

The Battle Of Coachella Valley by David Harris 1973  
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Alicia Uribe remembers the 16th of April like she remembers her feet or the fingers on her hands. The day is built into her body now. It has been ever since it first happened. She and a hundred others started the 16th lined along the hot dirt shoulder in front of the Mel-Pak vineyards. The road behind them slid six greasy miles east to Coachella and Indio. Alicia cocked her union flag over her arm and let it slop sideways like wash on the line. The 90 degrees around her kept lifting off the valley floor in thin slabs. Each way Alicia looked, the world had a warp to it and a shimmer, like the air was dribbling sweat.

The 16th didn't feel all that different from any other spring day in the Coachella Valley. At ten, the heat pushes past a hundred and the asphalt on the far side of noon bubbles like cornmeal mush. Three o'clock cooks spit before it has a chance to touch ground. Without deep wells and old age, the Coachella Valley would be one long griddle of sand, anchored with greasewood and horned toads. As it is, 40,000 people live along its bottom and rising sides. The old ones built Palm Springs to comfort their rich arthritis; the young ones dug enough deep wells to cover patches from the San Jacinto Mountains to the Salton Sea with grapes, date palms, grapefruit, melons and sweet corn. If it were a year like any other, Alicia Uribe and her hundred friends would've been up to their shoulders in Thompson Seedless. But 1973 hit the east end of Riverside County like a bizarre snowstorm. The trouble and the crops came in together. A lot of folks guessed the trouble was coming, but no one knew it would show up quite the way it did. From the 16th on, the Coachella harvest was as plain as the nose on Alicia Uribe's face.

She remembers a red pickup truck and a white sedan spitting rooster tails behind their tires. The two shapes bounced along the ranch road, through the fields, and towards their line.

"Los Teamsters," the woman next to her said.

As the word jumped from ear to ear, the pickets began shouting and waving their red and black flags. The truck pulled even with Alicia and a fat man in the passenger seat jerked a .38 out of his pants. He let the sand billow over the tailgate and used his mouth to shout back.

"Eat shit," the fat man rumbled.

The white sedan slumping along in the fat man's tracks was quiet. Its upholstery was covered with four men in clean shirts. Making a sudden skip on the loose dirt, the car swerved right and one of the shirts in the back window leaned out and laid a pair of brass knuckles along the side of Alicia Uribe's head. Ever since, her face has had a little dent to it. The blow fractured Alicia's cheek, broke her nose and dug a scratch across her right eyeball. The white sedan turned left and disappeared towards Palm Springs.

Lying there in hot sand mixed with her splatter of 19-year-old blood, Alicia Uribe became the first casualty in a war that's bubbled out of every tin-roofed shed within 40 miles of downtown Indio. The fight is all about grapes and the people who pick them. It has three parties and two sides. On the one hand is Alicia Uribe's 60,000 member United Farmworkers Union, AFL-CIO. Their three-year contract with the desert grape industry

expired April 15th. On the other, the 27 growers who own the Valley's 7100 acres of table grapes sit with the 2,000,000 member International Brotherhood of Teamsters, Chauffeurs, Warehousemen and Helpers of America. The Teamsters own the red pickup, the white sedan, the brass knuckles and a fresh set of contracts which give them claim to represent the Valley's 3500 vineyard workers. The International Brotherhood and the growers have signed each other up and the UFW is striking them both. It's not small fight. Before the summer's over, it could grind its way across America's produce counters and perhaps even reach the outskirts of Washington, D.C.

None of this would be happening if it weren't for the United Farmworkers. Ten years ago, they were a truckstop joke up and down Highway 99, now they're all nationally known. There were lots of reasons for the union's rise, but the biggest was the pure and simple need for it. Since the Okies left to fight World War II, farm labor had belonged to a lot of Mexicans and a few Filipinos and Arabs. Telling one from the other was hard if you just looked at check stubs. The southwest had a white man's wage, a Mexican wage, and a lot of distance in between. Most Americans paid little attention, holding comfort in the knowledge that Mexicans didn't need much money seeing as how the price of beans was so cheap. White folks commonly understood dollars were a fortune in Spanish and trusted the honky legend that was sure all the wetbacks took their earnings south and bought steel mills on the outskirts of Tijuana.

As a result, the nation's 3,000,000 agricultural laborers worked an average of 119 days a year with an annual wage of \$1389. One out of every three farmworker houses had no toilet, one out of every four no running water. The average worker lived to be 49 years old and a thousand a year died from pesticide poisoning in the fields. If there was anything the people with those lives needed, it was a union.

