

VIVA LA CAUSA! (7/07)

The United Farm Workers union is celebrating the 42th anniversary of the extraordinary grape strike that brought California's sorely oppressed farm workers worldwide support in their struggle for the basic rights long denied them and the millions of other farm workers nationwide

The struggle continues. But the strike led by the charismatic Cesar Chavez remains a source of great inspiration – and of important lessons – for those who are waging today's battles with the essential help of the allies who originally joined them in response to the strike and the grape boycott that stemmed from it.

The strike began in the fall of 1965 in the hot, dusty vineyards around Delano, California, a nondescript valley town of 12,000 inhabitants. It was called by the Filipino American members of an AFL-CIO affiliate who were soon joined by the Mexican American members of Chavez' organization. The strike spread quickly to the state's other vineyards, where most of the country's grapes are grown, but had little impact until strikers launched the boycott three years later.

The boycott transformed the local strike – "La Huelga" – into a worldwide cause – "La Causa." It was a compelling social movement that drew together a potent coalition of union, church, civil rights and other sympathetic organizations, liberal Democratic politicians, clergymen and women, young activists, old-line union members, socially conscious shoppers and others.

By 1970, just two years after it had begun, the boycott forced California's grape growers to agree to the country's first farm labor contracts. Even more than that, the boycott led to enactment of the law that promises California's farm workers the right to bargain collectively with employers, the right that was granted most non-agricultural workers nationwide in the 1930s to enable them to better their miserable pay and working conditions.

There's never been anything quite like the grape boycott, certainly not in my 45 years of labor reporting. It was led by farm workers who had rarely been outside their small rural communities but climbed into rickety buses to travel to major cities all across the country, with the support – financial and otherwise – of their many and varied supporters.

The workers and their supporters picketed thousands of markets, urging shoppers not to buy grapes until farm workers were guaranteed union contracts. They convinced schools and other public institutions to remove grapes from their menus. They got longshoremen to refuse to load grapes destined for foreign markets.

John Giumarra Jr., a lawyer who represented the grape growers in announcing their agreement to sign union contracts, conceded that boycott pressures were threatening to "destroy a number of farmers." But he said they hoped the agreement would be the basis for a positive new relationship between growers and workers. Giumarra, whose family owns and operates the state's most important vineyards, said the world would be watching closely "to determine if this has really been a revolution in labor relations and if social justice will prevail. If this works here, it will work well throughout the rest of the world."

Chavez also looked to the future: "Today's really, truly, the beginning of a new day. We give hope to millions and millions of farm workers and we will not disappoint them."

The victory was short-lived. Grape growers refused to renew their contracts with the UFW when they expired three years later, and ever since have rebuffed union drives to renew them. The union is currently waging a campaign at the Giumarra vineyards, whose workers, John Giumarra Jr. claims, "don't buy into the union's promises anymore."

But despite loss of the landmark grape contracts and the decline in membership to not much more than 25,000 today, the UFW has won other important victories. They most recently include a contract granted in response to a nationwide boycott of the giant Gallo corporation, the country's largest winery and a UFW foe for many years. Other recent victories include contract signings by growers in a variety of crops in California, Washington state, Florida and elsewhere, and several pieces of legislation strengthening farm workers' legal rights and health and safety protections.

The UFW's efforts have inspired the formation of other farm worker unions in several states and their use of the boycott and other UFW tactics to win contracts and attempt to also win laws granting them collective bargaining rights.

Yet for all that, most farm workers, nearly all of them migrants with families, remain mired in poverty, their working and living conditions a national disgrace. Despite its ups and downs, the United Farm Workers union still holds out their best, if not only, hope for a better life, as it has since that day long ago when vineyard workers in Delano launched one of the most important and hopeful campaigns in U.S. labor history.