

The Truth Squad of the Arizona Ecumenical Council

In May 1972, the Arizona Ecumenical Council commissioned a fact finding committee, which became known as the "Truth Squad", to study the "issues in dispute between the United Farm Workers Union and the Growers". The "Truth Squad" consisted of representatives of nine denominations of the Arizona Ecumenical Council plus two lay advisers and included:

Dr. Paul R. Gaston, Committee Chairman, First Congregational Church, Tempe, Arizona
Dr. Robert Hershberger, American Baptist Church
Dr. Harold White, Roman Catholic Diocese of Phoenix
Dr. William Rawls, Disciples of Christ
Ted Shields, Lutheran Church in America
Velma Shotwell, Vice-Moderator National Synod, United Church of Christ
Phillip A. Robbins, United Presbyterian Church
Rev. David Reed, Executive Director, Arizona Ecumenical Council
Robert Washington de la Cruz, Field Research Analyst, Arizona Ecumenical Council
John Arena, adviser to the committee, representing the growers
Gus Gutierrez, adviser to the committee, representing the United Farm Workers

This blue ribbon committee conducted six public forums, held 223 field interviews in Arizona and California with farmworkers, public officials and growers. In addition, all of the published material available was gathered from the United Farm Workers Union, the Farm Bureau, the National Farmworker Ministry, the U. S. Department of Agriculture, and other agencies. The report of the Truth Squad was approved by the Arizona Ecumenical Council in September 1972, and is available, including appendices and supporting documents, from the Arizona Ecumenical Council, 10 E Roanoke, Phoenix, Arizona, 85004 at a price of \$18.00.

FINDINGS FROM FIELD INTERVIEWS

"DO YOU WANT TO BELONG TO THE UNION?"

Of 71 non union farmworkers asked this question the overwhelming response was "NO!". However, five of the workers said they "might consider if it it were the right kind of union." When asked "Why?" the response was varied with replies such as:

"They said they already made better wages than the union would pay."

"They wanted the freedom to move about, to work for farmers they liked."

"They did not want to be involved in the turmoil of picketing."

"They think the union discourages incentive pay, encourages slow downs which makes it more difficult for a good worker to make top pay."

"They have doubts that members of the UFW have any rights, any power, any input, etc."

Robert Washington of the Arizona Ecumenical Council staff and a professional counselor with several anti-poverty agencies asked farmworkers who were UFW members about the union and reported: "Workers complained that they were used to organize a larger membership for UFW, but could not get benefits which they say were promised." He also reported that "No current or former union members in the survey felt that their membership had improved their conditions. They resent having to pay fines for non-attendance at union meetings, when some live as far away as 70 miles from where the meetings were held and have no transportation. They also resent having to pay union dues for months when they do not work."

Dr. Paul Gaston, chairman of the committee, reported similar findings following his talks with farmworkers who were members of Chavez' union in its home town of Delano, California. He quotes them as saying:

"At first the union was popular because they promised to do so much for the worker. They haven't done anything and it isn't popular anymore."

"The Union took away all our rights. We can't work for the farmers where we have worked for years; husbands and wives can't work together; we have no say as to where we go. We can't complain. We are told to keep our mouths shut or the union will not give us a dispatch card. We are treated like sheep; we have no power at all; there is no such thing as freedom of speech. There is no election, there is no way for us to say what we like or don't like."

"We want an election to determine if the worker wants to be in the union or not."

"Before the union, we could work 8 or 10 hours a day. Since the union, our hours have been cut way back. There are too many people being brought in here from elsewhere. There is really only enough steady work for local people."

"The union will not send enough workers to farmers who are not pro-union men. You pay your dues, the farmer requests you to work for him, but the union will not let you go."

"We get no real benefits from the union. We pay \$10.50 a quarter, in advance; we get fined for all kinds of things, \$25 for being late with dues, \$5 for missing union meetings, and \$200 for speaking against the union but we don't get anything back for all that money."

"HOW ARE WORKING CONDITIONS ON THE FARM? HAVE YOU ALWAYS BEEN PAID FAIRLY, AND IN FULL? ARE YOU TREATED WELL BY YOUR EMPLOYERS?"

"There was more disagreement in the committee over the figures relating to the income of farm workers than any other question. Mem-

bers who have seen only the tragic poverty of some farm worker families tend to believe that such poverty is the 'norm' for farm workers. Other members who have seen dramatic improvements on Arizona farms in housing, safety measures, benefits for workers, and have talked with permanent workers making \$8,000.00 to \$12,000.00 a year, tend to emphasize that the term 'Farm worker' is not necessarily synonymous with 'poverty'."

