

## Preliminary Report On The Grape Strike published by the Students For a Democratic Society. 1966

### Chavez And The FWA

In April of 1962, Cesar Chavez left Saul Alinsky's Community Services Organization in Los Angeles to organize farm workers. Chavez, who was probably earning \$10,000 a year when he left CSO, chose Delano as a base of operations because he had relatives there who would support him if the going got tough. In the early stages he ranged up and down the state working in sixty-seven different communities, but later concentrated his efforts in the San Joaquin Valley (the Delano area). Working on a one-to-one basis, he built the National Farm Workers Association by offering individual services; by developing a credit union, a co-op, and a group insurance program; and by talking with people about the importance of a powerful community union. When the strike began FWA had two thousand members who through their dues were the sole support of the organization. Even with that many members Chavez takes a small salary as FWA president and has turned down an OEO offer of a job that paid in the neighborhood of \$20,000 per year.

In an interview early in 1964, Chavez said, "I figure, that even if we had a 50-50 chance of carrying off a successful strike, the gamble would still be too great. You stand always to lose more than you gain by drama when you are working with people. Thirty men may lose their jobs as a result of a strike. You lose thirty members, and you gain thirty "disorganizers". So we must work on immediate goals—helping the members get a little living through using the facilities of the association, through getting what they are entitled to, through learning how to participate more fully in social life. And the hard work of gaining official recognition, including strike if necessary, will come." He was not at that time ready for a strike. "You cannot organize a strike or build a union, until the members who must do the real work understand what all this means, what kind of activities are involved. They must first be able to articulate their own hopes and goals." (from an interview conducted by Wendy Goepel, Farm Labor, Vol I, No. 5)

How close his members were to that stage still needs to be researched, for the timing of the grape strike was set not by the FWA, but by AWOC. On September 8, 1965, the primarily Filipino members of AWOC in Delano went out on strike. Two weeks later FWA followed and the Delano grape strike began.

The effect of the strike on FWA has been to create a situation in which it is impossible for FWA workers to do the "real work" in the strike. Though Chavez has insisted FWA retain control of support work done in its behalf, the association has lost the complete autonomy it maintained until the strike began; it has had to make alliances not only with AWOC but with other labor unions, church, civil rights, civic, and student groups as well. Strike support work has required high level coordination of boycott activities aimed at stopping the sale of Delano table grapes and liquors; it also involves massive fund raising, sending scab-stoppers to Texas and Mexico, preventing the loading

of Delano grapes for overseas shipments, etc. To maintain the strike, FWA has had to urge members to leave Delano and seek work elsewhere for the strike's duration (most FWA members are year-round residents). Instead of building community, the strike, at least on one level, is destroying it.

The above may overemphasize the negative. In some ways those who have remained in Delano have had to grow with the strike. A great many have had to take individual responsibility in seeing that the day-to-day operations continue. Picket captains to lead picket crews through the four hundred square miles of the San Joaquin Valley, house captains to see that the over-crowded housing stays clean and bearable, tracking crews to follow outward bound shipments of scab-grapes and picket against their association.

Inevitably, I think, bureaucratic procedures have ensued. Picket captains must sign a man's picket card and a house captain must certify the number of people in his family before he can get food from the FWA storehouse. Though I can sense my anarchist friends shuddering at that procedure, I can think of no other food could be dispensed until the community of love is so strong or the warehouses so full that it is no longer necessary to make sure each does his share of the work and no one takes more than his share of the goods. I would point out two things: 1) that food is allotted on the basis of need, not on a one-to-one ratio with work, and 2) that FWA members make decisions about these systems and adjustments in them at these meetings; if functionaries are necessary, they are nonetheless answerable to the people.

In addition to providing an opportunity to criticize systems and administrators, the mass meetings are a time for adjusting personal differences: "On the picket line today, Juan called the scabs filthy scum-sucking pigs." Laughter. Someone reminds Juan that you don't persuade people by calling them names. (Proper FWA tone is something like "Brothers, come out of the field; this strike is for all of us.") There are also house meetings about which we did little; they may deal only with domestic things, but perhaps with more. Additional information in the next report.

The strike has pressed the necessity of the leaders dealing with the problems created by success. In an interview which appeared in the October issue of The Movement is quoted by Andy Kopkind in the Jan. 29, issue of The New Republic (See that article), Chavez said,

The danger is that we will become like the building trades. Our situation is similar — being the bargaining agent with many separate companies and contractors. We don't want to model ourselves on industrial unions; that would be bad. We want to get involved in politics, in voter registration, not just contract negotiation.

