

KQED/TV NEWSROOM SCRIPT – 1972

UFW MOVES INTO THE SOUTHWEST

By Dick Meister

The United Farm Workers Union and its charismatic leader, Cesar Chavez, are off on a new drive – the most ambitious yet since they set out in September 1965, on the five-year campaign that brought unionization to California's rich vineyards.

This time they are aiming at nothing less than unionizing all of the thousands upon thousands of men and women who harvest the crops throughout the entire southwestern United States.

They have begun the new drive in Arizona, largely because the growers and other powerful men who have so staunchly opposed the unionization of farm workers also have begun a new drive in Arizona – a drive to stop the United Farm Workers Union for good.

The growers' main weapon is a new Arizona law which will strip farm union organizers of the weapons which have been essential to what comparatively little success they have had so far. Those are the right to conduct consumer boycotts – the right to ask people to refuse to buy the produce of non-union growers – and the right to strike at harvest time, the only time when a union can have any real effect on a grower.

Growers in states all over the country – California included – are proposing similar legislation, and so both union and grower interests see Arizona as the place for a showdown. The union feels it must get the new Arizona law repealed if it is to continue to be effective.

The union's main weapon has been a campaign to recall Governor Jack Williams of Arizona, for signing the law... and, as in previous drives, a consumer boycott – in this case, a nationwide lettuce boycott.

Most of the farm workers live at or near the poverty level, and such an effort will entail great sacrifice, and require help from prominent outsiders. And so, also as before, Cesar Chavez provided an extreme example of sacrifice for the farm workers, at the same time dramatically calling the attention of outsiders to the union's cause.

Chavez undertook a fast, just as he had during the vineyard strike. He ended it this time after 24 days, at a mass in Phoenix last Sunday, which honored the late Robert Kennedy – and which signaled the real beginning of the new farm union drive.

The odds are pretty heavily against the farm workers' union. But they did it before, in the vineyards, against odds at least as heavy, and maybe they will do it again.

In the meantime, both sides in this extreme conflict will once again be trying to win friends and influence people with a steady barrage of charges and counter-charges.

Sorting out the truth won't be easy. But some facts are available. According to the latest federal figures, farm workers in Arizona average \$14 to \$15 a day on those days when they can find work – something which only about half of them can do on a regular basis, and an undetermined but apparently substantial number of these workers are children.

The only legal restriction on the hiring of children is that those under 16 be kept from certain dangerous farm operations, and not work during school hours. And even those loose laws are not very strictly enforced.

The most important fact is that farm workers still do not have the legal right to use the tool which most other workers have used to raise themselves from such primitive economic conditions. That tool is unionization, the right to bargain collectively with their employers on their wages, hours and working conditions.

And until farm workers get this right, with the same legal guarantees that were granted other workers three decades ago, the struggle in Arizona and elsewhere will continue unabated.