The Teamsters’ Campaign to Smash a Union

By Lester Veliz

Reader’s Digest
PLEASANTVILLE, NEW YORK 10570
The Teamsters' Campaign to Smash a Union

Cesar Chavez almost succeeded in giving security to Chicano farm workers. But a ruthless Teamster effort to destroy his union may set them back for years.

Not long ago, the Massachusetts Board of Rabbis branded as non-kosher all grapes and lettuce that didn't bear the union label of Cesar Chavez's National Farm Workers Association. None of the churches and the National Conference of Catholic Bishops to support a boycott rare in American labor history.

The Teamsters had brought no grievances against Chavez. And their chief weapon was the International Brotherhood of Teamsters, a union that has long been labeled an "oppressor of laborers" by the rabbis as well as other groups.

With this dictum, the rabbis lined up with the United Farm Workers, the Teamsters and California's major agribusiness corporations signed union contracts last year that supplanted those of the United Farm Workers. All but a remnant of its 60,000-old members were dumped into the Teamsters like so many sacks of potatoes.

Contrary to every union tradition, the Teamsters mobilized to smash a union—and a dream as well: the worker's aspiration of gaining a voice in the conditions of his work, and of shedding his migrant status.

To members of the United Farm Workers—as scores of interviews in fields and workers' homes indicate—the Teamsters are an alien force of Anglos (whites) brought in to suppress a native independence movement of Chicanos (browns); they impose an industrial colonialism which permits no representation on taxation (union dues), no redress of grievances, no right of assembly (union meetings).

Meetings? "They [the Teamsters] told me in a couple of seconds: we're more civilized, they'll start having meetings," farm workers at Salinas said.

Redress of grievances? The Teamsters swept away the Chavez union's shop stewards and ranch committees to whom workers could complain in the field and in their own language—Spanish. The Teamsters send occasional representatives to the field—many of them Anglos speaking only English—whose primary concern is collecting initiation fees and monthly union dues from the workers. Some workers complained to me of arbitrary firings which the Teamsters ignored.

"Yes, there have been firings," a supervisor at the Giumarra, Inc., told me. "We had every reason to fire some of them. They cooperate pretty well with us," he said.

Struggle for Security. This cooperation has gone far beyond the abolition of workers' rights alone. It strikes at the very heart of the agricultural worker's struggle for security and stability, by permitting the return in force of the labor contractor who sells "supplies of labor" to growers for a commission based on the payroll.

If the labor contractor there is no nonce on seniority and job security. Rather, the contractor destroys whatever security the farm worker might build, by bringing in floods of workers from across the Mexican border, including both legal (contractual) and illegal ("wetbacks") who compete for jobs. This frustrates the agricultural worker's efforts to accumulate enough year-round work to permit him to stay put in an area.

Over the bitter opposition of agribusiness employers, Chavez had replaced the anarchic and archaic labor-contractor system with the union hiring hall. This has long been used on the docks, in shipping, in the building trades, where workers have jobs with a number of employers during the year. The hiring hall dispatches workers to employers on the basis of seniority. Besides providing stable work, the hall is our basic, gut reform. It stabilizes the work force and curbs migrancy.

It is from the hiring hall that the Teamsters launched their campaign to smash Chavez's union and a dream: "The hiring hall had wrought in the lives of Chicano farm workers. But a ruthless Teamster effort to destroy his union may set them back for years."

The company had shut down the field for three camps that once housed them.

The longer year at union wages had permitted the workers to stay put. Some had built homes in nearby Richgrove with self-help government loans. They had elected field representatives to the water and school boards. But now labor contractors, reduced by about 50 percent during the first three years of the hiring hall, began to extend his unionization into the lettuce fields in 1970, lettuce growers secretly approached the Teamsters and soon signed contracts with them.

There is no suggestion in the record that the growers attempted to ascertain whether their field workers desired to be represented by the Teamsters. Indeed, when the workers were told about the Teamster-grounder deal (which had no
hiring-hall clause in it), "they refused either to join the Teamsters or ratify the agreement." Instead, according to the Supreme Court ruling, "it appeared that the majority desired to be represented by the United Farm Workers."

