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The Die Has Been Cast . . . Federal Legislation Is a Must

EVENTS in California during the past several weeks have added proof—if we did not have enough already—that there is urgent need for federal legislation covering relations between organized labor and farm employers.

The International Brotherhood of Teamsters is one of the nation's most powerful and effective unions. Economic logic gives them reason to extend their bargaining position from field truck drivers, cannery workers, and other related work to include field workers. The Teamsters served notice many years ago of their interest in farm workers, and they have not been afraid to challenge AFL-CIO forces in other areas where their interests overlapped.

In signing contracts covering some 6000 vegetable workers in the Salinas Valley and neighboring areas, the Teamsters obtained a position that would seem to be worth defending.

Yet they backed off when UFWOC demanded the right to represent all farm workers everywhere. As we write this, details of the settlement in Salinas had not been revealed, but it seems clear at least that the Teamsters have renounced any further effort to organize field workers.

We could speculate at length on the strategy and tactics of the battle, but that would be largely irrelevant to the issue that concerns us here. What is important is this:

UFWOC has conquered the grape industry and fought off the Teamsters without ever having to demonstrate whether it does, in fact, represent any substantial number of workers, and it has signed contracts covering thousands of employees without any meaningful negotiation with employers.

We have said it before; we say it again: Agriculture must have some kind of federal legislation to establish orderly relations with organized labor and to prohibit the use of the boycott.

In March, 1969, when the Delano grape growers were still standing fast, we said of them; "They are not complacent. More than most farmers, they are aware of powerful forces behind UFWOC." And in an editorial comment, we said:

"Agriculture must inevitably come to more direct terms in dealing with organized labor and collective bargaining. The problem now is to determine the ground rules for that relationship. Like many others, the editors believe that the best place for those ground rules is in federal legislation."

Events have confirmed us in those judgments.

Supported by a broad and energetic alliance, UFWOC made unrestricted use of the boycott weapon that has long been outlawed for industry. We may complain that the cloak of righteousness was skillfully manipulated to conceal unscrupulous and vicious tactics.

But they succeeded, and they will succeed again if UFWOC is not brought into the framework of the law.

What kind of legislation?

In company with others of like minds, we have supported the "Consumer Protection Act" sponsored by Sen. Murphy of California. With a few exceptions, the bill has received only nominal support from other congressmen, and Sen. Murphy, however good his intentions, has been unable to gather the political influence to force serious consideration of his bill.

Many who supported the bill did so only because it might offer a bargaining position with those who would simply include farm workers in the existing machinery of the National Labor Relations Board. The clear success of the boycott suggests that the time has come to adopt a more flexible position.

Thousands of farm workers have been brought into the union without an opportunity to express their views. Hundreds of farmers have been forced to sign contracts by the threat of financial disaster.

No one could have made a more valiant battle than the grape growers. They were overwhelmed by the boycott. Let no one delude himself. Everyone is vulnerable to the threat of coercive union organization so long as UFWOC is free to use the boycott on its own terms.