

Memos To CORE Chapters from James Farmer December 1965

December 17, 1965

To: All Chapters

From: James Farmer

Re: Grape Pickers Strike and Boycott of Schenley

This afternoon at a New York City press conference I announced national boycott against the wine and other products of Schenley Industries. The enclosed materials give the background of the issue. Also, we are enclosing the leaflet which will be used in our kickoff demonstration on Tuesday, December 21st at Schenley's National Headquarters, 1290 Sixth Avenue, New York City.

We urge you to begin immediately a demonstration against a Schenley Industries or Schenley Distributors office in your city, or at a prominent liquor store where you urge people not to buy Schenley products.

The cause of farm workers is part of our challenge to low wage industries and to strike at the root causes of inequality.

Please be in touch with the National Office as to what you are doing.

As you see from the enclosed leaflet text SNCC, SDS and the United States National Student Association are all participating in this fight. You should try to get their support in your local efforts as well as that of other community groups, unions, civic groups, church organizations (in California, The California Migrant Ministry, which is associated with the National Council of Churches, has been especially active in support of the grape workers).

17 December 1965

To: All Chapter Chairman

From: Director of Public Affairs/National CORE

Subject: Operation "VINEYARD JUSTICE"

National CORE will launch a nationwide boycott against Schenley Industries, effective at 3 p.m. (local times) on Tuesday, December 21, 1965. The announcement was made by CORE National Director and SNCC Executive Secretary James Forman at a joint

news conference today. In that connection, certain information concerning the background and necessity of this action is being furnished to all Chapter Chairmen.

This document will be considered CONFIDENTIAL and chapter chairmen are requested to exercise maximum control over its handling. If there are additional questions, especially concerning actual or anticipated inquiries from news media, chapter chairman and/or chapter public information officers are authorized direct communication at any hour with the Director of Public Affairs:

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1. National CORE has determined that the California State Department of Employment has:
 - a. Certified that a trade dispute exists between employees of the Schenley ranch property located in the Delano area of California.
 - b. That Schenley was so advised by telegram on 7 October 1965, by the California State Department of Employment. That the dispute is identified as Trade Dispute of #65 – 3289A
2. On 14 December 1965, Dr. George A. Wiley, Associate National Director of CORE, together with others, met with representatives of Schenley. Dr. Wiley asked that Schenley agree to sit down and discuss the matter with representatives of the workers at Delano. There was no indication that the Schenley representatives intended to honor Dr. Wiley's request. On 15 December, Mr. James Farmer, National Director of CORE wired Mr. Lewis S. Rosenstiel, President of Schenley, advising him of CORE's intention to commence a boycott if the requested meeting was not granted and a date set by 12 noon, 17 December 1965. That deadline passed without positive word from Schenley.

Delano: The Grape Industry

Delano is in the central part of California — one of the largest and richest farm areas of the state.

There are primarily 2 kinds of grapes grown in the Delano area:

1. Table grapes: give a higher return on the investment, must be handled by skilled workers. Table grapes that have been picked unskillfully or that have been too long on the vine are sold, at a loss, as wine grapes. By and large, only Filipino workers pick table grapes.

2. Wine grapes: have a lower market value but can be picked by “less skilled workers,” i.e. Mexican-Americans. Working conditions are worse for these pickers — they become covered with juice; the areas are dirty and thick with spiders.

Grapes in Delano are picked and packed in the field. Field packing makes union organizing more difficult than when packers work closely together in a central packing house.

There are 9 separate operations involved in grape production. Picking (during Sept. Oct, and Nov) and pruning (during Dec. and Jan.) require experienced workers. During the seasonal high points, 2500-3000 workers are employed in Delano. Workers receive an hourly wage of \$1.15 to \$1.20 plus a bonus of 10¢ per box, or 2¢ per man on a five-man team.

The Unions

1. FWA: an independent union headed by Cesar Chavez. The strength of the union lies within its membership among non-migrant Mexican-American workers. Total membership is about 3500 families.
2. AWOC: an AFL-CIO affiliate headed by Al Green. Membership is primarily among migrant Filipino workers.

The Strikers

Filipino workers are preferred by the growers. They are supposed to be better workers than Mexicans, their short, broad-shouldered physique is said to be more adaptable to the fields. When they walk on the field, they automatically receive 5¢ more per hour than Mexicans. The overwhelming majority of Filipino workers are single men, living in the growers camp on the growers property. Most Mexican-American workers are married have large families to support and live year-round in Delano in their own homes. Competition between Filipinos and Mexicans is encouraged by the growers.

