

DICK MEISTER

DON'T look now, but the twentieth century is about to dawn on california's farms. It's still very hard to believe, after all the years of false starts and broken promises. But it indeed appears that farm workers are at last heading toward that point reached so many years ago by most other workers.

IT will still be some time yet. But it now seems clear that at some time in the foreseeable future, farm workers will have the right to be represented by unions, to bargain collectively with their employers. In short, to at last have the weapon they have so long needed to escape from poverty and degradation.

FOR years, of course, there's been talk that this was imminent, that the unionization of farm workers was just around the corner. But it wasn't until ^{JUST} last week that such talk began to sound like something other than propaganda or wishful thinking.

IT began on Wednesday with a brief announcement from los angeles. Schenley industries had agreed to recognize the national farm workers association as the sole representative of the workers in its kern county vineyard, in delano. Negotiations on a contract would begin within a month.

THEN, on thursday, that giant of the farm giants, the digiorgio corporation, announced that it would ^{AGREE TO} allow its field workers to vote on a union to bargain in their behalf.



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THIS is not to mention the most recent farm worker victory, announced on tuesday of this week. that was the agreement of the christian brothers winery in napa to join schenley in recognizing the farm workers association as the ~~workers~~ bargaining agent. An agreement, significantly, that came without the economic pressures which the union had put on other vineyard owners.

~~SIXXX PICKUP~~

FINALLY, on sunday, eight thousand cheering demonstrators crowded around the steps of the state capitol to demand passage of laws to give farm workers those legal rights granted other workers.

STARTLING developments, these. Never before had a national firm of schenley's stature recognized a farm workers union. Never before had the digiorgio corporation, for years the hated foe of farm unions...never before had the huge digiorgio corporation so much as admitted even the existence of a farm union. And certainly never before had such a show as that capitol demonstration been staged

in behalf of the farm worker. ~~AND THIS IS NOT TO MENTION THE~~
~~RECOGNITION OF THE UNION~~

LET'S consider these ^{THREE} key developments ~~which preceded this latest victory~~. First, the schenley agreement.

THE agreement, as you know, marked the first victory in the seven-month ~~long~~ strike against ~~the~~ kern and tulare county grape growers by the farm workers association and the af of l-cio's agricultural workers organizing committee.

IT was achieved, in large part, not because of the direct affects of the strike, but because of a nationwide ^{CONSUMERS} boycott organized against schenley ^{WINES} ~~liquors~~ and ^{LIQUORS} ~~wines~~ by the farm workers association. For, despite the strike, schenley easily harvested all of its grapes ^{LAST} summer.



BUT that boycott hurt, if only because it constantly reminded the public, whether or not they refused to buy Schenley products...it constantly reminded the public that the good guys...unions, churches, civil rights groups...considered schenley a bad guy. This sort of publicity was extremely painful to schenley, a firm with what the public relations people call a good corporate image. And, IMPORTANTLY ~~_____~~ a firm with a well-deserved reputation for fair labor-management relations...in its distilleries and wineries, where the workers have long been unionized.

THIS, combined with a very real fear that the teamsters union drivers who deliver schenley products would join the boycott--as they finally did in san francisco just before the strike settlement was reached by refusing to cross boycott picket lines set up around schenley's northern california distributor by the ~~_____~~ farm workers association...this darkening of schenley's reputation plus the teamster threat finally sent the firm's west coast negotiator to confer with ~~his good friend~~, the head of the af of l-cio in los angeles county. The teamsters' west coast chief was called in. The af of l-cio's national director of organization came. And, finally, cesar chavez of the farm workers association. Agreement was reached quickly.

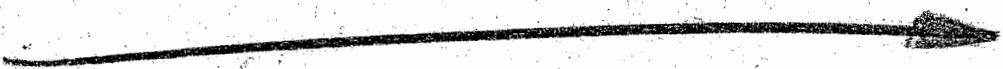
BUT though ^{VERY} important for reasons of precedence, and ^{EXTREMELY} important within the framework of the vineyard strike, the schenley agreement ~~_____~~ isn't ^{AS} ~~_____~~ important generally. Schenley, despite the size of its other operations, is not a major grower. Nor does it have the history of violent ^{AND SUCCESSFUL} anti-unionism common to most large growers.

FAR more important is the action of the digiorgio corporation. It's true that the corporation attached some unpalatable conditions to its offer to allow its workers to vote for a union. But the fact that it bothered to even make the offer alone represents a major victory for farm ^{WORKERS.} ~~union organizers.~~

FOR digiorgio is one of the masters of californi^{'s}/agricultural economy. As digiorgio goes, so go many, many other growers. For years, of course, this has meant that digiorgio and ~~the~~ subordinate growers fiercely opposed field unions.

BUT, suddenly, last thursday, what was robert digiorgio saying? That farm workers are entitled to collective bargaining and, in fact, should work under union shop contracts. That they should have a minimum wage, and be protected by all other federal labor laws. That unionization is bound to come to farms everywhere.

JUST talk, of course. And an attempt to keep the forces that zeroed in on schenley off digiorgio. But the words indicate that digiorgio, too, has seen what's coming. The corporation will try to hold it off for as long as it can, and try to see that it develops to the corporation's advantage when it does come. But, again, the corporation knows that it's coming, or robert digiorgio wouldn't have spoken out, wouldn't have made such a strong effort to beat the developments to the punch.




ON the surface, anyway, the offer of an election appears to be an attempt to hold off farm unionization. Stress the democratic line, ~~by~~ expressing outrage that schenley recognized the union without having an election. Then offer elections, being careful to attach conditions clearly unacceptable to any union...that any union taking part in an election agree before the election, before negotiating a contract, that the contract will not allow the union to strike.