"Sign or Be Fired." Since the farm worker is excluded from the National Labor Relations Act's protection, the growers did not have to consult their workers' wishes. But the state Supreme Court got into the act when Chavez's followers struck. The growers, contending that the strike was merely a dispute between two unions, sought to outlaw it under a state law that bars jurisdictional strikes. The judges told the growers that they could not invoke the anti-jurisdictional strike statute to break a union.

Chavez's strike continued, but because growers could harvest crops with migrant Mexican workers and wetbacks—and even Chavez loyalists who needed work—the strike failed. The Teamsters stayed in the lettuce fields.

Next, in 1973, the Teamsters took over most of the grape growers' union contracts as well, when Chavez's negotiations for new contracts broke down over his refusal to give up the hiring hall. Here again, the evidence indicates the workers preferred Chavez. When a committee that included Rep. Edward R. Roybal (D., Calif.) and 25 religious and civic leaders polled 953 workers in 31 fields, 83 percent voted for the United Farm Workers, as against eight percent for the Teamsters (the remainder voting for no union).

But the Teamsters said they had evidence of their own. On the advice of the growers' lawyers, the Teamsters rounded up workers' petitions. How many of these petitions were signed voluntarily by regular field workers will never be known. Chavez loyalists charged in affidavits that they signed under growers' threats to "sign or be fired." Many workers, unable to read English, said they were asked to sign Social Security cards, only to find out later they were petitioning for Teamster membership. The labor contractors did their bit by barring from their buses—and from work—those who did not sign for the Teamsters.

Again, as in the collusive lettuce deal, wages and working conditions were negotiated without workers' knowledge or consent. The Teamsters not only shelved the hiring hall, but also gave official sanction to the workers' pet hate—the labor contractor—by signing separate agreements with some 20 of them.

When Chavez fought back with a strike, the Teamsters called in 100-odd "guards" at $67.50 per day—to protect strike-breakers from interference by Chavez's pickets. As Kern County Sheriff Charles Dodge told a California legislative committee, the Teamster guards, armed with grape stakes, baseball bats, metal pipes and chains, came spoiling for blood. And as his deputies testified, they spilled it. After one strike scene, four pickets were treated for injuries at a local hospital; one picket had a cracked skull. The deputies arrested 28 Teamsters. All but one were charged with assault—a misdemeanor—and convicted.

A Moral Issue. Cesar Chavez has called his union-organizing effort "La Causa": the cause, not only of the Chicano workers immediately involved, but of an entire minority. He has devoted as much time to developing medical clinics and providing social services to Chicano families as he has to organizing.

Faced with the formidable opposition of Teamsters and agribusiness, will the UFW and La Causa die? Chavez, who has seen his 60,000-member union reduced to about 5000, doesn't think so.

"We've lost jobs, not people," Chavez told us at his union headquarters in La Paz, Calif. "Most of the workers are still solid behind us, even though they work under Teamster contracts."

Chavez wears a button which proclaims, "Non Violence Is Our Strength," and he believes "that the most nearly perfect non-violent weapon is the boycott." Chavez is confident that this weapon can bring his cause eventual victory.

Here Chavez has a powerful ally: George Meany, the blunt, 80-year-old president of the AFL-CIO. Meany told me recently: "The Teamsters are doing more than suppressing a union. They're suppressing a minority—the Mexican-Americans who were just beginning to raise their heads and assert their rights under their own leaders."

Chavez's chief weapon, Meany believes, is the boycott. The American people will have the final word by supporting or rejecting Chavez's grape-and-lettuce boycott appeal. The AFL-CIO has urged its constituent unions and their 14 million union-member families to support the Chavez boycott. The Federation's regional organizing staffs are being thrown into the fight as well. The action is supported also by the independent one-million-member United Auto Workers and by the organized clergy. "The boycott must be effective in the long run," Meany believes.

The Federation has already given $6 million to help Chavez and the farm workers in past years, "and we'll give him more, if he needs it," Meany said. "We mean to see this thing through. We have no timetable, no deadline. If it were a bread-and-butter issue—a question of wages only—we would have dropped our support a long time ago," Meany said. "But it is not. It is a moral issue."