And they knew it. Since the Spanish missions, California's produce has been worked by people who followed their dreams across a border and figured they deserved a whole lot better than they ended up getting. In 1884, Chinese hop pickers waged the first strike in Kern County. They asked for \$1.50 a day and ended up with an ass-whipping and a broken union. After that it was more of the same. Growers are very powerful people with big bags of money, and a command of both the language and the local police. At the same time, the world is full of people who are hungry, poor and desperate enough to chase their dreams to California. Together, the two make a magic combination all the way to the grower's bank. Once you've paid your last peso to get three, California's a hard place to get back from and an easy place to starve. Over the years, the bosses have made a practice of hiring a new dream if yours gets slow or uppity. The technique's been enough to make a lot of folks swallow their bitch and tote that sack. The man who signs the paycheck is called "yassuh, boss" and thanked for the opportunity to sweat in his fields.

Filipinos, Japanese, blacks, Mexicans, Okies and Arabs all followed in the Chinese footsteps. The IWW tried to organize a union, the CIO tried, the AFL tried and then the AFL-CIO tried again. All of those efforts failed. When the National Labor Relations Act recognized the right of working men to form unions, farm labor was excluded. Each succeeding minimum wage bill had agriculture in a special place all to itself. Some growers took to economizing by dropping wages every time they broke a strike. For a man picking

grapes, 1884 and the 1962 Delano that Cesar Chavez drove into looked a lot alike. Farmworkers used just one picture for both their pasts and futures. It was worn on the edges, sore and ate whenever it could.

Not that Chavez was shocked. That life had been his feet and ribs since his family lost their Arizona farm in 1938. Cesar and the Chavezes moved the length of California, living in hovels, missing shoes in the winter and working when the labor contractor<sup>4</sup> said it was all right. By 1952, Chavez lost his patience, went for a break in the clouds and became an organizer for the Community Services Organization at \$35 a week. He did that for the next ten years. Chavez wanted to go into rural California and build a union, but the CSO decided against it. So Cesar took his 1962 life savings of \$900 and went to his brother's house in the San Joaquin Valley.

The dream in Chavez' mind took root in tiny houses, with whatever circle of workers could be collected. When the talking was over, the hat made its way around the room and Cesar lived out of it, picking grapes each time the sombrero came back light. Soon the hosue meetings called themselves the Farmworkers Association. By 1965, the organization supported itself, with dues and fought two small strikes. Then the dream blossomed. In September of that same years, the Filipino Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee came to Delano to work grapes and had no taste for the \$1.20 an hour being offered. AWOOC struck and the FWA had to stand on one side or another. Eight days after the Filipinos set up their pickets, the Farmworkers Association voted unanimously to jump in with both feet. Together, they called themselves the United Farmworkers and started off into the biggest fight they'd ever imagined.

The UFW spent five years on strike and boycotting to win their original contracts with the table grape industry. Before the Union's victory, base wage in grapes was \$1.20 an hour with a ten to 20¢ kickback to the labor contractor. The 1970 union agreement started at \$2.05 and created the first hiring hall in grape-growing history. It also forced the growers to accept pesticide regulations much stiffer than the state of California's, an employer-financed health plan, banning workers under 16, and no firing without just cause. The contract lasted three years. Today's troubles started when it came time to sign a new one: Negotiations never passed the first point of discussion. It wasn't just the union's proposal the growers didn't like. Most of them plain couldn't stand the union. "It's too goddamn democratic," as the way one described it.

The United Farmworkers don't send their president in to get a contract he can announce to everybody else. All union members are on crew committees which elect representatives to a ranch committee and the ranch committee negotiates. At contract time, that means the growers sit face to face in a \$50 hotel room with the people who work for them, listening to them talk in Mexican and eventually giving in—none of which are too popular among rich growers and corporations. When the talks started this year, it wasn't long before the UFW understood the growers had Teamster contracts in their pockets and the tiny United Farmworkers was in for a brawl with the largest union in the Western world.

"The Teamsters and growers have been joined together," Chavez, now UFW national chairman explains. "They are trying to destroy our union and force the workers to accept a union they don't want." For this work as chairman, Chavez receives \$5 a week plus food,

gas and shelter. To look at him, you wouldn't think Chavez has an age. His face is full of soft creases sitting sidesaddle on a collection of bumps. Behind it, his mind perches on his short body, flicking, watching and poised like a cat. And that's all of Cesar Chavez that shows. There's more, to be sure, but the rest has turned in on itself, grown into its dark brown toot, stewed there, and sprouted into a crowd of red and black eagle flags. Chavez is more than meets the eye and less than a nation of movie magazines and talk shows has come to expect. He gets up in the morning and scratches himself like everybody else, but the boundaries we call personality aren't so sharply drawn. In some strange way, Cesar Chavez doesn't exist. His laughter and the fear on his eyelids are his own, but the shadow he casts has long since become the shape of a long sweating line inching out of Mexico. When he talks, the voice always sounds bigger than the face it speaks with; it is as though the words come from somewhere over his shoulder. Chavez behaves like a bulge in the hide of a thousand years' history. When he looks up, he seems embarrassed by it all. The nerves in his fingers betray him. They grapple with each other under his conversation. The words glide along in their own self-conscious way, full of stumbles and wide enough to touch the ears of every Lopez in California. He's the leader of his people more than he is anything else. The most on the surface is Cesar Chavez, but the stuffings are 100% union. It makes him hard to know and easy to believe.