In Delano, where the union is well established, the committee was told, "The situation is not better, but worse. There are fewer jobs for the workers, and a lower annual income." and "The business community is depressed, some stores reporting 40% less business". Dr. Gaston reported, "We were shown W-2 forms of a man who has worked more than 20 years in the fields. In 1969 he made \$7,547; in 1970 (after unionization) he made \$6,352 or \$1,200 less. His wife has gone to work in the fields to make up the difference."

"DO SOME GROWERS PAY WAGES BELOW THE \$1.30 PER HOUR MINIMUM?"

"Interviewers found no growers paying less than \$1.50 an hour, nor did they find workers who claimed to have been underpaid. The facts establish (U.S. Dept. of Labor reports) that there are growers who break the law and cheat their workers; the fact that there were 12 reported violations out of more than 3,800 growers seems to indicate that the practice is not widespread."

"DO GROWERS ALLOW WORKERS IN THE FIELD TO BE Demeaned AND TREATED AS LESS THAN HUMAN?"

"The charge is somewhat vague and not documented in our field interviews although every worker was questioned on this point."

"DO SOME GROWERS NOT PROVIDE ADEQUATE SANITARY FACILITIES?"

"This has been and in many areas remains a difficulty. However, some growers are improving the situation by building permanent toilet facilities at key points and, at harvest time, using many small chemical-type toilets which can be loaded onto a truck and moved across the fields as the crews move."

"DO UFW PICKETS USE TACTS OF THREAT, FEAR, INTIMIDATION, AGAINST NON-UNION WORKERS?"

UFW pickets use tactics of threat, fear, and intimidation against non-union workers in the field, and have damaged and destroyed property of the growers."

"Bob Washington documents several instances where pickets threatened workers by telling them their homes, wives, and children were not safe."

"Jose Montenegro, farm worker and ex-union official, said: 'Organizing is really a tactic of intimidation, violence, and threats.'"

"Swede Antonell, Delano grower, told of thousands of dollars worth of damage by pickets to farm machinery."

"Douglas Hallett, in Bitter Fruit, describes in detail the insulting, demeaning attacks by pickets on workers."

"Judge John W. McGuire's decision in Superior Court declares there were 'repeated threats of violence and intimidation and the use of mass picketing' in the Yuma organizing effort."

"Workers from Salinas Valley, California, have given sworn statements of the threats and intimidation to which they were subjected by UFW pickets."

"HAS THE UFW LIVED UP TO ITS PROMISES TO FARM WORKERS?"

"In California, field workers commented:

'They promised much, but delivered nothing' said one worker.

'The situation is not better, but worse,' said another.

'There are fewer jobs for the workers and a lower annual income.'

Arizona field workers responded similarly:

'A woman said she asked for unemployment allowance she was promised by the UFW whenever they did not have her employed, but she couldn't get it.'

'An ex-UFW official said, 'The UFW can't comply with its promises to workers.' Some specific complaints were: no vacations; no job guarantee; no sick leave; less annual wages; no power in UFW; no decision about what kind of work, or for whom, forced to picket.

"WHAT HAS BEEN THE EFFECT OF UNIONIZATION?"

"Fewer jobs are available where the UFW has been operating for several years because: a) Growers large and small have gone broke due to increased costs of labor; b) Many growers have changed their crops from table grapes (and other crops requiring a big labor force) to wine grapes which require only about 10% of the labor force, or to crops which can be harvested by machines.

"For two years the California table grape industry has operated under a contract with the UFW union. What has happened? In 1968, 1200 carlots of table grapes moved to markets in the East. In 1970 the figure was below 700; the 1971 figure will be less. In 1969 there were 655,000 tons of table grapes produced in California. In 1970 the figure was half that." Thousands of fewer acres have been planted in table grapes in California in the Chavez years (at least 12,000) "This whole developing pattern is bound to result in fewer jobs, increased unemployment, and more poverty than before."

"When Chavez won the DiGiorgio Contract the large Sierra Vista ranch employed from 800 to 2,000 people. Today it is closed. The same is true of the DiGiorgio ranch in Arvin. Before Chavez it employed nearly 3,000 people. Now it is sold and the land has been given back to nature.

