SAN FRANCISCO CHRONICLE –1965

BATTLE IN THE GRAPES

By Dick Meister
Labor Correspondent

Delano, Kern County

Outwardly, Delano seems not much different from any of the other sleepy little towns that dot U.S. 99 as it cuts its dreary path through the San Joaquin Valley.

But walk the sun-scorched streets, 300 miles south of San Francisco, among this town's 12,000 citizens, and out on the dusty, flat vineyards encircling the town, and find Delano is different.

Juicy black, red, deep blue and green grapes of more than a dozen varieties hand in the vineyards – Thompsons, Ridieres, Carrignanes, Palominos and others destined for the dinner table or the wine press

Sweat runs freely – it's nearly 90 – as you approach a tree-shaded, grassy square in the heart of town, and the buff ranch-style building where Delano conducts its government business. It sits long and low – and cool.

Police Chief Jim Ailes sighs unhappily, props a bare elbow on a glass-topped desk. "That's right, nearly two months now" – two months of alert status for the chief and his 25 men, no days off, no vacations, and also for special sheriff's unit brought to town by the county.

In the blackish dirt of a vineyard just a few miles away you find out why.

A half-dozen women stand in the dirt at the edge of an asphalt side road, peering down long, seemingly endless rows of eye-level vines. The vines are heavy with fruit headed for the presses of Schenley Industries, for Roma and Cresta Blanca wines.

The women are dark-skinned, Mexican-American – all but one of them – and wear loose blouses, and the slacks and broad-brimmed straw hats of the grape picker.

But they're not picking grapes. They're from the National Farm Workers Association, and they're carrying signs: "Alta, Huelga…Viva la Causa … Better Wages for Education."

They chant "huelga, huelga," then switch to English – "strike, strike" – then fire away in Spanish again to the men and women who move slowly from vine to vine with small metal clippers about 20 feet away.

"Why do you work for so little money" A dollar and a quarter" We can get you a dollar 40!

Don't be a scab. Join your friends. Come, come, strike."

A man in dust-spotted overalls leans lazily – almost indifferently – against the side of a dented pickup truck on the strip of dirt between pickets and workers.

"There isn't anyone here who makes under $1.50 an hour, and some of them can make up to $1.85," he says, face beet red in the hot sun. He says he's a supervisor – "but, no, I'd rather you didn't use my name."

The workers ignore the pickets, or smile weakly – and stay where they are. A red sedan has stopped on the dirt roadside, and their boss steps out. He's the only one on that side of the picket line with blond hair, blue eyes, and creased clean trousers.

The boss glares at the pickets, then starts suddenly toward a pretty young woman, blonde and blue-eyed, too.

"If I was you," he says angrily, "I wouldn't" – wouldn't move across an invisible line that marks that point in the dirt where Schenley's 4800 acres begins.

She doesn't. Nor do the others; four of them had been jailed just last week, for ignoring a deputy sheriff's order not to shout while picketing.

The boss barks his warning, loudly enough for Jim Ailes to hear, for the chief has arrived, with his policemen and sheriff's deputies.

Ailes, bespectacled, rawboned, slight, sits in an air-conditioned patrol car. He leans out to tell a picket that it's "foolish" – and dangerous – to talk to the workers while picketing.

The officers merely glance at the blonde woman. They know she is Wendy Goepel, 26, and she looks – she'd hate you for saying it – like a pretty Stanford coed, her silky hair, brown plaid skirt and white blouse stark incongruities among the other pickets.

She was, in fact, a Stanford coed (master's degree in sociology, halfway to a Ph.D.). She also was on Governor Brown's staff, working on antipoverty programs, until coming here seven weeks ago to volunteer all of her considerable energy and intelligence to the strike.

A picket, her barely walking son in tow, comes over with a white balloon. Wendy paints the word "HUELGA" across it in black poster paint, and pickets hold it up to try to attract workers farther down the row of vines.

No one walks out and, after two hours, the pickets straggle back to to battered sedans, to move to another vineyard.

"Maybe tonight," Wendy says, scrubbing at the black paint smeared across her hands and face.

"We'll follow them home and tell them about it," she adds, with a burst of childlike enthusiasm. "Maybe we can talk them into walking out. I think Dolores knows some of them…"

The strikers belong to the predominantly Mexican-American Farm Workers Association and to the AFL-CIO's Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee, composed chiefly of Filipinos.

Most of their young helpers are from Los Angeles and the San Francisco Bay Area – some from CORE, some from the student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee and other student groups, and some Protestant clergymen from the Migrant Ministry.

Men like the boss oppose them fiercely. When one is picketed, several of his fellow growers come visiting, alerted through two-way radio.