Over the years, Chavez has acquired the habit of meaning most everything he says. He calls the Teamster move "fearful and dishonest." "They're afraid of the farmworker," he explains, "because they don't control him."

"We have offered elections to let the workers decide which union they want, if any. The Teamsters have refused and the growers, of course, have held out. They know if the workers are given the choice, they will be put out of the fields by a very large majority. Instead, the Teamsters hired goons in Los Angeles and brought them to Coachella with the idea of scaring our pickets away. They're slowly finding that the workers are not afraid of them."

"I can understand the employers," Chavez continues. They're employers and acting like employers. When it comes to the Teamsters Union, that's a different question. They're supposed to be a union and are acting in concert with the growers to destroy us. It's a shameful act and they won't succeed.

"The Teamsters claim to have signed 4500 workers in the Coachella Valley. We know they haven't," Chavez chuckles. "There aren't 4500 grape workers in the Valley. You see, the Teamsters don't organize workers. They organize employers. They're very successful at organizing employers but very bad at organizing workers."

George Meany, President of the AFL-CIO, put it more simply in his own stern tone. He got on ABC evening news and called the Teamsters "strike breakers."

When Teamster President Frank Fitzsimmons heard the comment, he announced on nationwide television the next night that Meany was "senile." It was a smart move. If he hadn't chosen that tack, Fitzsimmons might have had to stand on the Teamster record, which isn't a very smart thing to do. Of course, Frank Fitzsimmons didn't get where he is by being anybody's dummy. His presidential paycheck reads \$175,000 a year, plus travel and maintenance for himself and his wife. Teamster national headquarters is equipped with

a limousine plus drive, a full-time barber, a full-time masseur, and two French chefs, not to mention the president's private 17-seat jet. All that, of course, doesn't change the union's record, starting with the president and working its way down.

Fitzsimmons' predecessor, Jimmy Hoffa, had a problem common to Teamster history. He was sentenced to 15 years in a federal penitentiary for tampering with a jury. (His sentence was later commuted by Richard Nixon.) Since taking the reins, Fitzsimmons has had his own brushes with the law. Last February, an FBI stakeout spotted him meeting with alleged L.A. Mafia members Peter Milano and Sam Sciortino at the Bob Hope Golf Classic in Palm Springs. Before the golf balls were gone, Fitzsimmons had talked with Lou Rosanova, allegedly of the Chicago Mob, as well. Four days later, he and Rosanova met again at a health spa in San Diego County. When their meeting was over, Fitzsimmons went north to San Clemente and hitched a ride back to Washington with Richard Nixon on Air Force 1. Wiretaps later revealed a contract in the offing allegedly designed to bleed the union pension fund with a Mafia health care plan. The Mob's kickback was reported at 7%. When it came time to renew the wiretaps, Attorney General Richard Kleindienst refused permission and the investigation was dropped.

Some said it was a case of the old Teamster solution again. The Teamsters were the first union to endorse the Republican ticket and rumors in Washington hold that Fitzsimmons had veto rights on the Secretary of Labor. The Manchester, New Hampshire, Union Leader has charged that the Teamsters invested better than half a million dollars in the secret Watergate campaign fund. When Special Counsel to the President, Charles Colson, retired from public life a few months back, he joined a Washington law firm that had begun handling the Teamsters' seven-figure business just the month before. Needless to say, Fitzsimmons, Kleindienst, Colson, Milano, Sciortino and Rosanova have denied all charges of wrongdoing.

At the bottom rung of the International Brotherhood, the record is no better. The Teamsters had no foothold in field work until the last half of 1970. Two days after the UFW won industry-wide contracts in grapes, the Teamsters signed five-year agreements with a frightened set of Salinas lettuce growers. The UFW responded by shutting down the lettuce fields with a walkout of 7000 workers.

When the Teamsters appealed to the courts to invoke California labor law and stop the UFW from striking, they won an initial injunction. Two years later, the California Supreme Court reversed the findings of the lower courts. The justices ruled that the law forcing compulsory arbitration only applied to two unions representing factions of the same working force. The court found the international union guilty of accepting the grower's invitation and making deals without worker representation. The Teamsters were, in the terms of the law, ruled a "company union," organized by the management to do the management's bidding.

