

Bob Considine**The grape squeeze**

Robert Kennedy, campaigning in California just before his assassination, marched at the side of Cesar Chavez in one of that labor leader's repetitive crusades. Kennedy's participation added a layer to the veneer of Chavez's charisma. A Catholic priest named Humphrys, whose in-the-vineyard talks with members of Chavez's grape-picking union indicated that Chavez is more dictator than emancipator, has been silenced by his bishop in San Diego. Any member of Chavez's United Farm Workers who opts not to show up for the man's political demonstrations or engage in secondary boycotts has difficulty getting further assignments to work.

Curiously, the watchdog media has been generally sympathetic toward Chavez, perhaps because the only alternative is to support the Teamsters Union, which is making substantial gains in what was once Chavez's union domain.

In the middle are the big and little old winemakers, notably Gallo, the largest, and countless stores, supermarkets and wholesalers who are finding themselves picketed illegally but increasingly—from coast to coast—by Chavez's people, at a loss of incalculable tens of thousands of dollars to themselves and the unionized employees they've had to lay off.

Here are charges made in literature pressed on store customers by UFW pickets around the country, and refutations by the Wine Institute, which claims to be neutral, and an assessment by the silenced priest:

CHARGE — Gallo, the world's largest and most profitable winery, broke its contract with the Chavez group and signed "sweetheart" contracts with the teamsters, contracts which lowered wages, eliminated fair hiring and firing practices, allowed virtually unlimited automation, and brought dangerous pesticides back into the fields.

DENIAL — The teamsters contract signed by Gallo in July 1973 gives to Gallo farmworker the highest combination of pay scales and fringe benefits received by any farm-field worker in the continental U.S. (Hawaii's is a bit higher.) On May 1, these rates will increase to a minimum of \$2.89 per hour, ranging upward to \$3.75 per hour. Picking rates during grape harvest average more than \$5.75 per hour, and may run up to more than \$9 per hour.

CHARGE — A corrupt alliance between leaders of the western conference of teamsters, and owners of California grape and lettuce ranches, is attempting to force farm workers back to the days when they were no more than rented slaves.

DENIAL — In addition to increased

income, the contract provides for a paid pension plan, paid vacations, paid holidays, premium paid overtime, paid funeral leave, grievance and arbitration procedures, paid health and life insurance plan, and state unemployment insurance not required by law for farm labor.

CHARGE — The secretary for research of the U.S. Catholic Bishops conference conducted a poll in the fields and found that 60 percent of the workers wanted UFW representation.

DENIAL — UFW has seen its membership melt in California from a top of more than 50,000 to less than 10,000. It is desperately campaigning from the outside, seeking by public pressure on Gallo and other producers (Paisano, Thunderbird, Carlo Rossi, Eden Roc, Boone's Farm, Spanada, Tyrolia, Ripple, Andre, Red Mountain, and any wine marked "bottled in Modesto, Cal.") to retrieve the lost members. Fr. Humphrys reported, "With my own eyes I saw a petition signed by 452 workers, a petition taken at the Bagdasarian Ranch of Mecca, Cal. It was a petition stating that the men did not want to be represented by the United Farm Workers. They did want to be represented by the Teamsters . . . the total work force is about 500."

CHARGE — Chavez union members, happy with their lot, switched allegiance only because of intrigues between growers and teamsters.

DENIAL — They were opposed to Chavez's practice of "family-splitting." Under Chavez, they were not allowed in many cases to work on the ranch where they had worked for years and knew the employer on a personal and friendly basis. Many resented the harassment by Chavez officials in the field, asking to see union cards, and ordering men to go to Los Angeles to picket Safeway Stores, for example, when they could have been working. And threatening them: If they refused they'd find no work the next day.

The role of the Catholic church in this jurisdictional dispute was clarified last month by San Francisco's Archbishop Joseph T. McGucken. The resolution of the National Conference of Bishops supporting the consumers' boycott of table grapes and head lettuce was not intended, he said, "to harass shoppers or to impede entrances to stores or markets, nor to injure merchants who are presumed to be in good faith."

So it goes. Where's truth? And why should a supermarket in Bangor, Maine, suffer because of a union dispute in a steaming valley 2000 miles away?