

THE UNITED FARM WORKERS ARE ALIVE & WELL...AND THAT IS GOOD FOR ALL OF US!

It has become popular in recent months to write articles about the survival chances of Cesar Chavez' United Farm Workers. On September 15, 1974, the prestigious New York Times Sunday Magazine Section ran a pessimistic and shoddily-researched article entitled "Is Chavez Beaten?" by Winthrop Griffith. Jerry Cohen, United Farm Workers' legal counsel, has a simple analysis of the article: "Winthrop Griffith and a lot of observer-type folks like him are not writing about Cesar and the farm workers at all. They are writing about themselves; they are simply announcing that the 60's tired them out and they want a rest from the conscience-probing struggles laid on them by the farm workers and other poor people of the world."

Cesar Chavez and the United Farm Workers are not worn out even though they have more reason than most. They do not intend to stop their organizing efforts until they have built one democratic union for all farm workers in our nation. Their amazing persistence is related in part to the fact that they have experienced in their own lives the oppression of growers and labor contractors: while some sympathizers may casually observe that the Teamsters can "take care of" farm workers adequately, the farm workers themselves - including the leadership of UFW - know the practical, enslaving meaning of the Grower-Teamster decision to allow labor contractors (crew leaders) to control hiring and firing in the fields. Farm workers know firsthand the dangers of heavy machinery and pesticides - dangers which the Teamsters have effectively ignored in their contracts. Farm workers know the importance of a strong seniority and job security clause in their contracts; and farm workers are the daily victims of the ineffectual seniority and job security clauses in the Teamster contracts.

UFW persistence is also related to the powerful spirit of self-determination and self-affirmation that has developed among farm workers in the last decade. Out of the strike and boycott struggle farm workers who were afraid have lost their fear. Farm workers who felt hopeless now have hope. Farm workers who had no sense of their own power won collective bargaining, elected their own ranch committees, enforced their own contracts, chose their own leaders and wrote their own constitution. The UFW, by hard work and sacrifice, released among farm workers the spirit of liberation and there is no way - short of genocide - to snuff it out.

UFW persistence is also related to the realistic expectations which come from a ground level, poor peoples' view of life. Cesar and Helen Chavez made a lifelong commitment when, in 1962, they moved their family to Delano and began to organize a farm workers' union. The leaders of UFW are farm workers by trade; they know the growers from close-up. They know about their money, their power, their allies and their hard-nosed determination to destroy all indigenous farm worker organizing efforts by any means necessary. Cesar Chavez thought it would be ten years before UFW won any contracts. (The first one came in 1966.) While some folks in our affluent society expect all triumphs to come in a semester or two, the UFW girded their loins for a lifetime struggle. What is happening to them in the way of progress mixed with serious set backs is what they expected. They have no intention of quitting. As Cesar has said again and again: "Time is our greatest ally; time is for the poor what money is for the rich."

Winthrop Griffith may be tired of social struggles but that does not give him license to write his own weariness into the farm workers movement. Knowing very little about farm workers and less about their struggle for a union of their own he has apparently concluded that farm workers who joined the UFW in the 60's are now willing to compromise their deepest aspirations by accepting the top-down paternalism of a

large, alien Union (the Teamsters). Other writers see statistics like 50,000 Teamster members and 10,000 UFW members and conclude that farm workers have transferred their loyalties from UFW to the Teamsters. Farm workers have not transferred their loyalty. They never voted for the Teamsters. Their employers chose the Teamsters for their own selfish reasons and imposed that union on the workers. The huge grape strike of 1973 was the farm workers' angry protest against that Teamster-grower deal. As this article is being written 1,000 lemon pickers are on strike near Yuma, Arizona under the leadership of UFW. 100 Apple workers who are "protected" by a Teamster contract walked out of the fields near Watsonville, California on September 23, 1974 because their employer was deducting \$15.00 per week for housing even though they were making their own cardboard shelters. Gallo workers went on strike in June of 1973 to protest the Teamster-Gallo contract; the company fired the strikers, evicted them from their homes and went to Mexico to find hungry people to break the strike. This summer the Gallo strikebreakers walked out of the fields to protest Teamster non-enforcement of the contract. When Frank Fitzsimmons, General President of the Teamsters Union, came to Salinas on June 6, 1974, "Teamster" lettuce workers walked out of the fields and picketed his luncheon meeting with Teamster "officials" and growers (there were no farm workers on the inside of the Hyatt House restaurant). When Cesar Chavez came to Salinas on July 11, 1974, 3,500 "Teamster" lettuce workers came to a UFW rally carrying the banners of the companies where they work. All across California and Arizona - in grapes, tomatoes, mushrooms, citrus, melons, vegetables - farm workers have gone on strike in the summer of 1974 to protest specific injustices and to demand a chance to vote for the union of their choice.

