

DICK MEISTER

IT'S time, I think, for still another installment in what is becoming a never-ending series of commentaries on farm labor. When I first started talking about it over the pacifica stations, back in the late 1950s and early 1960s, the discussion centered on the importation of mexican farm workers under the federal program -- the bracero program, it was called -- which allowed .. nay, encouraged, .. growers to import mexican farm workers to harvest their crops in california and the southwestern states.

THE mexican workers were lucky to find any kind of job at home, at any salary, and under any conditions. And so they were eager to accept whatever the american growers offered, as long as it included a job. And the growers consequently offered very little. Pay of \$1 an hour or less was standard. Fringe benefits were virtually unheard of. And any mexican worker who dared complain or ask for more faced quick deportation to mexico, where there were plenty of workers waiting eagerly to take his place, on the grower's terms.

THIS obviously did nothing for the standing of the american farm worker. Unorganized, unprotected by the labor laws that allowed other american workers to organize, he had to accept the miserable pay and working conditions offered by the growers, or stand by while the growers cried "labor shortage" and were sent compliant mexican braceros by the u.s. government.

AND this sort of thing did not begin with the 'bracero program. Growers invariably have had a ready supply of captive labor -- if not foreign groups such as braceros, then poverty-stricken domestic workers, convict laborers, prisoners-of-war ... even school children and soldiers.

IN california, it started even before statehood, when wheat farmers used the native digger indians, and then desperate whites who were driven off their own small farms by land speculators.

AFTER the discovery of gold, and statehood, wages shot sky-high. But growers got around this by hiring chinese coolies who had been chased from the mines and were desperate for work at any wage. Growers added ~~pl~~ another defenseless immigrants ~~AS~~ well as migrant tramps and, when world war one cut heavily into the flow of immigrants, they began relying heavily on mexicans for the first time.

WHEN the depression hit, cities which had to carry the mexicans on their crowded relief rolls during the winter months began deporting them en masse. But growers quickly found depression-stricken domestic workers to replace the mexicans. And when world war two drew these dust bowl migrants from the land to military service and jobs in the war industries, growers substituted japanese-americans and conscientious objectors who had been interned in concentration camps, domestic servicemen, and others.

IN 1942, growers managed to get an informal mexican bracero program going. And it continued after the war, despite the end of the manpower shortage that spawned it. With the korean war underway in 1951, growers pushed through a formal bracero program, as a wartime emergency.

AND the program was renewed every two years after that -- until 1963, when heavy unemployment among american workers made it impossible for growers to continue peddling the fiction that imported mexican farm workers were needed because there were no available american workers. The program was suddenly seen by congress as one which was taking jobs away from job@hungry and job-needy americans, and so the program finally was killed.

AND within two years, we were talking about the rise of a new farm union movement, headed by someone named ceasr chavez. Growers had to deal directly with the complaints of their badly treated workers. They could no longer depend on the federal government to send them uncomplaining substitutes from mexico.

AND so the expectations of american farm workers began rising. There was a chance that they finally might be able to put together a union of their own, and take the other steps that could win them the ~~required~~ decent wages and working conditions won long before by workers in urban industries.



YET it obviously has not been easy going for the farm workers, in large part because the federal government, while dropping the mexican bracero program, has certainly not stopped aiding the growers ~~legally~~ in their struggle with the farm workers.

CONGRESS has still refused to grant farm workers the legal right to unionization. Most other workers who want to be unionized need only demand an election in which they can show, by their votes, that they do indeed want to bargain collectively with their employer. Under the law, the election must be held, and the employer must abide by the result.

BUT farm workers still must rely solely on the voluntary agreement of their employers. And very few ~~for~~ growers, you can be sure, have agreed voluntarily to grant union bargaining rights to their workers.. except under extreme pressures ... pressures which are difficult and expensive for farm workers to mount... in part because government agencies such as the national labor relations board, continue to put strong counter-pressures on farm union organizers.


AND despite the end of the mexican braverro program, growers can still turn to mexico for ~~help~~ help in undercutting the demands of american farm workers. Federal agencies still allow them to bring in lots of mexikan workers on a temporary, seasonal basis... ~~legally~~ legally ~~by any means~~ *and otherwise.*

THIS sort of thing has made most farm strikes ineffective. Strikers no sooner leave the field than they are replaced by aliens, or by other domestic workers who are desperate for work.