Huelga: Strike Cry

The first people to strike were Filipino field packers on Sept. 8th, 1965. The growers were immediately forced to call on the local Mexican population to scab. These Mexicans were members of FWA. Eight days later, on Sept. 16th, 1000 Mexican-Americans voted to strike in sympathy with AWOC. The strike involved 32 small growers as well as 2 large owners: Schenley and DiGeorgio.

Union Strategy: AWOC attempted to involve Teamsters, ILWU, railroads and packing house employees by asking them to honor the strike. They picketed to gain the sympathy

of other labor unions. FWA picketed fields where scabs worked. Roving pickets surveyed the fields from 4:30 to 5:30 a.m., located scab fields and then sent pickets.

Grower Strategy: The growers went to other towns to recruit Mexican-Americans. The union followed them with leaflets and rallies explaining the strike, the demands, the absolute necessity for unity. The workers succeeded. The growers went further—to Fresno, Bakersfield, L.A. to hire “skid-row” unemployed. The union followed and picketed buses used to transport scabs. Again, a union victory—people refused to board buses. For the first 3 weeks the strike was solid. Then the growers imported 68 people from Old Mexico, advanced them \$33 to work. The scabs moved into the work camps that the striking Filipinos had been evicted from. It was difficult to reach them because they never left private property. The growers went as far as Southern Texas recruiting. When they could no longer recruit Mexicans with visas, they brought people in illegally.

After 4 to 5 weeks, people began to flood in. the unions tried either to get them jobs elsewhere (many Delano workers were working outside the strike area) or to convince them to return to their own areas. There were 3 places where some alternative work was available. Some people took other jobs, others left the area.

The strike lasted for 10 weeks. In an area which is generally worked by 2500 to 3000 people, an estimated 5,560 people refused to go into the fields. AWOC set up a soup kitchen which fed 200 pickets daily. FWA, which has \$200 in the bank on Sept. 16th, began fund-raising and collecting food and clothing. A store was opened which was stocked by contributions from all over the state. Real community feeling developed among the strikers.

The Ship: Concrete Victory

About a month after the strike began, a member of the Teamsters Union in San Francisco came to Delano. We advised the unions to picket the docks (from which the grapes are shipped all over the world.)

FWA sent 2 spies to San Francisco who watched departing freight 24 hours a day. They spotted 1200 cartons of Delano grapes being loaded on a luxury liner. Pickets were immediately sent up from Delano. When they arrived, 160 cartons had been loaded on the vessel. When the pickets made their case clear, the Seafarers Union walked off the ship, refused to remove the grapes and refused to board till the grapes had been removed. No union would touch the grapes. Someone unloaded the cargo and the scab grapes were put back into cold storage in Delano. Last Wed., Dec. 1st, a large grower moved 3800 cartons of scab grapes to San Francisco. Almost the total shipment was returned to him.

The victory of “the ship” had far-reaching effects. Growers were absolutely amazed at the strength of the union. Strikers has a real psychological victory. The press, for the first

time, gave important coverage to the strike. Possibilities for further union activity were opened.

Behind Them

The workers have created unity — the most vital element. They have gained confidence in themselves and in the willingness of others to respect and aid the unions. The growers have suffered real economic setbacks as a direct result of the strike: the cost of transporting scab workers long distances and sloppy picking has greatly decreased the value of Delano grapes. Their lower market value represents a substantial loss.

Ahead Of Them

Pruning begins on December 15th. This work requires the highest degree of skill. During normal times, only Filipinos prune. If the vines are not pruned, picking next year will be more difficult and more than ordinary skill will be required. If the vines are pruned incorrectly, the crop could be ruined for one or more seasons.

Needless to say, strikers continue to be harassed and persecuted by local police, county officials and courts. The incidents of false arrests on illegal charges makes one think of the South and the Negro civil rights movement. Certainly many parallels can be drawn — police controlled by the growers, phones tapped, sulphur sprayed on pickets, prejudiced juries.

The unions have received general aid and special services from American Friends Service Committee, SNCC, ACLU, the Catholic Worker, unions, student groups.

The growers have refused to negotiate with the unions. The primary union goal is to obtain a CONTRACT which will guarantee better working conditions and wage increases.