They stand in knots, bitterly denouncing needless, selfish and fruitless efforts by "outside professional agitators – union bosses… meddling preachers… beatnik students… nutheads from the University of California… messengers from Moscow."

They hire private guards ("rent-a-fuzz," the pickets call them) and offer strong counter claims of their own to the strikers' claims of beatings and harassment.

To the young people, it's a struggle for equal rights – something close to a revolution:

A unique attempt to arm California's 500,000 farm workers with unionization – the right to join together and bargain with their employers, so long promised them as the only way to escape "poverty-level" wages and conditions.

Beyond that, thy see it as the beginning of a movement by Mexican-Americans and Filipinos to join the civil rights drive begun by Negroes.

As a starter, they claim the strike has brought out at least half the 5000 grape pickers in the 400 square miles of vineyards which fan out from Delano through northern Kern and southern Tulare counties.

But back in town, at the Stardust Motel – Delano's finest, but no better or worse than its sterile pastel mates everywhere else – the growers' official spokesman smiles at the very word "strike."

Joe Brosmer, in uniform, too – khaki trousers, short sleeved shirt – leans back, hands clasped behind his head, relaxed and personable.

"As you know, we're picking more grapes than ever. Strikers? Substantially under 100 are involved… and I suppose that should answer that silly talk about us bringing in 'strikebreakers' from all over the country.

"There's never been a civil rights or wage problem here. And those pickers don't want a union. They've got a real fine relationship with the employers – really personal. A union would destroy it."

Brosmer smiles again, and brushes off the whole affair as "a minor irritation" doomed to a short, unsuccessful life.

But long-lived or short, "minor irritation," strike, revolution or whatever, it should be exciting, judging from the fireworks so far.

PART II

A light plane skims low over a hot, dusty vineyard in northern Kern County, a Catholic priest at the controls.

Next to him, loudspeaker in hand, is another priest. He beams a message to th grap pickers below:

"Join the strike. Respect the picket lines. Don't be a strikebreaker."

The workers pause to look up, but they're not greatly surprised. For the unusual is the usual in the bitter strike that has raged for nearly two months through the 400 square miles of rich vineyards in Kern and Tulare counties.

Father Keith Kenny – he's from Our Lady of Guadalupe Church in Sacramento – alights from the plane, explaining calmly that he's helping because " human dignity is involved."

He says the strike "is a movement by the poor people themselves to improve their position, and where the poor are, Christ should be, and is."

Outside another vineyard, a grower's son strides purposefully toward a line of pickets, dust swirling about him, sweat beads standout out on his face. He carries a shotgun.

He fires a shot in the air, wrenches a sign from the grasp of a swarthy Mexican-American picket, hurls it to the ground and blasts away at it.

Down the black asphalt road, a grower stands in the blackish dirt of his vineyard, wondering "what's the problem?"

"The workers have always gotten along well," he says. "They make good money. Some have beautiful homes. They own cars. They're our neighbors…"
A few miles away, in Delano, in the heart of the strike area 300 miles south of san Francisco, a plump housewife, pink skin glowing scarlet in the heat, raisers her temperature a few more degrees.

"We don't like it at all, I'll tell you, these outsiders coming to Delano and meddling in our affairs."

On the edge of the little town, the "outsiders" – young civil rights workers and ministers – are gathered, about a dozen strong, in a battered stucco building, once a grocery store, but now converted to headquarters for the National Farm Workers Association.

Clothing, paper, empty soft drink and beer bottles are strewn about the rooms, cigarette butts littler the floor, the unpainted walls are covered with newspaper clippings.

A newcomer, his hair brushing the collar of a grey work shirt, walks in shyly. He's from the University of California, a member of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee.

"I can stay till Sunday," he says earnestly.

"Good, you can sleep there," says one of the "outsiders," waving casually toward the floor.

"The trouble with this strike," she's saying, "is that you have to be up before the workers – and they're out there at five in the morning – then you have to spend the whole day picketing, tryin to convince them to come out."

"And then," someone breaks in wearily, "you have to stay up all night figuring out what to try next."

Soft sounds of Spanish intersperse the conversation as Mexican-American strikers in rumpled work clothes wander in.

Some, evicted from grower housing after striking, are tying to arrange for a place to stay – usually on the floor of someone's house. Others want a loan from the association's credit union, help in finding a job outside the strike area, or someone to baby sit while they picket tomorrow.

Some go out the rear door, across a bumpy dirt lot crowded with the broken-down cars of the young volunteers, and into another converted building, filled to the ceiling with canned food, eggs, sacks of beans, rich and flour, and second-hand clothing.

