

The Teamsters' Campaign to Smash a Union c.1974

By Lester Velie

Cesar Chavez almost succeeded in giving security to Chicano farm workers. But a ruthless Teamster effort to destroy his union may set them back for years

Not long ago, the Massachusetts Board of Rabbis branded as non-kosher all grapes and lettuce that didn't bear the union label of Cesar Chavez's United Farm Workers (AFL-CIO). Ancient Jewish law, the rabbis said, condemns the oppression of laborers; the fruits of their labors are unclean.

With this dictum, the rabbis lined up with the National Council of Churches and the National Conference of Catholic Bishops to support a boycott rare in American labor history. For this boycott is not directed at employers alone. The target, too, as an "oppressor of laborers" is a union, the International Brotherhood of Teamsters.

Without worker elections, and despite workers' opposition, the Teamsters and California's major agribusiness corporations signed union contracts last year that supplanted those of the United Farm Workers. All but a remnant of its 60,000-odd members were dumped into the Teamsters like so many sacks of potatoes.

Contrary to every union tradition, the Teamsters mobilized to smash a union—and a dream as well: the Mexican-American agricultural worker's aspiration of gaining a voice in the conditions of his work, and of shedding his migrant status. To members of the United Farm Workers—as scores of interviews in fields and workers' homes indicate—the Teamsters are an alien force of Anglos (whites) brought in to suppress a native independence movement of Chicanos (browns); they impose an industrial colonialism which permits no representation on taxation (union dues), no redress of grievances, no right of assembly (union meetings).

Meetings? "They [the Teamsters] told us in a couple of yeas when we're more civilized, they'll start having meetings," farm workers at Salinas said.

Redress of grievances? The Teamsters swept away the Chavez union's shop stewards and ranch committees to whom workers could complain in the field and in their own language—Spanish. The Teamsters send occasional representatives to the fields—many of them Anglos speaking only English—whose primary concern is collecting initiation fees and monthly union dues from the workers. Some workers complained to me of arbitrary firings which the Teamsters had ignored.

"Yes, there have been firings," a supervisor at the Giumarra, Inc., vineyards near Arvin said, but the Teamsters had brought no grievances. "They cooperate pretty well with us," he said.

Struggle for Security. This cooperation has gone far beyond the abolition of workers' rights alone. It strikes at the very heart of the agricultural worker's struggle for security and

stability, by permitting the return in force of the labor contractor who sells “supplies of labor” to growers for a commission based on the payroll.

Under the labor contractor there is no nonsense about seniority and job security. Rather, the contractor destroys whatever security the farm worker might build, by bringing in floods of workers from across the Mexican border, including both legal “commuting immigrants” and illegal wetbacks who compete for jobs. This frustrates the agricultural worker’s efforts to accumulate enough year-round work to permit him to stay put in an area.

Over the bitter opposition of agribusiness employers, Chavez had replaced the anarchic and archaic labor-contractor system with the union hiring hall. This has long been used on the docks, in shipping, in the building trades, where workers have jobs with a number of employers during the year. The hiring hall dispatches workers to employers on the basis of seniority. Besides providing farm workers with job security for the first time, the hiring hall also screened out and drastically reduced the use of “wetbacks.” As Cesar Chavez told us, “The hiring hall is our basic, gut reform. It stabilizes the work force and curbs migrancy.”

In an earlier visit to California, three years after Chavez had established his first hiring hall, I asked a unionized employer—then operating vineyards in the San Joaquin Valley—what changes if any the hiring hall had wrought in the lives of field workers.

The company’s vineyard manager was eager to tell. “We used to report wages for 2000 workers to the Internal Revenue Service,” he said. “There was a big turnover. Some would come in and stay three or four months to do pruning and move on. Others would follow to do the harvesting. Now, because of union security through the hiring hall, the same man does both the pruning and the harvesting and gets eight to nine months of work. I’ve just completed the W-2 forms—the lowest number in our history—690!”

Half of his workers, the vineyard manager said, use to be migrants, obtained through labor contractors. The company had shut down the three camps that once housed them. The longer work year at union wages had permitted the workers to stay put. Some had built homes in nearby Richgrove with self-help government loans. They had elected fellow farm workers to the water and school boards. But now labor contractors, reduced by about 25 percent during the first three years of the hiring hall, are returning in force to threaten this stability.

Angry Activists. Asked why they refused to re-negotiate their contracts with Chavez but signed with the Teamsters instead, grower after grower told us that the hiring hall was the basic reason. “We had every intention last winter of re-negotiating with the United Farm Workers,” John Giumarra Jr., counsel for Giumarra Vineyards, Inc., the country’s biggest table-grape producer, told me. “But they blew it by insisting on the hiring hall.”

Growers also said that while Chavez might be a great social leader, he was an inept union administrator, and this was reflected in the rigid way the union hiring hall was run. Dispatchers, adhering rigidly to union seniority, growers charged, broke up families that wanted to work together and insisted on sending workers the growers didn’t want—the older and slower ones.

