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A NEW TARGET: ARIZONA

By Dick Meister

Meister covered Delano in 1965 for the Chronicle. He covered Phoenix in June for KQED's Newsroom.

The scene is Phoenix, Arizona, and it is June of 1972; but it could just as well be Delano, California, in October of 1965.

Here are the Mexican-American farm workers, moving purposefully about a battered stucco building that serves as a community hall for the city's barrio, crimson and black banners all round as they prepare for battle with the growers who employ them.

And there are the Anglo growers, standing belligerently in the oppressive heat in crop-heavy fields just outside the city, blaming it on "outside agitators" and, worse, vowing to resist at all costs.

There are others who also seem familiar. Joan Baez, for instance, walks into the stucco building one day to promise the farm workers "whatever you ask." And there are the growers' helpers across town, in the mercifully air-conditioned State Capitol; legislators who are pledged, as one proclaims, "to halt this unrest."

Also, as in Delano in 1965, the farm workers are led by Cesar Chavez, the brilliant, soft-spoken tactician who has become a virtual legend since that beginning in Delano of what has become the United Farm Workers Union.

The goal, too, is the same: to win the right of unionization, the weapon which has been dangled before farm workers for decades as the only way to wrest first-class citizenship from a society which has kept them at the very bottom of the socio-economic ladder.

The casual observer might have thought the battle finally was won in Delano two years ago when, after five years of struggle, the vineyard owners granted union contracts to the vineyard workers.

But instead of prompting growers elsewhere to sign union contracts, it prompted new and stronger opposition.

First, growers called in Teamster Union representatives to sign "sweetheart contracts," which were designed to help growers and union officials rather than workers [Ed: See Meister in 10/26/1970 Guardian]. They have blocked the Farm Workers Union from getting genuine union contracts in the strategic vegetable fields in the Salinas Valley.

Then growers called on the Nixon Administration, which used the National Labor Relations Board to try to limit the union's use of boycotts against the produce of growers who would not sign contracts.

And now the growers and their allies have started the strongest counter-offensive yet. It is aimed at no less than stopping the Farm Workers Union dead in its tracks; and it has begun in Arizona.

That is why the battle lines have been drawn in hot, dusty Phoenix as they were drawn nearly seven years ago in hot, dusty Delano.

In Delano, they fought to establish a farm workers' union; in Phoenix, they are fighting to keep the union alive and growing.

We're at a real turning point, a real crisis stage in the union's life," explains Marshall Ganz, the mustachioed director of the union's worldwide boycott activities, part Chicano activist, part Jewish intellectual.

But Chavez, and Ganz and the other union staff members, feel that the only defense now must be a strong offense.

"We were on the defensive for a long time, but no more; we're completely on the offensive," notes another top staff member, Jim Drake, a bearded no-nonsense cleric from the Migrant Ministry.

What they're fighting, mainly, is a bill which the Farm Bureau Federation and other grower interests pushed through Arizona's State Legislature this spring. After the bill becomes law in August, it will be just about impossible to organize farm workers in Arizona and, the Farm Bureau hopes, it will be easier to get similar laws enacted in California and 19 other states where the Bureau is campaigning.

Growers and legislative supporters of the new Arizona law typically describe it as nothing more than an attempt to give farm workers the legal rights that most other workers have had for four decades under the National Labor Relations Act.

They may sincerely believe what they say. But if such claims are accurate, it means the Farm Bureau Federation has completely abandoned its very long-standing and fiercely-held position against unionization – and there is no evidence that the Farm Bureau has done anything of the kind.

What the evidence shows, rather, is that the push for new farm labor laws is perfectly consistent with the Farm Bureau's traditional anti-union position.

Anyone doubting that need only look at just three of the provisions in the Arizona law.

They bar most workers from voting in the elections which would determine whether a grower would have to bargain with a union. And they strip farm workers of the weapons which have been absolutely essential in whatever success they have had so far – the right to conduct boycotts against the produce of uncooperative growers and the right to strike at harvest time, the only time when an agricultural strike can have any effect.

The union's main goal now is to get the law repealed, not only so it can organize effectively in Arizona, but also to help blunt the Farm Bureau's campaign for similar legislation elsewhere.

The union's main tactics have been a campaign to try to recall Arizona's governor, Republican Jack Williams, for signing the law; a boycott against lettuce, the Arizona growers' main crop; and a strike in the growers' melon fields.

The big effort is the lettuce boycott. Ganz is trying to put together an organization as effective as that which waged the extremely successful grape boycott, and the union hopes for even greater success this time.

A successful boycott will force Arizona growers "to repeal their own law in order to sign contracts with the union," says Ganz. But it also will win union contracts throughout the entire Southwest, since a main crop of most of the big growers in the area is lettuce.

The need for unionization seems painfully evident throughout the area. In Arizona, for instance, the latest federal figures show farm workers averaging \$14 to \$15 a day on those days when they can find work, which is irregularly for at least half of them.

This means that most farm workers live at or near the poverty level, and that the effort planned by the union will entail great sacrifice, and require help from the outside.

And so, as he has done before, Cesar Chavez provided an extreme example of sacrifice for the farm workers as they began the new drive, at the same time dramatically calling the attention of outsiders to the union's cause.

Just as he had during the vineyard strike in 1968, Chavez undertook a fast. He ended it this time after 24 days, at a mass in Phoenix on June 4 that drew more than 5,000 farm workers and supporters.

He sat, exhausted but alert, looking up with incredibly sad eyes as the Reverend Chris Hartmire read what Chavez wanted to say to the people who have struggled for so long, and who must struggle much longer still.

"Our opponents in the agricultural industry are very powerful and farm workers are still weak in money and influence. But we have another kind of power that comes from the justice of our cause.

"So long as we are willing to sacrifice for that cause, so long as we persist in non-violence and work to spread the message of our struggle, then millions of people around the world will respond from their hearts, will support our efforts... and in the end we will overcome..."

The audience responded immediately, "Si se puede... it can be done."