Since the Teamsters arrived in Salinas, three of their "organizers" have been charged with violation of the Firearms Act of 1968; half a dozen more are in court charged with felonious assault. Teamster Frank Corolla has told the federal grand jury that grower representatives delivered \$5000 packets of fresh bills to Teamster officials each week at the Salinas airport.

The only agricultural successes the Teamsters have enjoyed are in the packing sheds and canneries, both of which are under uncontested Teamster jurisdiction. Even on its own turf, the big union has had its problems. Committees of Chicano workers have formed in the canneries all over California. One recently filed 36 charges of racism against the Western Conference of Teamsters. The Equal Employment Opportunity Commission upheld all 36 and issued a cease-and-desist order to the Teamsters.

That's not the first time the International Brotherhood has been called honky. Such talk is all over Coachella and Salinas. The Teamster leadership has done little to dispel the rumors. After three years of "organizing" in the Salinas fields, the Teamsters have failed to deliver union cards to the largely Chicano membership. Without a card, a worker has no rights in the larger union. When Einar Mohn, head of the Western Conference, was questioned about Teamster plans for membership meetings in Coachella, he said it would be a couple of years before any were held. "I'm not sure," he explained, "how effective a union can be when it's composed of Mexican-Americans and Mexican nationals with temporary visas. As jobs become more attractive to whites, then we can build a union that can negotiate from strength."

Despite this dubious record, the International Brotherhood of Teamsters continues to claim it best represents the workers of the Coachella Valley. So far, they've committed over a million dollars to their effort. Agriculture is big business and according to the Teamsters, only an International Brotherhood has the size to handle it.

Agriculture is indeed very big business. It accounts for one-third of California jobs and better than half of the state's accumulated wealth. If all the agricultural workers organized into a single union, it would be the nation's largest and have an importance beyond its size. Agriculture is rapidly becoming the keystone of the Republicans economy. Faced with other industries' inability to compete, the United States has moved into an increasingly unfavorable position in world trade. This has blown the worth out of the dollar and lit a fire under Richard Nixon. He plans to escape the dilemma by increasing the production and export of farm products. Already, government production controls have been lifted and doors opened to the Russian and Chinese markets. Needless to say, Richard Nixon isn't too excited about including Cesar Chavez and the UFW in that strategy. He'd sleep a little easier with it in the hands of his friends.

One such friend, Undersecretary of Labor Laurence H. Silberman, arranged for Frank Fitzsimmons to speak at last December's annual convention of the American Farm Bureau. The Farm Bureau is a growers' organization with a long history of calling unions Communist fronts, but they received Fitzsimmons warmly. He called Chavez "a revolutionary fraud" and got a big hand. A month later, the Teamsters signed an agreement with the Labor Contractors Association and their representatives showed up in Coachella with an offer.

Their offer was ten cents an hour less than the UFW's, included no hiring hall, no special pesticide regulations and was written in English. None of the Teamster rank and file have seen a copy of the contract yet, but the growers say it's attractive, fair and about time. "It's nice to have somebody with a little strength on our side for once," commented one Coachella ranch manager. He smiled as he said the words and switched the sides of his mouth.

The Teamster strength in Coachella is hard to miss. Most teamsters average better than six-foot high and 200-pounds heavy. Some are red-necked truckers from Indio; the warehousemen from L.A. look like hippies, and the reset grease their hair into a duck's ass. They all get paid \$67.50 daily from the union's organizing funds. Each day at 5 AM, these "organizers" assembly in the Safeway parking lot off Highway 111. The fat ones like to stamp their feet on the asphalt and say one Teamster is worth five Mexicans. Those are just about the odds they work. It makes for long hard days.

There are five times as many Mexicans, but they're mostly small and half are women and children. They start at 4:30, drinking sugared coffee in the Coachella park across from the hiring hall. As the picket captains pass the word on which ranches are working, the United Farmworkers huddle into caravans, head out the highway and across county roads. The streets running east and west are all named after numbers, the ones north and south after Presidents. The armies rarely get lost. They usually show up about the same time. Since Alicia Uribe's dented face, the courts have given the UFW the far side of the road and the Teamsters the side with grapes on it. The judge said the distance would keep things peaceful; Riverside County sheriffs cruise between the lines to make sure. But even the cops haven't been able to keep the noise down.

Both sides have full horns and start using them when the first folks show up to work. The UFW calls them "scabs." To the Teamsters they are "brother Teamsters" and "good Mexicans." The old Fords and new Chevies that come in the morning bring a mild breed. These people don't talk a lot. When they do, they're "looking for work." After they find it, the roar doesn't start dropping until three.