FACED with the near impossibility of waging an effective strike, farm union organizers have relied heavily on the secondary boycott -- pressuring growers to grant union recognition by persuading stores and their customers to stay clear of the grower's produce.

THIS tactic is denied other workers under the laws which grant them the right to form unions without having to resort to such pressure. So it would seem only just that the farm workers be allowed unfettered use of the secondary boycott. But even so, the federal government has interfered with the farm workers use of the boycott.

NO other union organizers have faced such government opposition. AS a matter of fact, most of the unions outside agriculture were organized with the active support of the government. But that was in the 1930s and early 40s, when franklin roosevelt headed the government and feared that anything less than ~~widespread~~ industrial unionization would trigger revolution ... and this is the 1970s, when the government is headed by richard nixon, who fears that unionization in agriculture will weaken the financial power of the growers who are among his strongest supporters.



BUT Despite the heavy government opposition, cesar chavez and his fellow farm union organizers have come a long way in the decade since the end of the mexican bracero program. Their boycotts won union recognition from california's grape growers and provided a base for the inevitable development of a full-fledged union of farm workers, to match, at last, the unions of steelworkers, of auto workers, of building tradesmen, of cooks, of carpenters, of newspapermen, of longshoremen, and so forth.

ANOTHER opponent has arisen, however, from among those established unions. And so far it is proving rougher than even the government. That, of course, is the teamsters union. And it has taken away much of what the farm union organizers under chavez have won in the past decade of struggle.

IT began in 1970, when chavez' farm workers union finally won ~~the~~ union contracts from the grape growers and began moving into california's basic vegetable crops, in the salinas valley, where growers always have been the country's most important targets for farm union organizers.

THE salinas valley growers saw that unionization ^{FINALLY} was inevitable. So they called in the teamsters union ~~xxxxxx~~ to make a deal: we'll sign contracts with you, the growers told the teamsters, if you'll agree to lesser ~~conditions~~ terms than the farm workers union.



THE teamsters readily agreed, and the deal was made. The contracts were inferior to those being demanded by the farm workers union. But even more to the point was that, as teamster officials acknowledged, the union did not even enforce the contracts anyway, whatever the terms.

THE contracts were sweetheart contracts designed only for the mutual benefit of teamster offivials, and growers. They did not give the farm workers improved conditions or a voice in the operations of a union which now supposedly represented them -- and to which they had to pay dues or lose their jobs.

THE growers used the contracts to block chavez' union from getting real contracts that would give farm workers a voice and force the growers to spend some money to provide decent wages and working conditions.

THE teamsters used the contracts to gain control over a group of workers whose newly-found militancy threatened strikes and other disturbances which could be disadvantageous to the produce truck drivers and food processing workers whom the teamsters actually represented.

THIS, of course, was the genesis of the lettuce boycott ... lettuce being the principal crop of the growers who signed teamster contracts.



THAT boycott is still being waged by the farm workers union, since very few growers have agreed to abandon their teamster contracts and sign with the farm workers.

BUT now, the farm workers union has had to turn to another grape boycott .. because the teamsters did, in the vineyards this summer, what they did in the lettuce fields in the summer of 1970.

AND lasting teamster success in the vineyards would be far more serious than in the lettuce fields. It would not just keep the farm workers union from expanding, as important as that is. It would all but destroy the union, since the union has very few contracts, and hence very little standing in a practical sense, outside the vineyards.

THE farm workers union signed the first of its major grape contracts in the coachella valley ^{OF RIVERSIDE COUNTY}, and they were the first to expire. That was in may. And the teamsters were there to offer the growers teamster contracts to replace the expired contracts they had signed with the farm workers union three years before.

ALL but two of the coachella growers signed with the teamsters. And then growers in the vineyards to the north began signing ^(ONE BY ONE) as their old contracts with the farm workers union also expired.




THE teamster steamroller stopped, however, when it reached the most important of the vineyards .. those which are in the area around the kern county town of delano. The growers there ~~xxxx~~ produce nearly half of the country's entire grape crop. And it was they who gave the farm workers union its first great victory, by signing contracts in 1970 after five years of strikes and boycotts -- but who refused to renew those contracts when they expired on july 31st this year.

AND why not refuse? The teamsters union was standing by, offering growers the tempting prospect of signing contracts on lesser terms.

