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DELANO: The Story of the California Grape Strike. By John Gregory Dunne, with photographs by Ted Streshinsky. Farrar, Straus & Giroux; 176 pp. \$4.95

Reviewed by Dick Meister

Here we go again – still another piece of colorful reportage on what the author in this case chooses to call “the California Grape Strike.” John Gregory Dunne, that is, has given us more words about the most recent – and most hopeful – attempt to win economic and social justice for farm workers, more words about the exciting movement that surfaced two years ago in the little Kern county town of Delano.

the columns and columns of newspaper stories’ the hours of radio and television broadcasts; the endless magazine articles; even a previous book, an atrociously written, wildly partisan account by a strike organizer – all were well worth our attention. So is Dunne’s book. For, like the mass of material before it, and the inevitable mass to come, it chronicles, however imperfectly, one of the great events of our time.

The deep significance of that two-year-old battle in the Central Valley’s lush vineyards is obvious – unless you’re entirely devoid of human feelings and social consciousness, or have a personal stake in keeping things the way they are for farm workers, the way they have been for, God, so long.

“Their world,” notes Dunne, “is one of side roads and labor camps, of anonymous toil under a blistering sun... Because they have never been effectively organized, they never have been included under legislation that safeguards the rights of industrial workers; because they are excluded from the machinery of collective bargaining, they have never been able to organize effectively...”

“Once the crop is in, they are as welcome as a drought, regarded in each community as no more than a threat to the relief rolls. Migrating with the harvest from crop to crop, they work an average of only 134 days a year. Eighty-four percent earn less than the federal poverty level of \$3100; the average annual income is \$1378...”

But though Dunne understands this essential background, and the importance of the vineyard workers’ efforts to change the miserable situation, he, like those who have preceded him into print, merely skims the surface. Dunne captures the excitement, color and controversy that has focused all the journalistic attention on Delano, but he doesn’t go much further.

His book, in short, is mere reporting, in the narrowest sense of the word. He shows some of what’s on the surface; he lets the feuding parties have their say. But there’s almost no independent analysis of the raw material, few attempts to communicate its meaning, except in terms of the conflicting ideas of partisan sources. What does it all mean? Surely the reader wants more than a simplistic conclusion that it probably will be “a long time” before Cesar Chavez and his vineyard strikers win their fight.

So let's make this clear: This book is not "The Story of the California Grape Strike," as its dust jacket proclaims. It's a superficial report of some aspects of that strike, based primarily on observations and interviews by Dunne and previous observations, interviews and reports by others, and involving apparently very little original research and thinking.

Even some of the reporting is suspect. Dunne looks no further for his facts than did his reportorial predecessors; their horizons limit his. He naively accepts the word of partisan "experts" on some points. He cites as his own, in a few instances, material, including direct quotations that may seem familiar to readers of *The Chronicle* and other publications.

But let's also make this clear: This is nevertheless a valuable, generally well-written book – a sensitive rendering of the atmosphere that permeates the great battle of Delano. Don't worry over what facts are or are not reported. Just dip into the book and feel the intense heat of battle. I've been there and, believe me, this is how it is. Few have conveyed the feeling as well as Dunne.

The battlefield itself is aptly described: a flat, monotonous land baking in oppressive heat, but bringing forth an incredible wealth in fruits and vegetables – more than \$1 billion a year in the counties of Kern, Tulare and Fresno alone.

It's also a land that is "largely insulated from what industrial America thinks and does and worries about" – a land where workers still must strike for the basic right to organize.

And the warriors: Dunne beautifully catches the "heat, the bitterness and the self-righteousness rampant on both sides," and the "state of paranoia" that compels them to say – and believe – anything of their opponents.

In Delano, Dunne sums up, "union activity was met with the cry of 'Communism' and a town was mobilized to combat the Red Menace of labor organizers... embattled growers, untouched by labor's consolidation over the past three decades, were acting as if the Wobblies were still the nation's number-one threat..."

"The AFL-CIO was mouthing the jargon of 'capitalist exploitation'... the strident voice of the radical Left was heard... beards and sandals and dirty fingernails provoked the shrill charge of 'outside agitators'..."

"Clergymen invoked Scripture to denounce each other as 'Godless,' growers clutched the American flag and sang 'The Star-Spangled Banner,' strikers waved red banners and changed 'We Shall Overcome'..."

"Each side declared itself innocent of violence, yet anonymous telephone callers breathed threats, fires lit the night, and shotgun blasts split the midnight silence."

The feel of this, the intense emotion and excitement of it all, run through Dunne's book. He, in fact, conveys the feeling far better than the mediocre photographs in book's center section. But as sensitive as is Dunne's account, it, too, is only an incomplete series of

pictures. To see is important. But it is also important to understand, and the book that would let us both see and understand the dramatic battle of Delano is yet to be written.