The United Farmworkers wave their flags and shout, "*Huelga!*" into the fields. They stand in a solid line, on tops of cars and in roadside weeds. Most have no idea that James Buchanan was the 15th President of the United States. They know him only as a street in the Coachella Valley.

The Teamsters on the other side of the bumpy tar are spread thinner. They like to take their shirts off, flash their tattoos, and every now and then one threatens to drop his pants at the UFW. That always gets a big laugh. One slow morning, the boss Teamster stalked out into the fields, brought 12 workers out, arranged them by an American flag and took their picture for the Teamster newsletter. When they got bored once, some Long Beach banana loaders stuffed a gunny sack, hung it as Cesar Chavez in effigy, and danced around it, spitting and calling the ex-potato bag 14 kinds of motherfucker.

At three, the field work stops, the United Farmworkers split for the shade trees in Coachella, and the Teamsters find an air conditioner. No one in the Valley with any sense works past three. Both sides agree to let the sun carry the action until six. Then the battle starts all over again. The UFW uses the cooler evenings to spread out into the Valley's sprinkling of little towns and labor camps.

On April 24th, 20 strikers from the Coachella-Imperial Distributors Ranch took their leaflets and walked into the CID labor camp. The rest of the 90-strong UFW pickets stayed on the road, by the line of gnarled cypress and the wave of sand pushing up on the camp's gate. The "camp" is a house trailer, a large single-roomed building with a bathroom in one end, and two cottages divided into two rooms apiece. The little houses are for families and

the big one holds 30 single men. The trailer is pulled by a semi and belongs to the camp manager, a short man with knobs of curly hair on his nose. On April 24th, he never even came outside. As soon as he saw the strikers, he just grabbed the phone.

In ten minutes, the police arrived. While the sergeant and the picket captains discussed the UFW's right to be there, the Teamsters busted in. Minutes later all hell busted loose. The 20 Teamsters were led by Al Droubie and rushed up from the road. Droubie hasn't been very active in the last month, but in the first two weeks of the strike, he kept busy enough to draw three different assault charges. Droubie paused momentarily at the sight of the police. But he was pissed off and began screaming "Get the fuck out of here," he yelled, "get these assholes out of here."

Taking his cue, the pear-shaped Teamster in back of Droubie threw a board into the circle of strikers and began to swing his bicycle chain. It whipped around his head in third gear. Droubie spotted Tom Dalzell, one of the UFW lawyers in the front of the crowd. "Get him," he allegedly muttered and the squat guy next to Droubie knocked Dalzell out cold with a right hand lead. Droubie himself allegedly chased down UFW organizer Marshall Ganz and plowed him into the sand, screaming, "Fuck you, Ganz." The Teamster had ripe sweat streaming down his face and blinked his eyes to keep track of the Teamster charge.

The 20-man rush forced the UFW across the sand to the road. Once past the gate, they held their ground by the parked cars and sang, *No Tenemos Miedo.* That means "we are not afraid" in Mexican. The Teamsters stopped at the edge of the camp and punctuated the song with flying rocks that carried with a whistle and a thud into the farmworkers' cars.

"Fuck you," Droubie shouted from the cypress.

The most popular UFW response to the Teamster muscle has been the picket line. As a group, the International brotherhood of Teamsters, Chauffeurs, Warehousemen and Helpers has been shortened to *los gorillas*. Some mornings, the pickets bring bananas tied to the ends of poles and dangle them at the Teamster line. The Teamsters have been carrying thick sticks, getting tans and picking up Spanish. When they do, the shouting has been known to hurt their feelings. "I never called their mother none of them names," the one called "King Kong" said. "It ain't fair."

You see, these Chavistas are hypocrites," Ray Griego, Teamster Local 208, explains. Ray came out from L.A. after the first week of the strike. He likes to wear a flat black hat so he looks like Black Bart and loves to talk on the bull horn. Griego is the only Teamster patrolling Karahadian and Son's Ranch who speaks Spanish, so he gets to be the Teamster voice every day. "Sometimes when I'm out here, I see them pray on their picket line but only 25% of them mean it. One of the guys was flipping me the bird while he was supposed to be praying, I ask you, is that real?"

"We're just here to protect these people in the fields," is the way Ray Griego sees his job. Griego claims he's never laid a hand on anybody since he came out from his home in La Mirada. "These people," he says, pointing back over his hat to the stooped shoulders in the field, "want to work. They got daughters and sons at home, but they're afraid to bring them to the fields because of these Chavistas. Since we've been here, they bring their kids.