THE heart of the farm workers' contracts is a provision requiring growers to get their ~~xxxx~~ workers from the union's hiring hall. Growers who want help call the hall and the union decides who to send -- a sytem that gives the union and its members a very important voice.

TEAMSTER contracts have no provision for a hiring hall. Growers get their workers where they please, as long as they collect teamster dues from them after they come to work, and turn those dues over to the union. And growers in this situation usually turn to parasitic labor contractors for their help, paying those body brokers a fee which comes from the pay of the workers themselves.




THERE are other important differences between teamster and farm workers union contracts. The farm workers contract gives employees a ~~say~~ strong say in the use -- or non-use -- of pesticides and in related matters, for instance. But teamster contracts leave most of those things to the growers alone.

IMPORTANT, too, is the fact that the farm workers union is an extremely democratic union, unpredictable, inexperienced, and likely to make all sorts of demands and try all sorts of things on growers. Whereas the teamsters is a well-established, orthodox and very conservative union, controlled tightly from above by quite predictable leaders who are relatively easy to deal with, if you are willing to pay the price.

ALL this may be beside the point anyway, since, as I noted before, the teamsters haven't really been enforcing their farm contracts. They have just been used as a handy way to keep field workers from taking any actions that might harm, on one side, the teamster truck drivers and cannery workers, and on the other, of course, the growers.

THE farm workers union, at any rate, tried to keep the delano growers from signing teamster contracts by calling a strike. But though the growers remained as unbending as the growers in the coachella valley before them, the teamsters union backed off a bit and did not immediately offer contracts to the delano growers.



THE teamsters acted mainly because of concern with the public response to their actions in coachella. Widespread publicity was given to the union's use of \$67-a-day goons to patrol the vineyards, supposedly to protect workers who were ordered to join the union or lose their jobs.

AND thanks to the allies of the farm workers union in the church and elsewhere, the teamsters were branded as vicious raiders trying to destroy an extremely popular union headed by an extremely popular leader.

NONE of this sat very well with the teamsters national leaders, who were in the midst of an expensive campaign to clean up the image of the union and of its ambitious national president, frank fitzsimmmons.


IN an effort to ease the pressure, the teamsters agreed to peace talks with the farm workers union, to ~~discuss~~ decide which union should organize which workers. They had made such agreements before, but this was to be a firm agreement, *guaranteed* ~~to be~~ by no less than ~~the~~ president george meany of the aflcio.

AND an agreement was apparently near in mid august .. until word came, in the midst of the talks in burlingame between teamster and afl-cio negotiators, that teamster organizers in delano had signed contracts with the growers there .. despite the understanding among negotiators that no contracts would be signed while the peace talks continued.

TEAMSTER leaders insisted that their organizers had signed the contracts without union clearance, and they immediately repudiated the contracts. The peace talks broke off nevertheless, with chavez demanding better evidence of "good faith" on the part of the teamsters .. especially since the delano growers refused to give up the teamster contracts which teamster leaders had declared invalid.

IN the meantime, the situation got desperate in delano, where the farm workers union was still picketing to try to get growers to sign new contracts. One union member was killed in a scuffle with a deputy sheriff outside a bar frequented by strikers. And another member was shot and killed by a non-striking worker as he drove away from a picket line, after another of the rock-throwing incidents which the previously non-violent pickets engaged in.

AFTER the deaths, the farm workers union called off the picketing, in favor of what undoubtedly will be its main weapon anyway: a nationwide grape boycott.



THE boycott was held up, however, while many tried to get the teamsters and farm workers back to the negotiating table.

THAT was finally accomplished, in september. And by the end of the month, many and teamster president fitzsimmons announced that an agreement had been reached between the teamsters and the farm workers union. They did not disclose the terms, but said they only needed a few finishing touches from their lawyers, and that the agreement would go into effect as soon as those ~~few~~ formalities were concluded.

ALTHOUGH they did not officially announce ~~it~~ the terms, others did disclose them. The organizing of all field workers was to be left to the farm workers union. The teamsters would "renounce and immediately rescind" all contracts which the union signed with grape growers, including major wineries such as gallo. The teamsters also would give up two major lettuce contracts immediately, though not giving up those in the salinas valley until they expired in 1975.

THE farm workers union, in return, would abandon its boycott of those salinas valley lettuce growers who retained teamster contracts, but would continue its boycott against all other lettuce and grape growers who would not sign contracts with the farm workers union.



