

Melon Growers—Next Target?

UP until now, most of the labor strife and union activity has been occurring in the table grape industry, with only sporadic attempts to unionize vegetable crop operations.

But on June 4, over 200 melon pickers, led by UFWOC organizers, walked out of Abatti Bros. Produce Co. fields in Imperial Valley, California. And after a three-day strike, which threatened loss of the entire 1200-acre crop, Abatti agreed to recognize UFWOC as bargaining agent for the workers. Terms of the agreement (not a contract—negotiations for this were to begin July 14) included a minimum guarantee of \$2 per hour instead of the \$1.65 now paid.

According to one report, Abatti, who is also a major onion and carrot producer, agreed to recognize the union as a bargaining agent for all his other field workers as well. The agreement was negotiated by Manuel Chavez, a cousin of Cesar Chavez.

Efforts to recruit other workers to replace the walkouts were not successful. Although some 100 youngsters had been recruited by June 6, temperatures of over 100° F. forced them to leave the fields.

Other growers in Imperial Valley, alarmed at this turn of events, took steps to prevent Chavez from using the Abatti agreement to force unionization of other workers in the area. A newspaper and TV campaign was begun to attract students and adults to the melon fields.

In subsequent UFWOC actions in the valley, picket lines were set up at cantaloupe fields of Andrews Brothers and Mario Saikhon. Work was disrupted, but most workers had returned to the fields within two or three days, or had been replaced with substitute crews.

As we go to press, AVG has learned that Abatti did sign a UFWOC contract. Details of the agreement, however, were not available. Union activity has spread to the San Joaquin Valley and picket lines were reported at several melon operations there. But as yet there is no evidence of a general move against melon growers.

Next, the union set up picket lines at the Andrews and Saikhon melon packing plants—where workers were already covered by a United Packinghouse Workers contract. At first packers refused to cross the picket lines and operations were halted. But shippers and townspeople co-operated in gathering pick-up crews and soon had things rolling again. Later in the week, packing house union workers (who have a no strike-no walkout clause in their contract) were back in the sheds.

UFWOC Rejects Mediation

California's Governor Reagan offered on June 29 to make available the Conciliation Service of the State Department of Industrial Relations to "provide the means for settling—voluntarily—the present fresh grape controversy by providing for free election, using secret ballots which will enable farm workers to choose which, if any, union they wish to join." Grower representatives quickly accepted the offer.

However, UFWOC rejected the governor's proposal of mediation and Larry Itliong, assistant director of UFWOC, noted that the time for elections is "long past."

Allan Grant, president of California Farm Bureau, has interpreted the rejection of the proposal as further proof of the ir-

responsible nature of UFWOC. "Farmers have always contended they are willing to hold secret elections with their workers, properly supervised by an unbiased agency," said Grant. "To me, this (refusal) is nothing more than a confession that UFWOC would be exposing itself should secret elections be held, supervised by other than labor oriented clerics . . ."

One Fact Stands Out

By mid-July, UFWOC had signed contracts with all but two Coachella Valley grape growers, and with growers of at least 65% of the grapes in the Arvin district.

The decisive influence in the five-year struggle came from retail chains. "The chains organized the workers," said one man who had been in the thick of the battle. In effect, buyers gave the victory to the union by refusing to buy non-union grapes. Growers, who had maintained a solid front throughout three years of a national boycott and unremitting pressure of strike tactics, were finally forced to capitulate in order to sell their crops.

Harassed by the consumer, consumer boycott, and frequently subjected to coercive intimidation, most retailers continued to handle grapes through the 1968 and 1969 seasons. The turning point came early this summer when a major Coachella Valley shipper signed a contract.

In the present situation, one fact stands out. The UFWOC consumer boycott failed to achieve its purpose with housewives. But it offered a channel to apply relentless and finally successful pressure on retail chain executives. Without some legal protection against the boycott technique, every segment of agriculture is vulnerable to a determined union attack. □



the THREE MOST IMPORTANT OPERATIONS IN A GREENHOUSE

INSECT, FUNGUS CONTROL, GROUND PREPARATION

For insect and fungus control, use **FLORA-FOG** for the larger grower; use **FLORA-FUME** for the smaller grower—now approved for vegetables.

For tilling — **SIMAR**, the Original Swiss Rotary Tiller used the world over.

The machine that is copied but never equaled.



Tear out complete ad, Fill in coupon, mail For Literature, Prices, Specifications —AV

Name _____
 Address _____
 City _____ State _____ Zip _____

Send for our catalogue showing greenhouse equipment, automation and labor saving devices.

GEIGER CORP.

Box 2853, Harleysville, Pa. 19438
 Phone: 215-256-8835