


DKK MEISTER

IT'S new years day, of course, and so I have been trying to think of something appropriate to say .. something to help ring in the new year on a hopeful note, if that is possible. And I think I have found it -- in a continuing story that I have talked about on k-p-f-a for several years ... the story of the united farm workers organizing committee.

REALLY, there hasn't been such a genuinely hopeful story in many, many years. And I think it would be valuable to review that story -- if only to prove that things aren't quite as bad as they may seem.

THE story began in the fall of 1965, when a group of vineyard workers called a strike in the grape growing area around delano in kern county, under the banner of what was then the af of l-cio's agricultural workers organizing committee ... to be followed out on strike almost immediately by an independent group called the national farm workers association ... the group headed by cesar chavez.

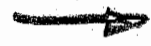
THE basic demand of the strikers was simple. They wanted their right to have a voice ~~in the setting of their pay and working conditions~~ in the setting of their pay and working conditions ... they wanted to bargain collectively, and they wanted their organizations recognized as their bargaining agents.



NO one needed this right more than the country's farm workers ... among the most exploited and oppressed of all workers. They had stood by for more than thirty years watching other workers who once shared their miserable economic condition rise to middle class affluence through the device of collective bargaining. Yet they could not grasp that device for themselves. The auto workers had risen, the steel workers, and just about everyone else. ~~THEY~~ ^{OTHERS} had won unionization long ago, and their struggling organizing committees become firmly established unions. ~~But not the farm workers.~~ ^{THE AUTO WORKERS HAD RISEN, THE STEEL WORKERS, AND JUST ABOUT EVERYONE ELSE. BUT NOT THE FARM WORKERS.}

AND though the ~~case~~ ^{case} for granting union bargaining rights to farm workers was obviously a ^{VERY} strong one, the odds against it still were incredible ... even in the year of 1965 ... even in a country where unionization in most fields long had been taken for granted -- and where unionization is a pale conservative thing compared to other movements of the left which had risen since the 1930s when unionization was THE issue.

FARM workers had struck many times before the strikes were called in delano, and in many places ... and ~~sometimes~~ ^{sometimes} with far more backing than either of the groups which called the vineyard strikes. Yet the farm workers invariably were beaten by the powerful corporate interests which run the farm industry. And their certainly ~~was~~ ^{WAS} no apparent reason ~~to~~ ^{to} believe that ~~this time~~ ^{this time} it would be any different for the farm worker ^{this time}.



ON THE contrary, the union campaign in delano appeared even weaker than some of its predecessors.


IN ITS part, the af of l-cio was going at it in the same old losing way. It was not putting nearly enough money into the effort. And it sent in the same old anglo organizers from the cities to try to organize the mexican american and filipino farm workers as if they were so many anglo-saxon plumbers in san francisco.

THE other part of the strike team, the national farm workers association, was hardly a union at all. It was a small community organization run by mexican americans who had no experience in exerting power who had labored in a near hopeless state for years under the heavy hand of the anglo growers who successfully demanded that the workers take the pay and working conditions they were offered unilaterally or starve.

BUT there was a spirit there which not many observers had noted. The times seemed ripe for some farm worker success at last. For it was the day of the civil rights movement and the war on poverty.

THERE was far more to it than that, however. The 1930s also had seemed ripe for it, but somehow it didn't happen ... somehow all that came out of it was an immense reservoir of bitterness, and some great, if depressing, writing by john steinbeck.

SO why was 1965 different than ~~1965~~ 1935?




THE difference was cesar chavez. The farm workers had to be there, ready and able as never before to exert the ~~best~~^{great} and courageous efforts that a successful union drive would require in the vineyards, and the essential outside supporters had to be there, ready and able. But they would not have done what they have done had not cesar chavez also been there to lead the way.

CHAVEZ grasped the essential fact that if something was to be done, it would have to be done differently. So he purposely put together a community organization rather than a union. For three years, he worked to gather members of his national farm workers association ~~around~~ together in a closely knit group.

ANGLO banks might be leery of farm workers, but their association had a credit union from which they could borrow the money so often needed to tide them over. Association members also found that by banding together they could pool their resources and buy the things they needed at discount prices ... tires for their battered automobiles, for instance.

THE vineyard workers learned, in short, what the outside union organizers had never been able to teach them. They learned the lesson of unity, and they practiced it daily in the affairs of their own association.



AFTER three years, the farm workers began asking the inevitable: If unity brought them cheaper automobile tires, why not better wages and working conditions as well? The strike soon became as inevitable as the question.

CHAVEZ knew the strikers could not do it alone, however. It was essential that financing, manpower and pressures also come from elsewhere. And Chavez, beautifully taking advantage of the atmosphere of the times, solicited and got that support, from unions, minority and anti poverty organizations, students, political leaders, clergymen and liberals and radicals generally.