Under the industrial union model, the grower would become the organizer. He would enforce the closed shop system; he would check off

the union dues. One guy—the business agent—would become king. Then you get favoritism, corruption. The trouble is that no institution can remain fluid. We have to find some cross between being a movement and being a union. The membership must maintain control; the power must not be centered in a few. Maybe we would have some system where the jobs were rotated. It is important to remain free to work on many issues. That takes time, and sometimes it seems as if you get lost on unimportant issues. We're experimenting.

The FWA leadership is concerned with membership education. Chavez has been granted and will receive after the strike a \$267,000 OEO grant (unless Shriver weasels out) for some twenty farm workers to educate other members on topics ranging from people's rights at health and welfare agencies to the use of credit and credit unions. At one point he took a group of forty members to Sacramento to study the legislative process at first hand. And he is interested in raising his members' level of general political and organizational sophistication. FWA, by creating its own institutions (a co-op, credit union, community theatre, burial insurance) is attempting to build much more than a union.

### AWOC

The more we find out about AWOC the worse it sounds. The 1960-61 Imperial Valley lettuce strike was on the verge of success when George Meany, because of a jurisdictional dispute with United Packinghouse Workers and political problems a successful strike would have created within the AFL-CIO, ordered AWOC to pull out and the strike collapsed. Norm Smith, then head of AWOC was relieved of commcan as too radical, and the more 'moderate' Al Green, formerly of the Plasterers Union, was put in charge. Since that time according to reports we've yet to hear contradicted AWOC has developed a pattern of hot-shot organizing—hitting a town, collecting a year's dues, calling a strike, then pulling out leaving workers behind in jail.

Cooperation between AWOC and FWA has apparently been good in Delano, though Al Green, in recent public statements has been baiting FWA as a group controlled by a bunch of ministers and civil rights kids (an unfounded charge). In Delano, AWOC has about one-sixth the number of members FWA has and hasn't been nearly as successful in keeping its people from going back to the fields. Almost all boycott action outside the valley has been conducted by FWA, not AWOC. Some speculate that that's because AFL-CIO sees AWOC as a holding organization, there to preserve corporate unionism's claim of concern for farm workers until such time as the Labor Relations Acts can be extended to agricultural workers and unionizing made easy. Green in cooperation with the Teamsters has begun an organizing campaign among orange pickers just north of the Delano grape area, probably as effort to preempt the turf from FWA, which had begun some tentative efforts in that area.

FWA pickets in San Francisco, talk about the complete lack of political awareness among AWOC members and blame that on the AWOC leadership. They also speak of top down direction in AWOC and the AFL-CIO may be much stronger among Anglos who are doing support work in Delano than it is among FWA members. It was mostly Anglos, for instance, who made up a group of about twenty-five people holding "Reuther Go Home" signs when the great leader came to the valley. That visit, incidentally, saw Reuther promise \$10,000 cash and \$5,000 a month to be divided equally between AWOC and FWA. Only a fraction of that money was produced; we're still trying to find out why after he publicly promised it he didn't come through.

### Worker's Complaints And The Ranches

Though many FWA members live in the San Joaquin Valley the year round that doesn't mean they can work all year. A few do, most do not. The number of months' work varies from year to year depending on weather, yield, etc., but the average income for a farm worker's family is \$2,000 per year. The unions are demanding recognition as bargaining agents and \$1.40 per hour plus 25¢ a box. Before the strike growers were paying \$1.10 to \$1.15 an hour plus 10¢ a box. (Growers get more than \$4.00 per box.) But the pay varies. According to one report, Sierra Vista Ranch when the strike began recruited in Texas promising excellent working conditions and 50¢ per box; after two days pay was switched to \$1.20 per hour plus 10¢ per box.

The poverty of the farm workers has effects which hardly need to be detailed. If you look only at medical consequences you find that kids and older people go without glasses; teeth go unattended; bad diets lead to stomach trouble; everyone is susceptible to colds—partially because of diet, partially because a lifetime in bad housing leads to chronic respiratory diseases. When volunteer doctors went to Delano at Christmastime people came to them with minor cuts festering because they hadn't been properly bathed and bandaged; the poor don't get far in school and they don't learn some of the first aid procedures we have known since we were toddlers.

When Mexican-Americans or Filipinos go to the Delano hospital they meet indifference, or worse. The doctors are out. The doctors are busy. Can you pay? Go somewhere else. A sick girl sits for two hours before even her temperature is taken. A worker overcome by heat prostration dies before the doctors take an interest in him. These stories come from Delano, but they are common to the poor everywhere.