“Do you know,” Griego argues, “these Chavistas eat nothing but tortillas, beans and potatoes all the time? That’s all they eat, swear to God. Yesterday, one of them gave me a burrito. It was pure beans. It got me so mad that this man Chavez comes out here and feeds these people that shit morning, noon and night. So what I did was buy some burritos myself. I came back and gave them a Teamster burrito. It was all meat. I ask you, what kinda union is it that makes its people eat beans? Those people inside the fields are eating beef in their burritos. They’ll tell you they have to go with the people who put meat on the table and that’s us.”

Pio Yerpes is a Filipino worker in the fields Ray Griego guards. Like most of the 15 workers on his crew, he’s been out of work much of his life. Farm labor is seasonal, but living is year-round, which means bills that only a paycheck can satisfy. In April and early May, the crew do what’s called thinning. The bottom of the grape bunch is cut away from the stem and six branches are left on top to make big, sweet Thompsons. If the job is done wrong, the grapes grow into water berries, bloated and tasteless. In June, the crews are tripled and they begin to pick. If the picking is done too slowly or too late, the grapes shrivel into raisins and droop on the vines, crusting into heaps. Whenever he works, Pio Yerpes uses his bandana to tie a straw hat to his head. Shade collects into a black apron under its brim and falls all over his eyes.

“I am a member of the Teamsters,” he says. “I signed already. It seems to me it’s good but I don’t know much about them yet. My boss, Mr. Karahadian, he sign with the Teamsters. Where shall I go? Shall I follow Chavez to strike? Without some money? And who will pay me? I’m supposed to follow my boss. Am I right? I have to support all kinds of things. Some of my car and everything like this and that. I go with them and what will happen? They will give me \$5. Can I live on \$5? It seems to me that’s ridiculous.”

K. Karahadian, the boss of Pio Yerpes and owner of the fields Ray Griego guards, agrees. Karahadian made his stash in knit sportswear and moved out of L.A. in the Thirties to own some grapes. “This Chavez made too goddamn many mistakes,” Karahadian claims. “We tried to negotiate with this fellow clear back in November. He had a contract that was impossible to live with. About 20 negotiable items and we never got past the first one. In the meantime, we warned them. The Teamsters are in the Valley, we said, but he wouldn’t listen.”

The 1965 strike hurt Karahadian and thoughts of the new one jam his jaws together; so an occasional word beaches on one of his molars and rattles inside his head. “he . . . he simply pushed the workers away from his union. We didn’t have nothing to do with it. If Teamsters came into our fields before negotiations, we chased them off. We kept out of the picture completely. We did the best we knew how to get along with this Chavez. Even then, his union was always har . . . harassing us with all kinds of stupid grievances, filling every day, just absolutely a bunch of nothings.”

As far as Karahadian is concerned, the UFW is Cesar Chavez and Cesar Chavez isn’t much. “He’s just not a labor leader,” Karahadian says. “He’s a revolutionist, or something like that. Those two don’t go together. The Teamsters are in and that’s all. That’s the whole goddamn thing in a nutshell.”

Rosario Pelayo used to work in Karahadian’s fields before Ray Griego began to guard them. She tells a different kind of story. “The Teamsters never came into the fields to talk

to us,” she explains. “Our foreman was a Teamster and he signed us all up without telling us. The day before the strike, the Teamsters came and broke all our union flags. We had flags on our cars and on the grape rows and they tore them all down. We went to the foreman. We told him that we were still under contract and that we did not permit him to come and molest us. The owner came up and said if we wanted to we could leave.

“The next day,” Rosario recalls, “the union pickets came and called us to come out of the fields. We began to talk to the other workers. When we did, the son of the foreman picked up a grape stake and told me to leave. I said I was going to leave but that we’d all go together. We didn’t agree with the union he wanted.”

Rosario Pelayo claims she left the fields with 85 others. Her face is expressionless; she doesn’t really smile or frown. She says the crew that replaced them is from Texas and northern Mexico. “The first timer I ever got to talk to a Teamster,” she continues, “was out here on the picket line. I told him that I didn’t think their union was bad but it was very apart from our union. If they wanted to be our union, they should have talked to us. They don’t represent farmworkers.”

Rosario Pelayo, her husband and six children live on \$50 a week strike benefits. “It’s difficult,” she admits, “but we have to struggle. It’s our life.”

Since April 16th, that life has been a lot more dangerous than they ever expected. The Teamsters started a fear campaign sprinkled with beatings back in April and May. By June the situation became even more tense. June means picking in Coachella and picking is a very touchy time. Grapes must be picked, packed and sent to the cooler at the right moment. Left too long on the vine, the grapes begin to wrinkle and each wrinkle means money out of a grower’s pocket. June was slow this year and there were many wrinkles. Crews were short, the strike grew, and the crop began to burn around the edges. The UFW pickets numbered in the hundreds and the Teamsters had to recruit 15-year-olds to do the work. The situation worsened and the Teamsters finally decided to cut the crap and get down to business. June 23rd, 1973, was the Battle of the Asparagus Patch.

