopardize their jobs and wages. Before the elections, they'll be pushed hard by both sides and there may be some rough stuff, but they'll make up their own minds."

California's new farm-labor law is likely to set the pattern for other states with a big agricultural industry and large numbers of farm workers. But the benefits of California's law are not likely to spread very quickly to the majority of field workers in the nation.

The Chavez union and the Teamsters represent, at best, only about one-fourth of California's 230,000 farm workers. Altogether in the United States—from California to New Jersey, from Florida to Maine—there are almost 3 million salaried farm workers. It is likely to be a long time before most of them rise above the poverty level.

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