Wages, however, are not the only concern of farm workers. The power of the growers is such that they have been able to deny workers not only a living wage but the meanest of human dignities. Though California law requires that toilets be provided in the fields, they almost never are. One young woman told Terry Cannon recently that she has never in five years of picking seen a toilet in the fields. It is interesting to note the irony of a state assembly which, despite the powerful Agribusiness lobbies, that people ought not the squat in open fields and that is worth legislation but cannot be moved to extend child

labor laws or unemployment compensation insurance to agricultural labor. National laws exclude farm labor from Wagner-Connally protection (the right to organize and bargain collectively) and most migratory workers from social security and health and welfare coverage. The Agribusiness lobby is indeed a powerful creature. That is why the demand of union recognition is so important: the legislature can be depended upon to do little or nothing for the farm worker.

It is important that people understand the difference between family farms as American mythology characterizes them and California farms and ranches as they actually are. In the Delano area the DiGiorgio Corp., for instance, owns 24,000 acres; the L.A. Times-owned Tejon Ranch, 168,531 acres; the Kern County Land Co., 348,026 acres in California with a world-wide total of 1,815,922 acres plus another 600,000 acres of leased land. The interlocking directorates of these companies with some of the most powerful corporations in the country yield them staggering power. (More on this aspect of the strike in a later report or pamphlet.)

### Effect Of The Strike

It's difficult to know how much the strike has hurt the growers. In this PR man's world claims are exaggerated on both sides — even by the good guys. It is clear, however, that the strike has hit the ranchers, probably very hard. DiGiorgio Corporation, for instance, was stopped from shipping \$20,000 worth of grapes by a single picket action (see Movement Supplement #2, enclosed). DiGiorgio is suing FWA, AWOC, and the Longshoremen's Union for \$80,000, the amount they've lost on overseas shipments above. In San Francisco, about forty liquor stores have put Schenley products under the counter rather than be picketed by roving picket teams, and major supermarket chains, and co-op markets have agreed to stop stocking San Joaquin Valley grapes. In the Bay Area, individual members of the ILWU and Teamsters' Unions have provided valuable support.

There's even clearer evidence of strike effectiveness in the Delano area, where in the pruning season, long after the last of the grapes should have been picked, grapes can still be seen rotting on the vine. More significant is the fact that many of the valley grapes (known as some of the finest table grapes in the country) are because of late picking by inexperienced workers being sold to wineries at a big loss to the growers. The strike may hurt the growers still more now that pruning season is here. Pruning is highly skilled work. Each variety of grape, and there are many, requires a different approach to pruning, and on each plant a large number of factors must be considered in order to have a plant which will produce well the next season. The Thompson seedless, for instance, must be pruned with an eye not only to the coming year's crop, but to the second year's as well; an inept pruner can screw up two years' grapes. According to our reports the growers are now recruiting teachers to train the winos they've brought out to do the pruning.

### Evaluation

Much that is important about an organization can be known only from the way its members relate to it, the way they talk about it privately and in meetings, the way they respond when it calls them to work for it. None of us in the S.F. office has that sort of knowledge of the FWA at this time. At best we can list some of the elements in the organization which are attractive and make us want to relate to it. The co-op, credit union, and FWA theatre (with plays written and acted by farm workers) are exciting departures from traditional unionism. They have potential for drawing the community together, building a sense of identity. The OEO education grant ought to result in developing farm workers' ability to pinpoint the ways the system screws them and, more important, what tools are at their disposal in fighting to change that system. It is important to look at what FWA has done. It has created an organization which had been able to maintain the spirit of its strikers through almost five months of strike — and that starting with only \$85 in the treasury and in the 'unorganizable' industry. Then there's the fact that members know FWA as much more than a union; in the words of El Malcriado, "Today in Delano there is the beginning of a movement."

Certainly the FWA has problems, as do SDS community organizing projects. If FWA loses the strike it will be set back at least a year or two in its development — if not killed entirely. If the strike continues for a long time, as it may, the pressures are for FWA to place top priority on the necessities of strike action and to let community building activities slide. If the strike is won, the FWA will face far more pressure than it has in the past to behave like a traditional trade unions: the tendency would be for new people to see FWA not as a community organization but as the group that won the Delano strike. Having been forced by circumstances into a strike sooner than they would have chosen, FWA now has to deal with these difficulties. None of them is insurmountable, but they do underscore the necessity of winning the strike quickly. Your support action will help.