THE farm workers economic battle quickly became a cause. ~~and~~ Within two years, ~~the two workers' organizations merged into one group headed by chavez and backed fully by the entire american labor movement, and won a dozen union contracts ... including one from the fiercest anti-union grower of all, the digiorgio corporation.~~

THESE contracts were with wine grape growers, and came largely ~~because chavez and his supporters shrewdly decided to use the boycott rather than the strike as their main weapon. Strikes had not worked in the past MAINLY because the law enabled farm employers to replace strikers VIRTUALLY at will and because most farms just were too big to picket effectively. But the boycott could be used to great effect -- and it could be used, ironically, because the law which exempted farm workers from the union guarantees extended other workers also exempted them from the laws against boycotts.~~

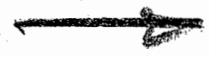
CHAVEZ AND his followers proved that the boycott could be used to great effect, however, by winning contracts from corporations which feared what was happening -- or, rather, what would happen -- to the sales of their wines and other products.

BUT after these wine grape growers signed contracts, the organizing effort bogged down. The table grape growers resisted more strongly, and the farm workers were reluctant to mount a boycott that would have to be a boycott of all grapes sold throughout the whole country. But finally they took on the tremendous task.

THE boycott -- the largest thing of its kind in history -- went on full blast for almost two years -- until this July, when the great victory came ... when the ~~xxxxxxx~~ grape growers finally signed union contracts.

THEN came the other great step -- the calling of a strike in the lettuce fields of the salinas valley. It may take a great deal more time. But it is going to lead, quite simply, to the unionization of the bulk of california's farm workers ... and so, at long last, to the unionization of farm workers everywhere.

THE dispute, as you know, pits the farm workers organizing committee of chavez against an alliance of the teamster union's powerful farm worker division and some of the country's most powerful growers .. who have signed ^{UNION} contracts with the teamsters in hopes of avoiding the stricter contracts demanded by chavez and the strikers.



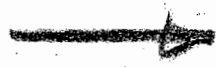
As you also know, the strike also has become a boycott -- a nationwide boycott of all lettuce grown by those growers who have signed with the teamsters rather than with the farm workers organizing committee.

THE dispute has centered in recent weeks on the bud antle corporation of salinas, the world's largest lettuce grower. Antle signed a contract with the teamsters way back in 1961. But the organizing committee notes that antle's workers never have had anything to say about it and that they clearly would prefer to be represented by the organizing committee.

Salinas disagreed, however & He

A SUPERIOR court judge in ~~montezuma county~~ *Montezuma* agreed with antle's contention that his firm should be exempted from the lettuce boycott because ~~it~~ *it* supposedly has a valid agreement with the teamsters. ~~It~~ *It* The farm workers ignored this, ~~and~~ *and* managed to get chavez jailed for three weeks by purposely violating the ~~order~~ *order* ... not only in hopes of hurting antle's business directly, but also clearly in hopes that chavez would be jailed and thus ~~able~~ *enable* to make one of those grandly dramatic gestures that he has come up with ~~the~~ *the* as ~~important~~ *important* weapons during the five-year-old battle to organize farm workers.

BUT finally, on december 23, the state supreme court ordered chavez released pending the high court's hearing of the appeal of organizing committee attorneys against the ~~court order~~ *ruling* that ordered the organizing committee to exempt the bud antle ~~from~~ *from* ~~the~~ *the* lettuce boycott.



IN freeing chavez, significantly, the supreme court also at least temporarily lifted the order that antle be exempted from the boycott -- a ruling that also will hold until the court hears chavez appeal.

CHAVEZ is claiming, mainly, that the court order violated rights of free speech. In the meantime, his forces are intensifying the boycott, against antle and others.

ANTLE'S attorneys are working hard, however, to ~~get~~ start new court proceeding ~~on~~ the boycott that might result in action soon -- at least sooner than may, when the state supreme court hearing now is expected to be held.

THE lawyers are hoping to force the issues through a damage suit that the antle corporation has filed in the superior court in salinas .. and which they hope ~~will~~ be brought to trial by march or april.

THE suit is against the national af of l-cio, president george meany and other af of l-cio officers, and against the farm workers organizing committee, chavez and ~~its~~ other officers. Antle's chief lawyer says the firm will be seeking more than five million dollars in damages, on grounds that the boycott violates the state's jurisdictional strike act .. and violates previous agreements between antle and the organizing committee (in one hand, and the organizing committee and the teamsters of the other, that chavez group would not try to ~~wing~~ ^{bring} up antle's field workers.

IF NOTHING else, the antle corporation hopes this suit will convince the national af of l-cio to in turn convince the organizing committee to back off.

IN THE meantime, a committee of clergymen is trying to get the parties together to settle their differences quickly. No one has shown many outward signs of compromise, however, and so the battle continues to rage full force.

BUT whatever is happening, there's one terribly important thing to keep in mind. Just five years ago it was still being said, as it always had been said, that it could not be done ... that farm workers were doomed to continue their lives of economically marginal subservience. But today everyone knows it will be done. -- growers included, whatever the the exact route and however much longer it may take. That is what the united farm workers orgaanizing committee and cesar chavez has done -- turned farm workers from sure losers into sure winners. So happy new year everybody.

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