

Unless You See The



UFW Union Label

Boycott Lettuce & Grapes

A POLITICAL EDUCATION PROJECT REPORT NO.5



Armed guard watching over a crew of strike-breakers in a Salinas Valley lettuce field.

All of us have been hit hard by the drastic price increases and mounting goods shortages which we've faced in the past year. No one, though, has felt the pinch more than America's migrant farmworkers, 800,000 of whom are children under the age of 16.¹ They are among the nation's lowest paid laborers, though their employers include some of the wealthiest corporations in the world, such as Tenneco, whose farm landholdings in the Southwest are larger than the entire state of Rhode Island.²

Thousands of these farmworkers, members of the United Farm Workers, AFL-CIO, are now on strike. They are struggling for better working conditions, a living wage, and the right to freely determine the union of their choice. Their success depends on our support, which we can give by boycotting all non-UFW iceberg lettuce, table grapes, and Franzia, Guild, and Gallo wines. The boycott has been endorsed by the AFL-CIO Executive Council, the United Auto Workers, the

United Steel Workers of America, the National Conference of Catholic Bishops, the United Church of Christ, and local labor and religious leaders across the country. Please give it your support, too, and help the farmworkers secure the basic rights which most American workers now enjoy.

WORKING CONDITIONS

If asked to name the most difficult and hazardous jobs we could think of, most of us would probably not mention farm work. U.S. government studies, however, have concluded that migrant farm labor is actually the nation's third most dangerous occupation, with the job-related death rate for farmworkers being 300% greater than the national average.³ According to the U.S. Public Health Service, the life expectancy of a farmworker is a mere 49 years, while the average American lives to be 72.

These startling statistics directly reflect the



Cesar Chavez, President of the United Farm Workers, speaking to a group of workers.

brutal working conditions and meager wages that are the lot of the migrant farmworker. In California, the center of the nation's fruit and vegetable industry, a team of lawyers found that as many as 83% of the farms were in violation of state laws requiring sanitary toilets for employees. More than 88% did not even provide safe drinking water.⁴ In addition, farmworkers are regularly exposed to massive amounts of lethal pesticides, such as Phosdrin, a chemical based on a nerve gas developed in World War II. A study conducted by the state of California found that 80% of the workers tested suffered at least one symptom of pesticide poisoning (*Fresno Bee* 9/29/69).

LOW WAGES

Farmworkers are paid so little it is often necessary for the entire family to work in the fields. In California, one-fourth of the farm force is made up of children under 16.⁵

A day in the life of one migrant family, working the raisin fields of California, was described in the *Los Angeles Times* (2/27/72). Their workday began at 5:30 in the morning and lasted until 6:00 at night. They filled 1300 trays of raisins and were paid a total of \$104. As there were 9 of them working the fields that day, this meant a wage of less than \$1.00 per hour for each member of the family.

This example is hardly unusual. According to a 1971 U.S. Department of Agriculture report, the average farmworker makes \$11.60 a day, for about 10 hours of work. Since farm work is seasonal, most farmworkers are unable to obtain a full year's employment. Those that are able to travel the hundreds of miles required to catch the various harvests still earn considerably less than \$4,000 a year.⁶

FARMWORKERS ORGANIZE

Tired of low wages, hazardous working conditions, and harassment by growers, grape pickers

in Delano, California organized themselves into the United Farm Workers union and went out on strike in 1965. For two years the growers refused to recognize the union, much less negotiate a contract. In 1967, as public support for the farmworkers continued to build, the UFW called for a nationwide boycott of non-union grapes. Millions of people responded, and finally in 1970, faced with a sharp decline in sales, 85% of the nation's grape growers signed contracts with the UFW.

THE TEAMSTERS

Soon after the signing of the grape contracts, the UFW called for union representation elections to be held for lettuce pickers in Salinas Valley, where workers had been organizing for two years. The lettuce growers ignored the UFW call for elections, and instead asked the Teamsters to come in and represent the farmworkers. Days later, 170 lettuce growers signed "sweetheart" contracts (agreements reached without the consent of the workers) with the Western Conference of Teamsters.

In the spring of 1973, the grape growers took virtually the same action. Rather than renew the 3 year contracts they had signed with the UFW, or hold elections to determine the farmworkers' preference, most growers simply switched to the Teamsters.