### Programatic Suggestions

#### I. Forming And Proceeding With A Boycott Committee

Delano table grapes and wines and liquors distributed by Schenley (one of the principle growers and the largest producers of wines in the Delano area) are being boycotted throughout the country by friends of the strikers. Some suggestions for proceeding with a boycott committee follows:

- 1) Bring together people who can be expected to be friendly to the strike: unionists, SNCC, CORE, other civil rights people, activist ministers, etc. Don't forget faculty wives and other middle class women who frequently have a great deal of time to devote.

- 2) Choose a time or times to set up regular informational picket lines outside liquor stores (Friday and Saturday afternoons and evenings are peak sales times). Establish work groups to take care of getting picketers, making signs and leaflets, and visiting liquor store owners. The last is important; some will readily agree to take the Schenley list off their shelves (in some parts of the country Schenley distribution is so bad that business

men are happy for an excuse to get even). Remember, however, that it is illegal to encourage the boycott of stores for handling Schenley. Finally, don't have split crews working within sight of each other. Store owners are more willing to reconsider dumping Schenley if their competitors do not have an informational picket in front of their stores.

3) At the first meeting select a delegation to go to the next meeting of the Central Labor Council, and make arrangements for approaching union locals to ask permission to speak at their meetings. They should be told of the strike and asked for boycott resolutions and money. A list of upcoming meetings is found in the county labor newspaper.

Ministerial councils, individual churches and temples, civic groups, the local Democratic Party or precinct clubs, etc., should be approached in the same way.

One opening to unions and churches is that the AFL-CIO Congregation and the California Migrant Ministry respectively have endorsed the strike.

4) Food, clothing, and money drives are essential to the strikers; if your chapter can't undertake them, see if there's some other group that can.

5) The "Schenley—I have Taken the Pledge" card (enclosed) is a clever gimmick and should be effective, especially on campus. Try offering them at tables in the student union or near class buildings. People working the tables can talk to students about the significance of the strike and try to interest them in related study groups or farm labor forums (see below). The whole range of campus groups — social, political, dormitory service, pre-professional — should be approached. Asking them to fill out the pledge cards gives you a specific reason for asking to take some of the group's time and talking about the strike. The cards are significant in themselves, but so is the opportunity to talk to people about what the strike represents.

Pledge cards cost a penny apiece or 62¢ a hundred (the weight of the stock and the perforations make them expensive). They can be ordered from this office. You might try stamping them and asking a 10¢ contribution from people who take them.

6) Leaflets for the picket should be brief and easily read. Ones for use with the pledge cards can be longer, mentioning the long history of farm workers being exploited, the failure of labor laws to cover and protect agricultural workers, the amount farm workers earn, what they are asking for, etc.

7) Supermarkets should be visited, informed of the Delano strike and asked not to handle Delano table grapes. If after the liquor store pickets and the pledge card work there are still people available, pickets should be mounted against stores which persist in handling Delano grapes. A list of Delano grape brand names is included in the Movement boycott supplement. To find out what brand a store is handling it is sometimes necessary to make forays into the back room where produce is stored. Find out from people in the produce section when deliveries are made and plan to be there if you suspect the store is stocking or may stock bad grapes. If the clerks are unionized or friendly they can save you a lot of trouble.

## II. Tying The Strike To Local Movement Building

Chapter activity on the boycott ought to be combined with radicalizing kinds of intellectual pursuits: seminars or single meeting forums on the history of American unionism and what went wrong; discussions of the difference between traditional trade unionism (AWOC getting workers a wage increase) and the community-building emphasis of FWA; discussions and study of counter-society institutions—co-ops and community theater, for example—and the role they can play in movement-building; the influence of corporate lobbies of legislation; etc. If people working on boycott activity are induced to look at the relation of the Delano strike to what goes on in the rest of society and of Delano to the objectives of the movement, boycott activity can be movement-building. People involved in the boycott because of civil rights urges or fondness for picket lines could begin to consider the implications of their action in a broader context. Why do you work to get an increase in wages for farm workers from \$1.20 to \$1.40 an hour when there are laundry workers in your home town who work for \$1.05? People should be confronted with such questions.

A beginning bibliography on farm labor would include two books by Carey McWilliams: Factories in the Fields and Ill Fares the Land. A third book of basic value is Henry Anderson's To Build a Union (Anderson is president of Citizens for Farm Labor; order the mimeographed book from Box 1175, Berkeley, Calif. \$1.00).