The attack took shape at seven in the morning around the vineyard owned by Henry Moreno. A hundred United Farmworker pickets got tired of standing next to Avenue 60 and decided to move into a clump of desert between the grapes and a field of asparagus, 90 yards further on. The court injunctions said they had to stay 60 feet from the vines, so the pickets walked the long way and set up behind the field with the asparagus to their backs. Most of the pickets were teenagers, women and children. While they were making their way around the vineyard, 75 Teamsters crunched up behind the vines to watch. The Teamsters split into two groups, one facing the pickets, the other to their side and behind them. The International Brotherhood distributed pipes and tire irons. It wasn’t long before they began to take swings and throw rocks at the stragglers in the UFW line.

The Teamster leader was known as the Yellow-Gloved Kid. The name came from the squash-colored gloves he never took off. He perched on the back of a white pickup, tugged at his wrists and delivered hoarse shouts. Two fat Teamsters near him carried pistols under their belts. The Teamsters were soaking up the heat like sponges, getting redder as they waited, and rubbing their hands in wet circles.

Then the waiting was over. The Yellow-Gloved Kid lobbed a firecracker towards the UFW picket. "Kill them," he allegedly shouted. "Kill them." That set the Teamsters in motion and their June offensive was under way. Three sheriff's stood between the two unions but that didn't even dent the Brotherhood's rush. The group to the side and back drew blood first. The ground they charged across was full of bumps. As the pickets tried to escape, they stumbled and fell into the Teamsters' path. A man named Tamayo hit the hardpan deck and two long-haired Teamsters allegedly split his head open with a pipe. It was as easy as swatting flies. For good measure, they spent five minutes kneading him with their size 12s. When Fredrico Sayre tried to help, he was knocked into the sand by a third Teamster coming up from behind.

All the United Farmworkers began to run, but there wasn't really any place to run to. The Teamsters had circled them on three sides. Some ran out the open side into the asparagus patch only to be chased down. Before the police reinforcements arrived, several pickets got to sample Teamster benefits close up. A blond Teamster chased Roy Trevino with a tree limb and allegedly beat him to his knees. Each time Trevino staggered to his feet, the Teamster laced him with his piece of tree. When Joe Pavia finally helped him away, Roy's head was raining juice and he kept coughing blood in a thin dribble between his lips. Consuelo Lopez found her son Ricardo by a pile of grape lugs with his face pushed in. The police helped the hundred limp back to the main road, but the Teamsters didn't want to stop. One called "Cat Man" chased a 14-year-old boy down the street and allegedly whipped him with a stick. Another, ran across the road, opened a pickup door, pulled the driver out and kicked his ass with a club. When the dust settled, five UFW members were in the hospital; twenty more were treated and released.

Before the June offensive ended four days later, 18 Teamsters faced assault charges; a UFW member's house had been burned to the ground; Cesar Chavez was shot at; and four more UFW members were hospitalized after being "organized" with tire irons. When a priest had his nose broken by a 300-pound Teamster in the middle of a crowded coffee shop, the shit finally hit the fan in the Teamster from office. Frank Fitzsimmons sent his own fact-finders to Coachella and their report clinched it.

Murray Westgate was one of the men Fitzsimmons sent to help "maintain good relations with the press" and report back. On arrival, Fitzsimmons' emissary was quoted as saying there might be a "violence" problem in Coachella. Westgate was having dinner at the El Morocco Motel in Indio when he got the chance to investigate the problem in greater depth. Teamster Hank Salazar was with him. A Teamster Westgate had never seen before approached Salazar and Westgate looked up from his blue cheese dressing to introduce himself. The Teamster backed away from Westgate's handshake.

"I don't want to know you, you son-of-a-bitch," the Teamster said. "Why the hell do I want to shake your hand? You think you can pull that shit on everyone? I don't like you. Get fucked." With that, the Teamster walked around the table, allegedly punched Westgate in the mouth and then punched him once again to make sure he remembered the first one. "Don't try to pull that shit again," he said and left. Westgate on the floor.

Westgate picked himself up off the carpet and the waitress brought his steak. Ralph Cotner, the Teamster Area supervisor approached him from across the room. "Westgate," he said, "there are four more guys standing over there who are madder than hell at you,

who are waiting to do the same thing unless you get the hell out of here right away.” Westgate kept eating. As far as he could tell, everyone was angry about what he’d told the press. The Teamsters wanted no publicity on the “violence problem.”

Cotner bent over Westgate’s shoulder again. “If you don’t want that thing shoved down your throat” he allegedly said, “you’d better get the hell out of here.” Westgate looked up and Salazar interceded. “Look, Murray,” Salazar said, “you better get the hell out of here before you get killed.” Westgate abandoned his steak and left.