For the food, donated mainly by students, and unions, churches and other organizations in the San Francisco Bay Area, and Los Angeles, they exchange script, given them for picketing or for joining the strike.

Presiding over all is 37-year-old Cesar Chavez, an articulate and tireless former migrant worker from Delano.

He sits behind a makeshift desk topped with bright red Formica, a shock of pitch-black hair trailing across his forehead, wearing the red plaid shirt that has become almost a uniform for him.

Chavez founded the association three years ago as a community service organization, recently winning a $286,000 Federal grant for one of its anti-poverty projects.

The grant can't be used until after the strike ends. But Chavez, just a trace of Mexico in his voice, tells you that the association's assault on poverty already has been launched.

For "the only way to fight poverty," he asserts, "is with a union contract" – and that's the chief strike demand of the association. It wants a minimum pay rate of $1.40 an hour in the

first contract, the minimum set by the government in some farm areas beyond the strike zone.

Chavez pauses to light a mentholated cigarette. strikers, he contends, were making only $1.20 to $1.25 an hour – about $2000 a year. And he candidly admits that the strike, and the more costly demand for unionization, might not have come had local growers provided a $1.40 guarantee.

He explains that the Government minimum didn't apply to local growers because they had not sought imported Mexican labor. They claimed to be paying about the government rate anyway, but refused, nevertheless, to grant a guarantee.

The phone jangles, suddenly, and Chavez dashed out to make an impromptu fund-raising speech. Two women have been jailed for following a grape picker home, to try to talk him into striking, and they need bail money.

Downtown, in a spotless modern motel room, Joe Brosmer, the personable chif spokesman for local growers, laughs off Chavez' comments.

"Poverty? The last survey I looked at showed them making $1.95 an hour. Why would they want a $1.40 guarantee? They don't need it – and they don't want a strike, a union or a contract, either.

"It's just an idea of that Chavez and a couple of other union leaders trying to feather their own nests."

A few blocks away, in the neat, compact auditorium of the Filipino Community Center, Larry Itliong is explaining how his organization, the AFL-CIO Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee, shares the burden of the strike with Chavez' group.

Ever-present cigar clenched in his teeth, he points, for an example, to the kitchen behind the stage, where strikers and their helpers can get three meals a day free – usually meat, always rice, potatoes and beans.

Itliong, short, dark-skinned, bushy black hair, smiles often. He turns away occasionally, lights bounding off his horn-rimmed glasses, to address a few words in Tagalog to passing members.

They're almost all Filipinos – who, along with Mexican-Americans, dominate the local work force. They struck first, on September 8, to be followed in two weeks by the Farm Workers Association.

About 200 people – mostly men – fill the auditorium for one of the Organizing Committee's nightly meetings. Speakers poke good-natured fun at friends in the audience, discuss the day's picketing, the basic whys and hows of trade unionism.

For two hours they talk. Then Al Green, the weathered AFL-CIO organizer who directs activities of the Committee in California, tops it off by presenting $1900.

Some of it was collected by strikers' committees which canvassed Filipino communities throughout the State, some donated by unions, and some sent by members who left their jobs here for work outside the strike region.

Itliong parcels out the money, in checks ranging from $25 to $100, succinctly summing up why the strike continues in the face of overwhelming grower opposition: "No one's going hungry."

Yet in the traditional sense, the strike already is a failure. Labor doesn't win strikes if it doesn't curtail the business of management, and the output of grapes certainly hasn't been slowed.

Faced with a record crop, growers have sole more grapes than in any year in recent history, State officials report – so many, they say, that individual growers may be lucky to break even on wholesale prices which have been driven down to "miserable" levels.

But the classic rules don't apply in Delano; here it's irrelevant at this point to speak of winners and losers. The immediate effect on employers is a secondary consideration. So is the number of strikers (at least half the 5000-member work force, say the unions; less than 100, say growers).

More significant are questions of how the strike is being conducted, and for how long. The history of farm labor organizing is one of short, futile strikes by unions playing the traditional game.

But this time – and this is what makes Delano significant – an alliance has been formed between two tightly-knit community groups, and drawn influential outside support.

Rare in itself, the alliance has given strikers at least a temporary unity and staying power also rare in farm labor disputes, and armed them with new tactics.

The test, however, is yet to come – even Cesar Chavez, the leader of the Mexican-Americans, says he expects no concessions for at least four months – and the alliance could collapse tomorrow under the steady pressure of far more influential and powerful growers.

Joe Brosmer, the grower spokesman, for one, is certain that collapse is near, because the outside forces soon will tire of "this game they're playing."

No one has played it quite like this before, however, and its very example – win or lose – may yet have profound effects on the entire State.

(Second of two articles.)