The growers had some basis for their complaints. Union contracts were administered, at first, by angry young activists. In the wake of Chavez’s 1967 victory—when most of his

contracts were won—these activists showed little magnanimity toward the defeated growers, even less understanding of their problems.

So the growers never ceased to war against Chavez. And their chief weapon was the International Brotherhood of Teamsters. When Chavez began to extend his unionization into the lettuce fields in 1970, lettuce growers secretly approached the Teamsters and soon signed contracts with them.

“There is no suggestion in the record,” a subsequent California Supreme Court decision observed, “that the growers had attempted to ascertain whether their field workers desired to be represented by the Teamsters.” Indeed, when the workers were told about the Teamster-grower deal (which had no hiring-hall clause in it), “they refused either to join the Teamsters or ratify the agreement.” Instead, according to the Supreme Court ruling, “it appeared that the majority desired to be represented by the United Farm Workers.”

“Sign or Be Fired.” Since the farm worker is excluded from the National Labor Relations Act’s protection, the growers did not have to consult their workers’ wishes. But the state Supreme Court got into the act when Chavez’s followers struck. The growers, contending that the strike was merely a dispute between two unions, sought to outlaw it under a state law that bars jurisdictional strikes. The judges told the growers that they could not invoke the anti-jurisdictional strike statute to break a union.

Chavez’s strike continued, but because growers could harvest crops with migrant Mexican workers and wetbacks—and even Chavez loyalists who needed work—the strike failed. The Teamsters stayed in the lettuce fields.

Next, in 1973, the Teamsters took over most of the grape growers’ union contracts as well, when Chavez’s negotiations for new contracts broke down over his refusal to give up the hiring hall. Here again, the evidence indicates the workers preferred Chavez. When a committee that included Rep. Edward R. Roybal (D., Calif.) and 25 religious and civic leaders polled 953 workers in 31 fields, 83 percent voted for the United Farm Workers, as against eight percent for the Teamsters (the remainder voting for no union)

But the “Teamsters said they had evidence of their own. On the advice of the growers’ lawyers, the Teamsters rounded up workers’ petitions. How many of these petitions were signed voluntarily by regular field workers will never be known. Chavez loyalists charged in affidavits that they signed under growers’ threats to “sign or be fire.” Many workers, unable to read English, said they were asked to sign Social Security cards, only to find out later they were petitioning for Teamster membership. The labor contractors did their bit by barring from their buses—and from work—those who did not sign for the Teamsters.

Again, as in the collusive lettuce deal, wages and working conditions were negotiated without workers’ knowledge or consent. The Teamsters not only shelved the hiring hall, but also gave official sanction to the workers’ pet hate—the labor contractor—by signing separate agreements with some 20 of them.

When Chavez fought back with a strike, the Teamsters called in muscle—100-odd “guards” at \$67.50 per day—to protect strike-breakers from interference by Chavez’s pickets. As Kern County Sheriff Charles Dodge told a California legislative committee, the Teamster guards, armed with grape stakes, baseball bats, metal pipes and chains, came spoiling for blood. And as his deputies testified, they spilled it. After one strike scene, four

pickets were treated for injuries at a local hospital; one picket had a cracked skull. The deputies arrested 28 Teamsters. All but one were charged with assault—a misdemeanor—and convicted.

A Moral Issue. Cesar Chavez has called his union-organizing effort “La Causa”: the cause, not only of the Chicano workers immediately involved, but of an entire minority. He has devoted as much time to developing medical clinics and providing social services to Chicano families as he has to organizing.

Faced with the formidable opposition of Teamsters and agribusiness, will the UFW and La Causa die? Chavez, who has seen his 60,000-member union reduced to about 5000, doesn’t think so.

“We’ve lost jobs, not people,” Chavez told us at his union headquarters in La Paz, Calif. “Most of the workers are still solid behind us, even though they work under Teamster contracts.”

Chavez wears a button which proclaims, “Non Violence Is Our Strength,” and he believes “that the most nearly perfect non-violent weapon is the boycott.” Chavez is confident that this weapon can bring his cause eventual victory.

Here Chavez has a powerful ally: George Meany, the blunt, 80-year-old president of the AFL-CIO. Meany told me recently: “The Teamsters are doing more than suppressing a union. They’re suppressing a minority—the Mexican-Americans who were just beginning to raise their heads and assert their rights under their own leaders.”

Chavez’s chief weapon, Meany believes, is the boycott. The American people will have the final word by supporting or rejecting Chavez’s grape-and-lettuce boycott appeal. The AFL-CIO has urged its constituent unions and their 14 million union-member families to support the Chavez boycott. The Federation’s regional organizing staffs are being thrown into the fight as well. The action is supported also by the independent one-million-member United Auto Workers and by the organized clergy. “The boycott must be effective in the long run,” Meany believes.

The Federation has already given \$6 million to help Chavez and the farm workers in past years, “and we’ll give him more, if he needs it,” Meany said. “We mean too see this thing through. We have no timetable, no deadline. If it were a bread-and-butter issue—a question of wages only—we would have dropped our support a long time ago,” Meany said. “But it is not. It is a moral issue.”