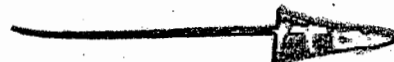


DICK MEISTER

A CURIOUS thing happened down in riverside county a few weeks ago -- a group of table grape growers actually agreed to negotiate with a farm workers union. At least a few growers, that is, finally acknowledged that this is the twentieth century, and that the world would not come to an end if they sat down with representatives of their workers and tried to agree to a contract that would give ~~the~~ workers some voice in setting their own wages, hours and working conditions.

THE very fact that this is a noteworthy event says a lot about the incredible backwardness of the country's agricultural industry ... the fact that in the year of 1969 it is major news when farm employers agree to do what most employers did thirty and more years ago. But that, as we all should know, is the way it is among growers, as wonderful a group of neanderthals as you could dig up anywhere.

WELL, what happened down in riverside? How did this curious thing happen? And why? What have they been doing since those growers recognized the twentieth century in the middle of june, 1969? And, most important, what is their pioneering step -- if we can call it that -- likely to lead to?

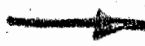


FIRST, let's recall the basics. For almost four years now -- since september, 1965, that is -- farm union groups have been waging major strikes against the men who grow most of the country's grapes ... first in kern and tulare counties in california, and later in riverside county as well as in the phoenix area in arizona.

THEIR demand, first as two separate union groups and then as the merged united farm workers organizing committee under cesar chavez, has been simply for recognition -- acknowledgement by growers that the organizing committee does indeed represent their workers and agreement by the growers in turn to sit down with committee negotiators and agree on a legal contract that would spell out guarantees on wages, hours and working conditions.

THE farm union groups pressed their demand -- the same as auto workers, steel workers and the like successfully made on employers in the 1930s -- first in the form of strikes. But they found that striking a vineyard is not the same as striking an auto factory. The workers are migrant, there are not just a few factory gates to picket, and law enforcement officers in farm communities are even less cooperative than were the urban cops of the 1930s, among many other problems.


MOST important, the farm union organizers found that even when ~~they~~ they could convince terribly poor and beaten down farm workers to join their strikes, growers replaced them easily from a steady stream of ^{poor} migrants from throughout this country and canada.



SO the farm unions turned to organized labor's second major weapon, one actually older than the strike -- the boycott. Farm union members and supporters went into action all over this country and in some areas abroad. They urged consumers to bypass the ~~the~~ wines, ^{LIQUORS} and canned goods produced by ^{SOME OF} the largest of the grape growers, ~~the~~ and to bypass the stores that sold these products. Then the farm union began pressing the stores directly. Many buckled in to the pressures. They did not want their stores picketed by people charging them with being part of the well documented exploitation of farm workers. And the large growers involved -- major national corporations -- didn't like what the union boycott activities were doing to their reputations, if not to their sales.

FINALLY, the giant schenley corporation gave in. The corporation's farm holdings are only a tiny part of its corporate empire. ^{But} they do include one of the largest vineyards in the strike area, and schenley soon tired of the assaults on its reputation over that small part of its ~~the small part of its~~ empire. Schenley recognized the union and negotiated a contract covering its vineyard workers.


THEN came another big corporation -- di giorgio, another major grower of wine grapes. After that, came some of california's largest wineries. Once schenley and digiorgio led the way, it was easy for them to come along. And, like schenley and digiorgio, they were accustomed to dealing with unions. Their field hands had never been unionized. But the workers in their wineries, canneries and other operations had been granted union contracts long ago.



THE naive referred to it as a breakthrough that would lead to widespread farm unionization. But california's table grape growers, the men who grow the bulk of the country's grapes, remained firm. So the union called a boycott against the largest of the table grape growers, giumarra and sons. But giumarra simply began using the labels of other growers on the boxes which carried its grapes to market.

THIS left the farm union with little choice. So, last fall, the call went out: boycott all grapes. No one -- and I mean no one -- knows the precise economic effects of that boycott. But it is obvious that it has had a great psychological effect on the growers, that they have been hurt economically as well, and that they fear they will be hurt even more as the boycott goes on.

THE most seriously hurt have been the men who grow grapes in the coachella valley in riverside county and in the arvin region of kern county to the north. For these are the areas where each season's grapes ripen first. The grapes here ~~are~~^{ARE} brought to maturity quickly and rushed to market in hopes of returning a quick profit because they are the first of the year to go on sale. They must be sold quickly, and they cannot be held for sales to wineries after losing their value as fresh table grapes.



SO it's not surprising that the first table grape growers to sue for peace are from these areas.

THERE are ten of them in all. They produce ten to 15 percent of the state's grapes overall and about one-third of those shipped from the coachella and arvin regions. They are not small, isolated operators, that is.

THE key grower involved in lionel steinberg, a man who is that rare thing among growers -- a liberal, and one who was appointed to the state board of agriculture by ~~governor~~ ^{former} pat brown and who still serves, strange to say, under ronald reagan.

I SUSPECT that steinberg wanted to recognize the union long ago. But ~~the effects of~~ ^{IT TOOK THE EFFECTS OF} the boycott ~~IT~~ finally gave him leverage to get together enough of his fellow growers to make a move toward recognition feasible. ~~And he finally got into~~
~~of the farm last month, or so.~~


STEINBERG AND THE NINE OTHER GROWERS

~~They~~ acknowledged that the boycott was causing them heavy losses -- cutting sales by as much as twenty percent -- and they asked the federal mediation and conciliation service to step in and help them negotiate a contract with the farm workers organizing committee.

AS unexpected as the growers move was agreement by the mediation service to step in. Although the service has helped settle virtually every major national strike in recent years in the industrial field, it does not, strictly speaking, have jurisdiction in farm disputes, since farm workers and their employers are not covered by the country's labor laws. And certainly there was every reason to believe that president nixon, previously a grower oriented opponent of farm unionization, would tell his mediation service to stay out.