The pressure by farm workers for fair, secret ballot elections may yet bear fruit. On August 19, 1974, the California Assembly passed a law (AB 3370) which would provide for state-supervised, secret ballot elections in agriculture with the added protection that such elections would be held at the time when most workers are on the ranch. The bill was supported by UFW, the State AFL-CIO, the Board of Rabbis of Southern California, the Catholic Bishops of California and the Protestant leadership of California. AB-3370 was defeated in the California Senate thanks to the combined opposition of the growers and the Teamsters. To quote its principle author, Assemblyman Richard Alatorre of Los Angeles: "It has now become clear to me that the Teamsters and the growers are not serious about secret ballot elections. They have from the very beginning tried to kill this measure which gives farm workers the right to elect their own union." But the battle for a law like AB 3370 is not over; the 1974 fall elections in California may produce a legislature and a governor more interested in the rights of farm workers. 1975 May be the year when the Teamsters will be forced by law to face the UFW in an election contest. It is the kind of test of worker will power that Teamster leaders have carefully avoided since losing three secret ballot elections to UFW at the DiGiorgio ranches in 1966.

Cesar Chavez has recently returned from a tour of the major cities of Europe. Labor unions in England, Scandinavia and Europe have agreed to join the boycott of grapes and head lettuce. Pope Paul received Cesar in an official audience on Wednesday, September 25, 1974 and made the following statement: "I know of your work and I thank you for it. Your efforts with the farm workers are very important and you must continue working in this field." Archbishop Giovanni Benelli elaborated on the Pope's statement as follows: "We are all indeed grateful to Mr. Chavez for the lesson which he brings to our attention. It is a very important lesson: to know how to be conscious of the terrible responsibility that is incumbent on us who bear the name "Christian". His entire life is an illustration of this principle: it shows a

a laudable endeavor to apply this principle, which means expending the effort that is required to put the Gospel into practice. What attracts our attention in a particular way is the commitment that is manifested, the commitment to work for the good of one's brothers and sisters, to be of service to them in the name of Christ, and to render this service with a full measure of all the energy one possesses.

The Papal audience is symbolic of growing Catholic support for the UFW struggle. On November 16, 1973, the Catholic Bishops of the U.S. voted unanimously to endorse the boycott of grapes and head lettuce until such time as the Teamsters and growers agree to elections for the workers. With the impetus of that statement combined with the leadership of such Catholic labor experts as Bishop Joseph Donnelly of Hartford and Msgr. George Higgins of the U.S. Catholic Conference, Catholic support for the UFW boycott has multiplied ten-fold among bishops, priests, nuns and lay persons. The National Council of Churches and most of the mainline Protestant denominations are strongly supporting UFW. The Synagogue Council of America has recently established a special project to organize Jewish support for the UFW boycott of grapes, non-UFW head lettuce and Gallo wines. The AFL-CIO in every state and metropolitan area is organizing boycott support committees as they did in the first grape boycott and in the successful Farah boycott. George Meany has led the way in support for Cesar Chavez and the UFW: "Make no mistake about it. We are here today to rally public support to the United Farm Workers and the boycott of table grapes and head lettuce. But we in the AFL-CIO are not cheerleaders. We do not stand on the sidelines and root. This fight is our fight. We are involved and we are going to stay involved until the sour grapes of oppression taste sweet again." (Washington, D.C., Sept. 9, 1974)