Before the end of June, new orders came to Coachella. The Teamster “guards” were pulled out and sent to Arvin and Lamont in Kern County. Director of the Western Conference’s Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee, Bill Grammi, announced the move to the press.

“We’re doing this,” Grammi said, “because we believe that local law enforcement agencies have realized the need for increasing their forces to the point where their protection appears adequate.”

But the war continues. The bulk of table grape growers have signed with the Teamsters, and the UFW is still fighting for its life. Coachella is burrowed in front of its coolers now, waiting for November. The harvest is over. The UFW has gone north to Arvin, Delano and Selma, striking all the grapes that are left to strike. It’s a hard fight for the UFW to win by itself. They are a union of poor people—a union that has struck in table grapes, wine grapes, lettuce and vegetables for eight years running. To wink the strikers must make their quarters do the work of a \$5 bill. It’s not easy but their friends’ help may make it.

Friends are one commodity the UFW has been able to count on. In the first five-year strike, it was the American grocery shopper who finally brought the growers to the table. When the demand for union grapes forced everything else off the fruit shelves, the UFW got a contract. The new boycott has already made this year’s grapes worth \$2.50 less if they don’t have the black eagle, the UFW seal, on the box. Field production is 38% of last year’s crop and if the price dips much further, growers will be losing money with each box they ship.

The biggest farmworker friend has been the AFL-CIO. Three weeks after the strike started, George Meany announced that the 13.5 million member labor federation would tax its members 4¢ a head for three months and give the UFW a strike fund. The money has kept the UFW eating. In the meantime, a lot of grapes have turned brown with puckers all over them like a small prune.

The shame of it all is that the money’s wasted. All the money—the UFW strike fund, the Teamsters’ million, the \$250,000 spent by the Riverside County Sheriff’s Department—could have been saved with the price of one honest vote. An election would sort out all the claims quickly, but it’s not likely to happen soon. The Teamsters aren’t big on elections. They have run against the UFW three times in the course of their agricultural organizing adventures and lost each time. The Brotherhood’s attitude suits the growers fine. It’s the case of Keene Lersen that has most of the owners scared. Lersen is one of two Coachella growers who renewed their UFW contracts. In the first strike, he was a grower spokesman. Lersen went around the country telling whoever would listen that his workers didn’t want a

union. Finally, the UFW called the question. Being an honest man, Lersen accepted. A binding vote was arranged by impartial parties and Lersen lost 78 to 2.

The nearest thing to an election this time around happened before the strike began. Msgr. George Higgins, a consultant to the US Bishops' Committee on Farm Labor, took 25 church and civic leaders into 31 fields and polled the workers. Their poll totaled UFW 795, Teamsters 80, no-union 78. If you're a Teamster or a grower, that adds up to a good reason not to vote.

Even without ballots, the Coachella Valley grape workers found ways of making their feelings known. One incident in the first week of the strike has become a farmworkers legend. It began with a young woman member of the UFW and a bull horn. She was with the picket line outside the Bobara Ranch, standing on top of a car. Behind her the sun hung like a yolk lobbed against a blue clapboard wall.

"Remember," she shouted to the workers in the field. "when we were under contract and we used to have 15-minute rest periods every four hours? I haven't seen anyone resting. Aren't there rest periods anymore?"

As she finished, the people in the vines began to break into bunches, sit down and light cigarettes. When their break was over, the young woman started in again.

"Remember, too," she continued, "how our contract let us leave the fields to go to the bathroom anytime we wanted? I haven't seen anyone leave for the bathroom in two hours. Don't the Teamsters let you?"

Scattered workers began to walk to the portable toilets on the edge of the vineyard. When they returned, the bull horn opened up again.

"Remember," the young woman said, "when we were all in the union and we used to shout, *Viva Chavez?* Is there anyone in the fields who still shouts *Viva Chavez!*"

The Teamsters forewoman stood up over the vines. "*Abajo, Chavez!*" she shouted. That's "Down with Chavez."

As soon as she finished, heads popped up and backs straightened all over the field. "Viva Chavez," they yelled. "Viva Chavez!"

The Teamsters along the road ran back into the vines, stumbling along the rows and tripping on the crumbling furrows. "Shut up," is what they told the workers. "That's a rival union." With that, everyone except the forewoman walked out of the ranch and joined the UFW picket. The young woman got down from the car. "*Si, se pueden,*" she said. ("We can do it.")

The sun said nothing and only dripped along the young woman's back, leaving tracks on her shirt and toasting the dirt under her feet. On the other side of the avenue, the Teamster forewoman hunkered in the ounce of shade next to the vines, kicking at the heat with her new shoes.