

VIVA EL BOICOTTEO! (10/11)

Although the United Farm Workers initially relied solely on strikes in its drive to win union contracts for California's farm workers, it soon switched to the much more effective weapon of the boycott.

Growers could easily replace strikers, and often did. But they couldn't do much about customers – individuals and institutions – who heeded the UFW's call to not buy any grapes, lettuce or wine from growers who continued to rebuff the UFW demands for union recognition.

The boycotts helped forge a potent coalition of clergymen, industrial unionists, young activists and civil rights advocates, liberal Democratic politicians, socially conscious shoppers and others. They also waved crimson banners, sang the farm workers' songs, chanted their slogans and espoused non-violence, on city streets, outside supermarkets, in meeting halls, wherever they could. There were an estimated 17 million of them worldwide between 1968 and 1975, including 10 to 12 percent of all U.S. adults. Later boycotts drew less support but were nevertheless effective in winning new contracts.

John Giumarra Jr., a young lawyer who spoke for the grape growers who signed the first UFW contracts, declared that boycott pressures had been threatening to "destroy a number of farmers." Lionel Steinberg, a major Coachella Valley grape grower who was the first to agree to a UFW contract, urged others to quickly reach an agreement, lest they continue losing millions of dollars in sales.

Steinberg told his fellow growers, "It is costing us more to produce and sell our grapes than we are getting paid for them. We are losing maybe 20 percent of our market. The boycott is illegal and immoral, but it also is a fact."

The signing of the union contracts with grape growers in Delano signaled the inevitable. California's farm workers were going to be organized, and the next target would be those in the nearby Salinas and Santa Maria valleys, which produced 70 percent of the nation's iceberg lettuce and much of its other vegetables. It was called "America's Salad Bowl," a flat, fertile place where morning fog hung heavy over land carpeted green for miles.

Men and women hovered over the land, gripping hoes so short their handles scarcely protruded above their fast-moving hands as they stooped and cut, stooped and cut. Most worked under the supervision of men with the broad

accents of Texas, Oklahoma and Arkansas who had wielded hoes for small independent growers before giant corporations bought up the land and hired them to manage their new holdings. These men were among the Dust Bowl Refugees of the 1930s who had made their own violently opposed demands for better working lives during the Great Depression.

Many of the former Dust Bowl Refugees were lured into urban employment when the depression ended, but those who remained as managers joined the farm corporations to oppose the demands of the Chicano and Filipino American farm workers who replaced them at the bottom of the economic totem pole.

The demands were for union recognition elections in which the UFW seemed a certain winner. But if they didn't agree to elections, the growers faced the certain prospect of a boycott like that which had been so costly to grape growers.

There was, however, an alternative that the growers had overlooked until the inevitability of unionization arrived with the UFW demands. They might arrange to bypass elections and sign with another union that would demand less than the aggressive, unorthodox UFW and at the same time ease the sting of a boycott by enabling growers to point out that their workers were unionized.

The growers found their alternative in the Teamsters Union, which feared that UFW strikes and boycotts would endanger the flow of produce handled by truck drivers, cannery workers and other Teamster members. What's more, Teamster officials were eager for representation rights that would allow them to control the field workers. The potential was immense: more than 30,000 farm workers in the two valleys alone. That would bring a lot of new money into the dues and pension funds used by leaders of the corruption-ridden Teamsters to gain power, influence and fat salaries for themselves.

Virtually all the 170 growers in the two valleys soon announced they had signed Teamster contracts, even though the Teamsters had no farm worker members. The growers and Teamsters hadn't even agreed on specific contract terms. They were in so great a rush to head off the UFW, they merely signed agreements that the terms would be filled in later. The terms, however, would not be decided in consultation with the workers or their union. Terms were left solely to grower and Teamster representatives.

The workers were not even allowed to ratify the contracts, although they would be required to join the Teamsters and have union dues deducted from their paychecks. If they didn't join the Teamsters, they'd be fired. Most workers got basic pay raises of 10 to 50 cents an hour in return for forced membership in the Teamsters and some minimal health and welfare benefits – but that was all.

Teamster recognition was a very small price for growers to pay in exchange for maintaining their ability to make decisions on pay and working conditions in isolation from the direct collective demands of their employees. Since the Teamsters' main interest lay elsewhere, in transportation and food processing, growers also could expect that even the minimal terms of the contracts would not be fully enforced and that strikes and boycotts were hardly a possibility. But on the slim chance that the growers might still feel insecure, the contracts were written to stand for five years.

Chavez was outraged at the Teamsters' "act of treason against the legitimate aspirations of farm workers." He declared "all-out war against the Teamsters and the bosses " and marched into Salinas with several hundred farm workers and an AFL-CIO contingent headed by Organizing Director Bill Kircher. Pickets went immediately to a farm where 250 workers had been fired for not joining the Teamsters. Hundreds of workers struck at other farms and the UFW began preparing for legal action and a nationwide lettuce boycott.

Growers got a court order against what was ruled an illegal jurisdictional dispute, but the pickets and boycotters kept marching nevertheless and Chavez began "a penitential fast against injustice."

In less than two weeks, the Teamsters were asking for a treaty with the UFW. It was quickly reached. The Teamsters agreed to reallocate jurisdiction over field workers to the UFW and agreed that growers who had signed with the Teamsters could switch to the UFW without penalty.

But there was a catch. Growers who had signed Teamster contracts would not give them up. Finally, UFW members voted to strike. It was, at the start, the largest and most effective farm strike since the mid-1930s. More than 5000 workers left their jobs at nearly 150 farms, and produce shipments were cut from 200 carloads a day to 75 or less. Growers were losing an average of \$500,000 a day.

Unlike the vineyard strike, this dispute was violent, with beatings suffered by UFW and Teamster partisans alike. Some of the turmoil was caused by officials of a Teamster cannery workers local who were charged with using \$25,000 in union funds to hire some of the local's burly members to "guard" fields from UFW organizers.

A judge ruled there could only be one informational picket at 22 of the Salinas Valley farms that made up the strikers' main targets, none at the eight others. Nor would the UFW be allowed to call a boycott against any of the 170 growers who held Teamster contracts. The union nevertheless called a boycott. Officially, the strike continued, but the major effort was at food markets in 64 cities across the country, where UFW members and supporters urged shoppers to bypass lettuce from the struck growers.

A judge ordered Chavez arrested. He went to jail accompanied by more than 2000 UFW members and supporters, including Coretta King and Ethel Kennedy. They cheered Chavez' parting advice to "boycott the hell out of them!" and then began a series of prayer vigils and other highly publicized demonstrations. After three weeks, Chavez was released, pending the outcome of a UFW appeal.

The boycott continued at an intensified pace throughout the early months of 1971 until a committee of Catholic bishops mediated a settlement between national Teamster and AFL-CIO leaders. But growers still refused to give up their Teamster contracts. They held them for a half-dozen years more, until the Teamsters, beaten badly in a series of union representation elections under California's new farm worker bargaining law, finally abandoned as futile the fierce fight they had waged against the UFW for more than a decade.

Meanwhile, the boycott continued, as the UFW expanded its organizing efforts to Florida and Arizona. The UFW's victory in California was truly spectacular. Imagine, one of the youngest and smallest unions in the country, representing the most oppressed of American workers, decisively beating the country's largest and most powerful union.

It was the UFW's incredible use of the boycott, the major non-violent weapon available to all who would seek justice from an oppressor.