WHO REPRESENTS THE FARMWORKERS?

"The Teamsters have our contracts, but the UFW has our workers"

a spokesman for Inter-Harvest, the largest lettuce grower in California (*Nation* 9/3/73).

In August, 1970, when it was announced that the lettuce growers had signed with the Teamsters, the UFW called for a strike of lettuce workers. 7000 people walked out in what the *LA Times* (8/26/70) called the "largest farm strike in U.S. history." Two years later the California Supreme Court, in a 6-1 decision, ruled that the Teamsters had acted in secret collusion with the lettuce growers, against the wishes of the lettuce workers. Their ruling stated that

"... a majority of field workers desired to be represented by the UFW and expressed no desire to have the Teamsters represent them" (*LA Times* 12/30/72).

The grape pickers also made clear their desire to have UFW representation after the growers signed with the Teamsters in 1973. Over 90% of the workers in Coachella Valley went on strike, despite efforts by the Teamsters and the growers to keep workers in the field (*LA Times* 4/17/73).

The UFW has won landslide victories in every poll or election taken among grape and lettuce workers. The most recent poll was conducted by an independent group of religious leaders, Congressmen, and Congressional aides in April, 1973. Nearly 1000 grape pickers in 31 different fields were asked to indicate their preference. 80 workers voted for the Teamsters, 78 for no union at all, and 795 for the United Farm Workers (*Newsweek* 5/21/73).

The UFW has repeatedly called for secret ballot elections, but the Teamsters have adamantly refused to allow them. They claim that the workers have indicated their position by signing thousands of petitions authorizing the Teamsters to represent them. *Newsweek* reporter Peter Greenberg examined these petitions, however, and found that "the signatures on a number of pages were remarkably similar" (*Newsweek* 5/21/73).

WHY FARMWORKERS SUPPORT THE UFW

"Teamster contracts contain terms considerably less attractive than those negotiated by the UFW" (*Newsweek* 5/21/73).

Contracts signed by the UFW include extensive provisions relating to job safety, overtime pay, mechanization protection, and child labor. Teamster agreements include no such terms. In addition, the base pay established by their most recent grape contracts is 10¢ an hour less than the UFW wage scale.⁷

Teamster agreements have also brought back the notorious 'labor contractor' method of hiring farmworkers (*LA Times* 1/17/73). Under this system workers must go to the contractor, rather than a union hiring hall, in order to obtain a permit to work. In return the contractor takes roughly 22% of each worker's paycheck.

Though Teamster contracts do include pension plans (roughly half of what is guaranteed by the UFW), many farmworkers wonder whether payments will ever be made, considering the reputation of the Teamsters Pension Fund. One high-ranking federal law enforcement official recently called it "an open bank to people well-connected in Las Vegas and well-connected in organized crime" (*LA Times* 5/31/73). Last year the National Labor Relations Board charged the Chicago Teamsters local with "sheer racketeering" in the illegal use of \$90 million of union members' fees and dues over a fifteen year period (*Nation* 9/3/73). And in Southern California, local and federal officials are currently investigating reports that four Mafia operations have been bankrolled with Teamster Pension Fund money (*LA Times* 5/31/73).

UNION DEMOCRACY

While both unions claim to accurately voice the opinions and desires of the farmworkers, only the UFW offers the workers any participation in the decision making process of the union. UFW members at each farm elect their own ranch committees, who are responsible for the enforcement of all provisions of the union contract. The contracts themselves, along with all union policy matters, are decided by a vote of all union members. Top union officials are also elected by the entire membership, and are paid a salary of \$5.00 a week, plus room and board. (*Fresno Bee* 9/24/73).

The Teamsters, however, don't even allow the farmworkers to have union membership meetings, much less a voice in union policy. Einar Mohn, President of the Western Conference of Teamsters, has said

"It will be a couple of years before they can start having membership meetings, before we can use the farmworkers' ideas in the union . . . I'm not sure how effective a union can be when it is composed of Mexican-Americans . . . As jobs become more attractive to whites, then we can build a union that can have structure . . . and membership participation" (*LA Times* 4/28/73).

It seems that in the opinion of the Teamster leadership, obeying orders and paying dues are the farmworkers' only proper functions within the union.