The UFW boycott is alive and well thanks to the determination of the farm workers themselves, the support of the churches and the AFL-CIO and the efforts of thousands of consumers. Gallo sales are down 7-10%. Gallo says that the boycott is not affecting them; yet they have doubled their public relations' budget (from \$6 million to \$13 million) in order to combat the boycott. Gallo representatives are crisscrossing the nation to meet with church leaders and others to "explain" their position on the boycott. They are merchandising new wine products under names like "Madria, Madria Sangria" and "Joseph Steuben". As one observer asks: "If Gallo is so proud of their good name why don't they make it more visible?" (All wines produced in Modesto, California are Gallo products.) Head lettuce prices during the summer have been at \$2.00 per carton and less - well below production cost. Table grape sales are down in most major cities in U.S. and Canada while California-Ariz. table grapes are piling up in the growers' cold storage facilities (as of 9/30/74 there were over 4 million boxes of table grapes in cold storage in California—nearly double the amount in cold storage at that date during the non-boycott years of '70, '71, '72). When the growers feel the pressure of the boycott enough they will find a way to ease the Teamsters out and begin, again, to deal with the only union that has seriously organized farm workers and depends-on farm worker loyalty for its strength,—the UFW.

Those who have convinced themselves that UFW is beaten have unconsciously accepted the prevailing American notion of what is powerful and what is not. The Teamsters and the big growers have wealth and influence; they have hired the best public relations firms; they have mastered the art of getting things done by muscle, deceit and corruption; they can afford to mail their propaganda to every clergyman, politician, labor leader, etc. They will threaten those who need to be threatened and

sweet-talk those who are susceptible to sweet-talk. It is as American as Richard Nixon and apple pie and there is no doubting that it is powerful.

The United Farm Workers rely on another kind of power. They have accepted responsibility for building their own union. They are willing to go on strike, to be jailed, to be beaten, to travel to strange, far-off cities to work on the boycott, to live on room and board and \$5.00 per week, to accept abuse from their enemies and misunderstanding from their friends in order to win their struggle. They go through all of these sacrifices because they do not want to kill others in order to gain their own freedom and because they believe that if they tell their story by words and deeds that we Americans will support them. Cesar Chavez has said that at "a very basic level non-violence means believing in the fundamental goodness of people." The farm workers believe in us even when we are tired and have stopped believing in ourselves. They believe that if they do their work, then enough of us will see their pain and respond from our hearts and support their boycott. Their experience with us over the past nine years supports their conviction!

Cesar Chavez and the United Farm Workers represent the power of sacrifice and self-giving and persistent love. By their own example and their own hard work they are building a coalition of people from all walks of life who love justice and who will give of themselves to the farm workers' movement without thought of pay or reward. It is the kind of spirit-power, people-power that the growers and the Teamsters will never understand and will never defeat.

The farm workers' battle is first and foremost for farm workers. But it is also important to each one of us and to the best that is in our nation? Cesar Chavez and the farm workers with him are like cool, clear water in the midst of a dry, wide desert. Can you imagine how much lonelier it would be in this country without their determined, non-violent struggle? There is a spark in each one of us that yearns to take charge of our whole being; it is that spirit that reaches out to the poor and the oppressed, that weeps with those who mourn, that rejoices when justice is done against terrible odds. The United Farm Workers have given flesh to that spirit of justice that dwells somewhere in every person. By their words and deeds they reach for what is deepest and best in each one of us—pulling, organizing, putting our love for justice to work in practical ways that will in fact change conditions for the people who feed us. For many Americans they have come to symbolize that spirit of love that is restless within each of us. Perhaps most importantly, they have demonstrated by their disciplined action that working for justice is meaningful, it makes sense, it is possible. In the midst of a desert of apathy, cynicism and self-centeredness, Cesar Chavez and the farm workers with him are a visible, believable, concrete sign that life can have meaning, that love is possible and that justice can be done.

Please consider, today, the request of the United Farm Workers that you "fast a little" for the sake of men, women and children who have gone hungry for a long time. Please make the boycott of grapes, head lettuce and Gallo wines a matter of conscience for you and your family. It is important to farm workers and it is important to everyone who loves justice. The more of us who join this fast, the sooner the day of victory will come. Si, se puede! (Yes, it can be done.)