BUT nixon gave his approval for the mediators to step in. And the mediation service prepared a major effort. Its national chief, a direct appointee of nixon, sent one of his top troubleshooters out from washington, d-c, to join the negotiations in los angeles. And he assigned his western regional director to oversee them -- and to work as fast as he could for an agreement, to escape the pressures that undoubtedly would build up among nixon's natural allies against ~~the effort~~ the effort.

THOSE pressures indeed have built up. Senator george murphy has led the charge along with the men who grind out fantasies for whitaker and baxter, the high powered right wing public relations firm that was hired by some extremely worried grape growers at its usual fancy fee.



MURPHY decided that agreement by a group of growers to sit down with union representatives might involve what he mysteriously termed collusion and demanded an investigation. The mediation service shrugged that off. Then came the press conferences and press releases arranged by the boys from whitaker and baxter and other grower ~~group~~ ^{SUPPORTERS} -- including, most especially, president alan grant of the california farm bureau federation, who is not adverse to letting us know that he also is president of the state board of agriculture and a university of california regent.

THE charges of grant, murphy and the other anti union types continue to be tossed about, along with their new line -- that the boycott isn't hurting at all and, above all, that they are not opposing the union, but merely protecting the free enterprise system and the dearly beloved consumer.

THAT'S why, they tell us, they're supporting legislation that grower interests have introduced in washington. Look, they say, it would allow farm workers to bargain collectively with their grower employers -- something the workers have been demanding since the 1930s, when they were excluded from the wagner act that granted that right to most other workers.


BUT the legislation also would prohibit farm workers from doing what they now are doing -- boycotting and striking at harvest time and other critical times, and thus keep ~~the~~ consumers from being deprived of their ^{RIGHT TO BUY THOSE} ever-so-essential grapes.



THE legislation, in other words, would allow farm workers to bargain, and then strip them of the weapons they need if that bargaining is to be effective. What possible pressure could they put on growers is they could strike only when they could not possibly hurt the growers, and if they could not boycott their products? That's right, the farm workers could not exert any pressure at all. They actually would be weaker than they are now, when at least they have the legal right to strike and to boycott, if not the legal right to bargain. They still would be at the mercy of growers, who still could grant them just what they pleased unilaterally -- and who, of course, have never been pleased to grant farm workers very much.

THAT'S precisely the point of the proposed legislation -- to de-fang the ~~union~~^{FARM}, now that it finally is showing some strength ... to make it appear that the union's demand for the bargaining rights ~~granted~~^{GIVEN} other workers has been granted, and then to make that right meaningless.


PREVIOUSLY, farm union forces sought ~~legislation~~^{BARGAINING} as their primary goal, but growers would have ~~none~~^{NONE} of it. But now, suddenly, growers are talking like the union men once talked. Why all this ~~talk~~^{KAUS}, they ask. The solution lies in legislation. The fact that the growers are saying this does indeed indicate that ~~to~~ farm union forces have become strong at last.



BUT I repeat: don't be fooled. The majority of the state's grape growers are attempting to push through their legislation as quickly as possible, before any agreement can be reached by the ten growers who broke with them to negotiate with the union. The ²message really is: hold off until we can get a law to strip the union of the weapons that brought those ten growers to the bargaining table.

THE growers aren't getting very far with their legislative drive, however -- thanks in part to a counter-drive by farm union supporters for other legislation. Like the grower-sponsored measures, this legislation would require growers to bargain collectively with representatives of workers who proved they want to bargain. But it also would allow the continued right to strike farms. And it would allow farm unions to continue using the boycott -- a weapon that was taken from the country's industrial unions during the wave of anti union pressures in the late 1940s, but after the industrial unions had used it to establish themselves firmly.

IN the meantime, however, grower and union negotiators aren't getting too far in their talks with the federal mediators. They began in los angeles two weeks ago, with predictions that there would be swift agreement. ~~But the~~




BUT THE growers have become extremely cautious under the mounting pressures from their fellow growers, and their unfamiliarity with the methods and techniques of bargaining has frustrated mediators.

FARM union negotiators haven't helped matters much by bringing in dozens of rank and file observers from the farms in question. But this was done in part to answer outside growers who keep insisting, like so many broken records, that the union doesn't really represent vineyard workers -- but who also continually refuse to prove it by having the workers vote on the matter.

THIS question of representation caused much of the early delay in the los angeles negotiations. But finally the negotiators agreed to set aside the issue. It can be resolved simply after a contract is negotiated, since the union has agreed to submit any contract agreement to a vote by the workers involved.

THE other issues have been harder to resolve, especially with both sides retaining some of their traditionally belligerent attitudes toward each other.

SO far, they haven't gone much more than trade basic proposals. First the union presented copies of the basic contracts it has won from wine grape growers. Then the growers presented modified versions, designed to meet what they see as their particular needs.



THE task now is to reach a compromise between the two. Their most recent attempt was a wearying effort that went until four a-m this monday morning, and led the mediators to call a recess until thursday.

SOME OF the grower negotiators, meanwhile, apparently have been trying to ease the pressure on them by circulating reports that other growers soon will join them in the negotiations, ^{ALTHOUGH} the most that can be confirmed, ~~is~~ is that some arizona growers have indicated they would negotiate with the union if they approve of the contracts ~~agreed to~~ agreed to in the los angeles negotiations.

IN the primitive field of agricultural labor relations, however, even this iffy stand is a significant development. The big development, of course, is that a large group of growers actually is negotiating with a farm workers union and, it seems likely, eventually will reach an agreement. The walls aren't tumbling down yet. But the cracks finally are beginning to deepen.

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