AND in return for getting jurisdiction over all field workers, the farm workers union agreed that it would not challenge the teamsters' jurisdiction over all workers in canneries and elsewhere who are involved in the processing, warehousing and trucking of produce.

FINALLY, any unresolved differences that separated the unions would be settled by meany and fitzsimmmons.

THAT last point was the chief reason for belief that this agreement could hold up, as similar agreements reached in 1967 and 1970 had not held, because there had been no such machinery for settling charges of violations by the parties.

THERE was another important difference, in that the teamsters agreed to renounce most of their contracts with growers unilaterally. In the previous treaties, they agreed to renounce them only if the growers who held them also agreed. And very few agreed.

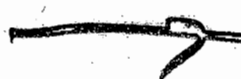
~~IT'S THE~~ ^{DID} growers ~~responded~~ ^{A NEW} to the announcement of peace ^{ready} between the unions by insisting they would not give up their contracts, but there was no assurance they could make that stick — especially since some ^{growers} ~~apparently~~ had secret agreements with the teamsters to switch to the farm workers union should peace be made. ^{AND SINCE THE WORKERS COVERED BY THE CONTRACTS HAD NOT BEEN CONSULTED ABOUT IT. THEY WANTED}

MEANY and chavez were convinced, at any rate, that the growers could not upset the peace treaty. And they signed it quickly, after their lawyers looked it over. But fitzsimmons stalled, claiming that the teamsters lawyers had found some "very serious legal problems.". problems arising from the fact that growers were preparing to legally challenge the provision in the agreement which would require the teamsters to give up contracts to the farm workers union.

THOSE supposed problems were known at the time that the agreement was disclosed, however, and teamster representative said nothing about them .. or anything else, for that matter, except that final~~l~~ agreement between the two unions was just a mere formality that would follow quickly, after their lawyers put on those finishing touches.

BUT finally, on the seventh of this month, nearly six weeks after tentative agreement was announced, fitzsimmons disclosed that the teamsters would not sign the peace treaty after all. He cited those supposed "legal problems" and the warning from a growers attorney, who threateneed to "sue him -- fitzsimmons -- to death if he didn't honor the contracts" that the teamsters have with growers.

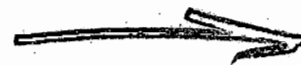
HENCE, said fitzsimmons, "we -- the teamsters -- will keep our moral and legal obligations" to the growers.



SO why the switch? Why did the teamsters union, which agreed in september to give over field workers to the farm workers union, decide against it in november? Fitzsimmons claims no such agreement was ever made. But I think we can discount that. And if fitzsimmons really does believe it -- which I very much doubt -- he is probably the only party involved in the peace talks who does.

IT'S more likely that the teamsters were merely stalling for time, hoping to get very strong public heat off the union by seeming to make peace with the popular farm workers union until after the harvest season was over and public attention diverted away from agriculture.

ANOTHER factor involves fitzsimmons' attempts to retain the teamster presidency in the face of a strong bid by jimmy hoffa to regain the office. Hoffa is campaigning aggressively, using, as part of his aggressive stance, the argument that he wouldn't let many and chanvez and those bleeding hearts push the teamsters around or give up anything to another union.



FITZSIMMONS, in any case, is now talking just about as tough. He met with growers ~~LAST~~ week to assure them personally that the teamsters would honor and "strictly enforce" all of the 305 contracts it has signed covering field workers.

FITZSIMMONS has NOT said ~~whether~~ whether the teamsters will go after other contracts in competition with the farm workers union, however, ~~And~~ he claims the union is still open to ~~peace~~ ^{NEW} peace talks with the farm workers. But the chances of this seem very unlikely. Fitzsimmons has spoken in bitter contempt of both Chavez and Meany, and they have responded in kind.

CHAVEZ has declared war, promising to press the lettuce and grape boycotts full blast, on the theory that the only way to get the teamsters out of the fields ~~and to guarantee survival of~~ ~~the only real union that farm workers have ever had~~ will be to inflict such economic damage on growers that they will do it ^{FOR THE} ~~FOR THE~~ ^{UNION} by renouncing their teamster contracts.

CHAVEZ feels there's no other way to guarantee survival of his union, the only real union that farm workers have ever had. He says the union should have ~~known~~ ~~that~~ it couldn't do it by negotiating with the teamsters. For the teamsters, as he says, "have deceived us every time."

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