

Priest says his group's study takes impartial look at farm labor unions

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COACHELLA — While two rival unions battle over who will represent laborers in Coachella Valley vineyards, a small group of Catholic priests has been quietly conducting an investigation.

Most pronouncements by clergymen in connection with the grape dispute have been on the side of the Cesar Chavez-led United Farm Workers of America, but this group is making its own study, according to the Rev. Richard Humphrys, pastor of Our Lady of Soledad Catholic Church here.

The group — the Mexican-American Commission of the Diocese of San Diego — includes about 20 priests from Riverside, San Bernardino, Imperial and San Diego counties.

Father Humphrys, one of the members, explains that each priest has been asked to conduct his own research so he can make up his own mind instead of just listening to someone's recommendations.

One thing is certain — the study will not result in 100 per cent support for the United Farm Workers. Father Humphrys already has presented his four-page report which holds that most workers did want to join the Western Conference of Teamsters.

That report was presented at the Mexican-American Commission's meeting here last week. It was the latest in a series of commission meetings on that topic, but the group's study has not been publicized.

Coachella Mayor Anthony Garcia, who was invited to sit in on last week's meeting, told news media about it afterward.

Father Humphrys said the commission will continue to meet about twice a month.

One of his basic conclusions, Father Humphrys said, is that "to come out in favor of either union is a tremendous mistake" unless there is conclusive evidence that one union is not doing the job for its members.

He noted in his report that "a small number of Catholic bishops have come out in favor of the Chavez union." There are "many priests," he said, who think the church should be impartial and that the bishops'

statement attributed too many of the farm workers' problems to growers.

"My research," Father Humphrys wrote, "does not mean that I am taking sides between the unions. I am only a reporter of what I have been able to find out in the four years I have been close to the issues."

The majority of those four years were in the Palo Verde Valley. He said he went there with "a very open mind" concerning in the United Farm Workers, and was surprised to find widespread opposition to Chavez among Mexican-Americans.

He became pastor of the Coachella church last July.

To try to determine whether the workers really wanted to be represented by the Teamsters, or did so because they had no choice, Father Humphrys said he talked with growers familiar with Teamster petitions which workers had signed.

He said he saw a petition taken at the Bagdasarian Ranch near Mecca and signed by 452 workers who did not want to be represented by the Chavez union.

At Mel-Pak, near Thermal, he learned that 90 per cent of the workers on hand at the time of the petitioning had signed.

"Considering that a worker might sincerely be afraid to sign such a petition for fear of reprisals," he said, "it would seem that this great number of signatures would indicate that the workers sincerely wanted the Teamsters Union."

He said he "found that similar petitions had been taken by all the other ranches."

There have been charges, Father Humphrys observed, that the Teamsters agreed to a "sweetheart contracts" (labor agreements which provide little for the worker) to help persuade growers to sign with the Teamsters instead of the United Farm Workers.

An examination of the contracts, however, indicates that the worker earns more than \$3 and in some cases more than \$3.50 an hour, including fringe benefits.

That, he said, discredits the "sweetheart contracts" theory.

Father Humphrys said he interviewed workers on their feelings

about the United Farm Workers and found these grievances:

✓ The union split families when it dispatched them to fields, and families in many cases could not continue to work at vineyards where they had worked for years and knew the grower.

✓ Union "harassers" visited fields, asked to see union cards, demanded that workers take part in union picketing if they wanted to continue to work.

✓ When one type of work (such as pruning) was concluded, the worker had to drive back to the union office and wait to be dispatched to the next type of work (such as thinning), even if it was at the same vineyard.

✓ Back dues had to be paid before a worker was dispatched to a job, even if he did not have any money. After last season this "abuse" was corrected, he noted, but dues were increased.

✓ Failure to attend a union meeting resulted in a \$25 fine.

"Many workers I have talked to over the past few years," Father Humphrys said, "thought that Cesar Chavez was a fair person, but they bitterly complained of the treatment they received from officials of the union."

He also said in his report that growers are not "getting rich" as some critics contend.

Most growers, he said, are making far less than they could earn by selling their property and "investing their money at 7 per cent (interest) with no risk and no work."

The "middle men" make at least double the profits of the grower, he said.

Father Humphrys added that it is "terribly unfair not to give the growers credit for the wages they are paying." It compares favorably, he said, with the pay for many other types of common labor.

He concluded that farm labor should be placed under the National Labor Relations Board so that free elections could be conducted among workers without question of bias, and that "until it can be proved that all virtue and right is on the side of one union . . . we should be fair and impartial to both unions."