"ARE CHAVEZ & THE UFW WORKING TO ELIMINATE POVERTY AMONG MIGRANTS?"

The poverty issue has been overplayed and misrepresented by the UFW and used for publicity. The UFW tends to organize the richest farms, not the poorest. The agricultural areas of the U. S. where poverty is greatest have not received the attention of the UFW.

"California's agricultural workers are better off than the agricultural workers of any other state in the union, and California's grape workers were better off than any other classification of agricultural workers in California. . . .I could not help wonder why the UFW in its enthusiasm to stamp out agricultural worker poverty should focus its concern on the least poor of all agricultural groups." "Chavez pleads he organizes to help the migrant and the poor....Before Chavez, California farm workers were making--with piece rates--from \$4.50 to \$5.50 an hour. As the Rev. R. B. Moore, the black pastor of St. Paul's Baptist Church in Delano, put it; 'Chavez is not working for the poor, he is working on the poor'."

THE CHAIRMAN'S TRIP TO DELANO

"My reason for the trip was that there were so many conflicting charges, and counter charges between UFWOC, growers, the legislature, migrant ministry, and activist ministers, that I didn't think I could cut through it all and arrive at meaningful conclusions in the time allotted me as chairman of the AEC Truth-Squad. A glimpse of what had happened in Delano after two years of UFWOC contracts would give me a quick, objective appraisal of how both workers and growers have been effected by the union."

"I came on the trip with a pro-labor bias. I have always been concerned for the poor, the powerless. I feel that those of us who are in positions where we can exert influence must exert it in behalf of those who cannot speak for themselves loudly enough to be heard. Most ministers would, I think, feel an instinctive concern for the fellow at the bottom of the heap who is being exploited, and we have been led to believe that in our state it is the migrant farm worker. Of course we must be concerned about their rights, their dignity; they must have employment that is not degrading, and work under conditions which are at least reasonable.

"It is easy to believe that all that is needed to correct abuses of the working people, and relieve the problem of poverty in our state, is a strong union. That lets the rest of us cop out. If a man like Caesar Chavez will take on the job and upgrade the standard of living of farm workers, provide better pay, better conditions under which to work, safety measures, insurance, retirement, health and accident benefits, etc., that sounds like the Millenium to me.

"But that is an over-simplification; apparently it is pure fantasy. I came to see a valley in which there would be considerable excitement over what UFWOC had brought to pass. Instead, in Delano, we found that many union farm-workers are unhappy, disappointed and bitter; that they make less money annually than they did before the UFW contracts (even though hourly pay has gone up); that the business community is suffering with sales down 25 to 40%; that some of the major farmers aren't happy with what the union has done with the hiring hall approach to providing farm workers; that public sympathy is against the union so that Mayor Frank Herrera of Delano, and Assemblyman Bill Ketchum whose district includes Delano, can be elected by overwhelming majorities, carrying every Mexican-American precinct, although they are openly and sometimes flagrantly opposed to the UFW.

"I asked how they felt about the ministers and priests who came out to help them during the drive to organize. There was general laughter at my question. Then an attempt to answer me seriously. 'They did not talk to the workers. They were with the pickets. They shouted terrible and insulting things to us. They

said we were stupid and had no self respect and dignity. They were not our friends. They gave us no help. They came with their minds made up, they never listened to the workers or tried to understand the situation, and they left with the same ideas they came with.

"One old Filipino said, 'I was distressed by them. I thought the church was supposed to help everyone. I couldn't understand why the church would want to make people hate each other. The church ought to be neutral. 'Then he asked quickly, 'What do you think?'

"I said we would like to hear from some of the workers who were happy with the union. A crew captain said, 'None of my people are happy, they are disgusted with it, it doesn't help them' 'Another said that the organization people are the only ones happy with the union. A man said that the only workers who support the union are the lazy ones who do not want to turn out the work, and want the union to protect their jobs. One girl said, in disgust, 'This union isn't a union, it's just a mess.' There was no positive note expressed, and no one disagreed with the above opinions.

"These are beautiful people, they have great pride in their work, a great personal dignity, a fierce independence which they want to preserve at all costs. They seem to feel that the things most dear to them, the personal rights which they cherish more than they cherish money, have been taken away from them by the union. They feel there is a chance to undo what has been done to them.

"One parting quotation, while we were saying good-bye; 'Just give the workers a choice in Arizona. We have no choice here."