

RELIGIOUS LEADERS' STATEMENT

December 14, 1965

Signatories: Father James Vizzard, S.J., of the National Catholic Rural Life Conference, Washington, D.C.; Lester Hunt, executive assistant, U.S. Bishops' Committee for the Spanish Speaking, Chicago; Cameron P. Hall, director, Commission on the Church and Economic Life, National Council of Churches, New York; Paul A. Stauffer, executive secretary of coordination, national division, Methodist Board of Missions, New York; Mae Yoho Ward, vice president, United Christian Missionary Society, Christian Church, Indianapolis, Indiana; Kenneth Neigh, general secretary, Board of National Missions, United Presbyterian Church of the U.S.A., New York; Rabbi Erwin L. Herman, Synagogue Council of America, New York; Rev. S. Garry Oniki, associate to the executive vice president, Board of Homeland Missions, United Church of Christ, New York; Msgr. William J. Quinn, U.S. Bishops' Committee for the Spanish Speaking, Chicago; Rev. John A. Wagner, executive secretary, U.S. Bishops' Committee for the Spanish Speaking, San Antonio, Texas; and Robert McAfee Brown, distinguished Protestant theologian from Stanford University.

As clergymen and laymen of many religious groups, Protestant, Roman Catholic and Jewish, we came to Delano to inform ourselves at first hand about the three-month long strike of the grape pickers. A number of us have also been here on previous occasions.

The right of churches and synagogues to engage in such action is absolutely clear to us. We reject the heresy that churches and synagogues are to be concerned only with so-called "spiritual" matters. We believe that this is God's world, which he not only made but continues to love. Consequently, whatever goes on in this world must be our concern, particularly when his will for the well-being of any of his children is being violated. We believe furthermore in the unity of the human person, made in God's image, and are persuaded that any indignity to any human person, whether to his soul or his body, must be our immediate concern.

We are not permitted to leave such considerations in the arena of pious generalities. They must be made specific, and for us they have become burningly specific in the Delano grape strike.

During our visit, we have talked with strikers, union officials, city officials, and one grower. We deeply regret that other growers, clergy and community leaders failed to appear at a scheduled noon meeting, and that our sincere efforts for prolonged discussions with them were thus thwarted. We are still hoping for a later meeting with them. Nevertheless, certain things are clear to us. We are not ignorant of, nor callous to, economic pressures on small farmers in this area and in the state and we expect the churches to stand with these farmers as change is thrust upon them. But the suffering of farm workers and their children cries to heaven and demands the attention of men of conscience.

Farm workers are men of worth. Their labor is important to the agricultural industry. It is both natural and just that they should participate in the decision-making process about wages, working conditions, and automation. Our three religious traditions have long recognized this fact and have repeatedly called for responsible collective bargaining between employers and employees in all industries. It is apparent to us that this basic right to collective bargaining is being denied to farm workers in the Valley. We are distressed that any employer in this day and age would refuse to deal openly with his organized employees on basic grievances and turn instead to labor outside the area to carry on his business. This a fundamental injustice which we dare not evade.

Since this right to bargain with strength as free men has been consistently denied to farm workers in this rich agricultural valley, their only recourse in an effort to gain it for themselves has been to strike. We are satisfied that no other avenues of procedure have remained open to them, and that the only way in which they can secure justice for themselves is to continue striking until such time as the owners are willing to enter into negotiation. Consequently, we feel compelled to identify ourselves unambiguously with their protest against such unjust treatment, and commend the pledge of non-violence which they have faithfully fulfilled.

We therefore:

1. Urge the strikers to continue their strike until such time as their just demands are recognized, and we promise them our help and support;
2. Call upon growers to enter into negotiations with representatives of the strikers' unions, the NFWA and the AWOC, and we promise to support all such efforts by the employers as may lead to a fair and just resolution of the strike;
3. Affirm our support of the active involvement in the strike being exercised by the California Migrant Ministry and other religious groups and pledge to back them with increasing national support;
4. Call upon other unions, in particular the AFL-CIO now meeting in San Francisco, to give support to the present striking unions by active financial aid, by representing their picket lines and by engaging in such other activity as lies within their power until such time as the present strike has been settled;
5. Call upon Governor Brown and the State Legislature to enact whatever legislation is necessary to ensure the right of collective bargaining for all within the state, and to enact whatever further legislation may be necessary to ensure that the specific abuses leading to the present strike will not recur in the future, and to encourage fullest use of current state resources, including the State Conciliation Service.

6. Call upon President Johnson and the Congress to enact Federal legislation extending the provisions of the National Labor Relations Board Act so that it includes agricultural workers, to include farm workers under a federal minimum wage, and to initiate a Congressional investigation of the present labor dispute in Delano;

7. Call upon our churches and synagogues to support the strikers and their families not only with their prayers, but with gifts of food, money and personal involvement, and, acting in their capacity as citizens and congregations, to call attention to each of the points cited above, so that power, being wisely used by them, may become an instrument of justice and love.