THEN neither recognize the union nor hold an election...blaming the undemocratic union for, one, demanding recognition without an election, and, two, turning down an election which it claims it would win anyway.

BELOW the surface, however, it's beginning to appear that digiorgio may not be all that insincere. That the corporation senses it would be more profitable to ride into the twentieth century with the unions than to continue to wage a battle it will eventually lose. DiGiorgio officials, in any case, have expressed a willingness to discuss modifications of the conditions attached to their election offer.

THE most dramatic of the recent key farm labor developments, of course, was that demonstration in sacramento on sunday... ^{35 HUNDRED} ~~nearly~~ ~~four thousand~~ people marching five miles to the capitol to be met by ~~at least~~ four thousand more.



IT was a moving spectacle, certainly one of the most moving i've ever seen. The incredible spirit, devotion and good humor of those who led the demonstration is sometimes hard to believe. These, of course, are the striking vineyard workers, who marched 300 miles from delano under the banners of the farm workers association.

THE ~~politics~~ ^{stupidity} of governor brown in not appearing at the capitol rally is even harder to believe. For twenty-five days these people marched, drawing widespread support from just about everyone but the people who probably wouldn't vote for brown anyway.

BUT where is the governor when they arrive? In palm springs, of all places. And at the home of frank sinatra, of all people. The Governor said he had to spend easter with his family. How sweet. But why not spend the day in sacramento, and maybe drive over to the capitol from the mansion in one of his limosenes to at least say hello? OR FLY UP BRIEFLY FROM PALM SPRINGS? Nobody asked the governor to give up the whole day with his family, much less give up 25 days as some of the marchers did. ~~no~~ no one asked him to walk a single block, much less 300 miles. No one asked him to take his family out into a ^{hot} dusty ~~at~~ vineyard ^{to} work at a dollar-an-a-quarter an hour. They merely asked him to say hello, and listen.

BUT though the governor ~~incited~~ ^{incited} angered unions, church leaders, civil rights groups, liberals, democrats, the mexican-american community, students, ^{and the like} i suppose he made those big farm corporations happy...happy enough, perhaps, to throw him a little of that campaign money they dole out so generously.

SURELY brown has done alot to help the farm worker...not as much as he likes to say, but more than many of his detractors realize. But neither this nor whatever political considerations may have kept him away from the rally excuses the fact that by not being there he unforgivably insulted a marvelous group of people. Even in his most bumbling moments, governor brown rarely has shown such bad taste.

BUT though the marchers didn't get the governor on their side... he says he's on their side, of course...but though the marchers couldn't even get a greeting from brown, ~~he didn't~~ they HAVE gained ~~the~~ some other very important support. The Capitol rally, and the march that preceeded it, made that clear enough.

A NEW coalition has been formed ^{about them:} farm workers; af of l-cio, and teamsters unions; civil rights and church groups; student groups; and liberal groups in general. This was not just an isolated group of farm workers or mexican-americans marching on sacramento. It was indeed a coalition, and a powerful one.

ANYONE who doubts that it is need only look ~~at~~ the vineyard strike in kern and tulare counties. It ~~is~~ this combination which has kept that strike going for so long. And it's this combination which finally is bringing ~~the twentieth century~~ working conditions ^{to the farm worker.} ~~with or without the support of governor brown.~~

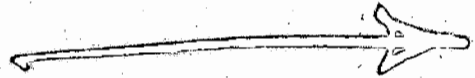
THE march was an inspired tactic. It not only strengthened this combination and gained it new supporters, but it also picked up a great deal of new farm worker support. Farm workers throughout the san joaquin valley were able to learn about what's going on in delano, to be shown that they can do the same thing, and how.

UNTIL the march came along, the strike, despite ~~its~~ length and the hope it inspired, was, in practical terms, getting nowhere.

BUT if the capitol rally meant what i think it meant, delano will be only the beginning of a movement that will ~~soon~~ sweep through the state's farm areas...not only unifying and strengthening farm workers for a major assault on poverty and second-class citizenship, but also unifying ~~and~~ strengthening the state's mexican-americans for a civil rights drive that's been far too long in coming.

THE guiding force behind this is cesar chavez, the director of the farm workers association. Although his abilities as a union leader put chavez in that rare category with such men as harry bridges, chavez is far more than just a labor leader. He's doing far more than building a union. He's building a community, whose drive for equality in farm labor will be only ~~the~~ one of many drives.

CHAVEZ has carefully built on the work of his predecessors who, although generally failing to organize the farm worker, did lay much of the basic ~~ground~~ ground work. It was, after all, not chavez' association which started the delano strike, but the af of l-cio's agricultural workers organizing committee.



What the unsuccessful union organizers before Chavez did not have: a

BUT it was Chavez who had ~~that~~ tightly-knit ~~association~~ association, ~~whose members~~ had three years experience ~~in~~ working together as a community organization before striking. It was Chavez who taught them not to seek just a union contract and better wages and working conditions, but to seek a better life in general, to work together toward first-class citizenship. After three years their devotion to Chavez and ~~the~~ ^{THIS} cause is amazing.

AND it was Chavez who sought the outside help which has brought the strike to where it is now, ~~and~~ the help which provided the ~~otherwise~~ financing and the invaluable ~~pressures~~ pressures which kept the strikers from the isolation that would have beaten them.

SURELY, farm workers still have a long, hard way to go. But the turning point seems to have arrived. If Chavez ^{group and its} ~~and his~~ supporters can keep up the pressure...and there's no apparent reason to doubt that they will...they won't need Governor Brown. They won't need anyone but themselves.

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