

Canadian clergy back California Farm Workers

THE TORONTO STAR, Tues., Feb. 28, 1974

BURLINGAME, Calif.

Bob Lindsey made an important decision here last week.

Head of the division of missions for the United Church of Canada, he was part of an inter-faith committee that had come from Toronto for a first-hand look at California's farm labor problems.

These problems have been carried to Toronto in recent months in the form of a grape and lettuce boycott, and Lindsey and the others wanted to find out where they, as individuals, and their churches should stand on the issue. He left California in strong support of the boycott.

Top United Churchmen, along with Anglicans and Roman Catholics, have endorsed the current boycott almost without question, just as they did a previous United Farm Workers of America grape boycott in the late '60s.

But this boycott is different. It has been broadened beyond just grapes to include iceberg lettuce—a more common commodity for Toronto consumers. And it also involves three parties instead of two.

In recent weeks the new third party, the International Brotherhood of Teamsters, has sent representatives from its headquarters here in Burlingame to present their side of the story with a view to scuttling the boycott.

To date, their success has been in confusing what once seemed a clear-

cut issue for people like Lindsey, as well as for supermarket executives who have been close on occasion to succumbing to pressure to remove the offending grapes and lettuce from their stores.

But for Lindsey, as a churchman and a consumer, it presents a crisis of conscience regarding the politics of the imported food upon his table.

Should he say to the Farm Workers: "You've done a good job so far, now move over and let the Teamsters take over?" Or should he say to the Teamsters: "You had no right muscling in on the other union and I'm going to back them in their fight with you until the workers in the field have a chance to make their own choice?"

Lindsey and his companions grappled with the questions all week as they moved up and down Southern California talking to workers and growers, to police and reporters who have covered the dispute since it began.

They crossed the border to the squalor of Mexicali slums and talked to people like Esther Mendoza, who lost her husband and three children in a recent accident involving a bus owned by a labor contractor. The Farm Workers, she said, were trying to help her continue when no one else seemed to care.

They visited the vineyards of the San Joaquin Valley where women wearing "Viva Los Teamsters" buttons told them their union gave them higher wages for lower dues than the Farm Workers, and that if it came to a vote they'd stick with the status quo.

They ate dinner with Maxima de la Cruz, whose husband Juan was shot dead on a picket line he would not leave because he believed in the Farm Workers.

Firm control

On balance, logic was against the Farm Workers and for the Teamsters, who, regardless how they did it, have taken firm control of the farm labor situation in the state. They have the contracts and are administering them to the satisfaction of growers and many workers.

But that balance was tipped for Lindsey when he walked into the headquarters of the Western Conference of Teamsters, here.

The group had earlier visited Farm Workers headquarters at La Paz, a renovated tuberculosis hospital on the hill that separates the San Joaquin Valley from the desert. It was a dilapidated old compound as humble as the workers it was geared to represent.

By contrast, the Teamsters headquarters was corporately palatial, with stained glass by the entrance and polished marble in the lobby. And the people who met the delegation there were seen as hostile and arrogant.

Lindsey left the Teamsters offices with a renewed affection for the Farm Workers. The Teamsters might be a legitimate union that is strong in fighting for its members, he said. He even agreed that it's a more efficient union than the Farm Workers.

Social movement

"But this is more than a straight union fight," he said. "The Farm Workers are more than another union. They're a social movement that's done a lot for these people already and is capable of doing a lot more yet. And I'm not prepared to let it die." At least, he added, until the workers themselves can have a chance to vote for one group or the other.

His feelings were shared by most of the others in the group, which included Francis Cook, of Inglewood United Church, north of Toronto; Robert Cuyler, director of co-ordination for the Anglican Diocese of Toronto; Brad Massman, director of social action for the Catholic Diocese of Toronto; Robert Madden of St. Basil's College; Sister Carolyn Dawson, of Loretto College; and Ross McClellan, a Catholic layman who lectures in social work at the University of Toronto.

The group will prepare a report on their trip within several weeks and will attempt to present a factual basis for any future stand the churches might take on the boycott issue and the plight of the California farm workers.

But as Lindsey sees it, the issue is something that defies a straight factual approach. "It's something you have a gut feeling about," he says. "No matter who's right or wrong, we've got to remember it's real people we're dealing with here. People who have needs. And the church should be sensitive to those needs."