THE TEAMSTERS AND THE NIXON ADMINISTRATION

There is good reason to question whether the Teamster officials are at all concerned about defending the interests of the farmworkers, considering the close ties they have established with the Nixon administration. Richard Nixon has long been an opponent of farmworker organizing efforts. In 1950, he helped author a Congressional study which declared that farmworkers should be excluded from national labor relations



In 1973, two UFW strikers were killed, hundreds were beaten, and 4000 picketing farmworkers were arrested during strikes at California lettuce fields.

legislation. (As the farmworkers continue to lack this protection, the growers are free to use child labor and to legally ignore the UFW's request for union elections). Nixon publicly opposed the last grape boycott, and his administration actively assisted the growers, particularly in 1969 when the Defense Department stepped-up its annual purchase of grapes by 64%, an increase of more than 4 million lbs. in a single year (*New York Times* 6/27/69).

Despite Nixon's position on farmworkers, Teamster President Frank Fitzsimmons found no problem either in assuming the post of vice-president of Democrats For Nixon in 1972, or in switching the Teamsters' \$100,000 a year legal business to a law firm headed by Charles Colson, formerly one of Nixon's closest advisors (*NY Times* 12/9/72).

These actions of the Teamsters' officials appear perfectly reasonable, however, when seen in light of the favorable treatment that the Teamster leadership has received from the Nixon administration:

*In May, 1971, White House aid Charles Colson sent memos to the Labor and Justice Departments ordering them to cooperate with the Teamsters in their dispute with the UFW.*⁹

*In June, 1971, Richard Nixon met with the Teamster Executive Board, and pledged that his "door is always open" to them (*NY Times* 6/22/71).*

*In July, 1971, Secretary of Labor Hodgson addressed the Teamsters convention and offered an "open door" to the federal government (*LA Times* 6/1/73).*

*In the Fall of 1971, former Secretary of the Treasury John Connally approved a moratorium on \$1.3 million owed to the government in back taxes by past Teamster President Dave Beck (*LA Times* 6/1/73).*

*In December, 1971, Richard Nixon granted an executive pardon to former Teamster President Jommy Hoffa, who was serving a 13 year sentence for jury tampering and misuse of the Teamster Pension Fund. (*NY Times* 12/24/71).*

*In the Spring of 1973, the Justice Department dropped its investigation into charges of fraud brought against Richard Fitzsimmons, son of Teamster chief Frank Fitzsimmons. A Justice Department employee involved in the investigation has testified that the "love affair between Fitzsimmons and the White House" resulted in the case being dropped (*LA Times* 5/31/73).*

According to law enforcement officials in California, this pattern of Teamster-White House collusion poses a serious threat to ongoing investigations into alleged Teamster financing of organized crime operations. One FBI agent has said,

*"This whole thing of the Teamsters and the White House and the mob is one of the scariest things I've ever seen. It has demoralized the Bureau. We don't know what to expect out of the Justice Department. (*LA Times* 5/31/73).*

WHAT WE CAN DO

Confronted with this alliance of the growers, the White House, and the Teamsters leadership, the farmworkers have had to rely on the active support of millions of people across the country. They are asking us to:

Please boycott all non-UFW table grapes, iceberg lettuce, and Franzia, Guild, and Gallo wines. The UFW is asking the growers to drop their "sweetheart" contracts with the Teamsters and to hold free and open union elections. To help pressure the growers into holding these elections, the farmworkers are urging consumers to stop buying all non-UFW grapes, lettuces, and wine.

Help out by contributing your time or money to the boycott effort. The UFW is a struggling union, badly strapped for funds and volunteers. Any contribution you can make will be greatly appreciated.

Footnotes:

1. *Cong. Record* H.R. 202, 10/27/71
2. *Ramparts* 7/72
3. *Accident Facts* 23, National Safety Council, 1967
4. *Cong. Record* S5202, 7/20/70
5. *Cong. Record* H.R. 202, 10/27/71
6. *USDA Ag. Economic Report* #222, 1971
7. Teamster Western Agricultural Master Agreement, 1973
8. *So Shall Ye Reap*, London and Anderson, p. 43.
9. *Boston Real Paper* 8/8/73



For more copies of this leaflet, write or call:

Political Education Project
107 South St. 3rd Floor
Boston, Mass. 02111
(617) 542-3301

or

United Farm Workers
Box 62
Keene, Calif. 93531
(805) 822-5571

