

Lettuce Strike Crippling 40% of California Output

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LOS ANGELES, Feb. 25 — In the rich Imperial Valley on the Mexican border, more than \$10 million worth of lettuce is rotting in the fields. Striking members of the United Farm Workers of America, waving their red-and-black banners in protest, have prevented the harvesting of about 40 percent of the nation's winter lettuce crop.

As a result, the price of iceberg lettuce has climbed to \$1 a head in supermarkets in the West and Middle West. (In New York, which is on the end of the distribution chain, iceberg lettuce shipped earlier is still priced at about 60 cents a head.)

"For the 60 percent not being struck, the profits are terrific, but over all the strike has been crippling for lettuce growers here," said a spokesman for the Imperial Valley Vegetable Growers Association.

Lettuce is a \$75-million-a-year crop for California growers, who produce 95 percent of the nation's midwinter let-

tuce crop on 22,000 fertile acres in southern California. On Jan. 19 the farm workers' union struck 35 major vegetable growers and shippers, seeking higher wages. The strike widened today as 400 workers at another company, Gourmet Harvesting, walked out.

An order issued over the weekend by a Fresno County Superior Court judge bars the U.F.W. and workers at Sun Harvest Inc. from carrying weapons. A striker was shot to death Feb. 10.

Cesar Chavez, leader of the union, and his 4,200 members want a bigger slice of the proceeds of the lettuce market. Right now, labor costs growers about \$60 an acre. Profits, when the growers can sell lettuce for \$10 a carton as they did a few weeks ago, can run as high as \$3,000 an acre.

The lettuce business has been called a gambler's crop. According to Keith Mayberry, a University of California farm adviser, the growers made \$500 an acre on average in 1973, lost \$400 an acre in 1974, broke even in 1975 and lost about \$180 an acre in 1976.

In 1977, which was a fairly normal

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Associated Press

Cesar Chavez, center, president of the United Farm Workers, leading a candlelight march through Calexico, Calif., Feb. 11 in honor of Rufino Contreras, who was killed the day before in an Imperial Valley lettuce field.

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year for lettuce, producers could sell the harvest of 300 acres for about \$1 million. In 1978, after a particularly bad winter, shortages and consequently higher prices produced a \$1 million average crop from just 50 good acres.

From Field to Consumer

The economics of lettuce involves a complicated passage from field to consumer. The cost to a grower varies. But his investment can come to as much as \$737.50 an acre if he leases his land at \$200 an acre a year, spends \$125 a year preparing it, \$85 to irrigate, \$50 to plant, \$60 for labor (growers calculate their cost of labor in the harvest and growing of a carton of lettuce at \$1.07, or about 4.5 cents a head), \$17.50 to operate cultivation machinery, about \$70 for fertilizing and \$130 for spraying.

Farmers generally get about 500 cartons, or about 12,000 heads, of lettuce from an acre. Recutting can raise that amount by 50 percent.

Once a crop is harvested, it is hauled to the cooler by teamsters' union truckers who earn up to \$15 an hour. The lettuce is then cooled at a flat rate of about 50 cents a carton. From there, the lettuce is often shipped to Los Angeles at a cost of about 70 to 75 cents a carton. Shipping to East Coast cities is substantially more expensive.

Los Angeles brokers arrange a sale of the lettuce to wholesalers, who then resell it to retail chains. Brokers take about 15 cents a carton and wholesalers often take a 10 percent fee for handling, warehousing and unloading the lettuce at the market cities.

Recent Price Fluctuations

In recent weeks, the price of a carton of 24 heads of lettuce on the wholesale market has fluctuated from \$5, or 20 cents a head, to \$15, or 63 cents a head. When lettuce sells for 99 cents a head, that means that the consumer is paying \$23.76 a carton for lettuce that under ordinary circumstances would have cost about \$2 to grow. Based on their 1977

costs, however, farmers said they broke even.

The United Farm Workers of America want to share in this economic spiral. The U.F.W. plans in one grand sweep to catch up with the other lettuce-handling unions, which have been in existence a much longer time, by asking for a near doubling of the present rates.

U.F.W. wage demands for laborers include a rise from \$3.76 to \$5.25 an hour. For tractor drivers, the union wants an increase to \$8.25 from \$4.56, and for lettuce machine operators, an increase to \$6 an hour from \$3.76.

Growers have offered 7 percent increases for each year of a three-year contract, an increase that would be within the anti-inflation guidelines set by President Carter.

Big Grower's Projection

According to Sun Harvest Inc., which is among the largest lettuce growers struck, U.F.W.'s proposals would cost the company \$49.8 million. In 1978 the company paid \$16.7 million for labor. "That's an increase in one year of 196 percent," the company said. For 1979, Sun Harvest has budgeted an expected profit of less than \$3 million.

A big wage rise here in California could be a model for other agricultural agreements. The California growers are getting support from Florida lettuce growers.

Growers say that at today's \$10-a-carton prices they are losing \$32 million on lettuce unharvested during the strike and will lose much more if other vegetable crops are not planted, harvested and shipped in coming months.

"This strike also affects carrots, broccoli and asparagus," said Jon Vessey, a grower from El Centro, Calif. "The strike will also affect melons. We should be planting cantaloupe right now," he said.

Should the strike continue, according to Mr. Vessey: "California will price itself out of the vegetable business. Vegetables will just be too high for people to buy them."