Growing Pains of a 20-Year-Old Union

As Cesar Chavez' United Farm Workers Union prepares to mark an important anniversary, the early fire of its cause has been banked by the day-to-day needs of running the union and fighting off its enemies.

By Dick Melster

It's Sept. 30, 1982. Cesar Chavez, a stocky, disarmingly soft-spoken man, stands at the podium on a small stage in Fresno, Calif., presiding over the founding convention of his tiny, unknown organiza-
tion. Suddenly, Chavez' pugly young cousin, Manuel, grips off a huge piece of wrapping paper that covers the wall behind the podium, unveiling a blazing red bann-
er with a stylized black worker eagle emblazoned boldly in the center. "When that damn eagle flies," roars Manuel Chavez, "the problems of the farm workers will be solved!"

We've seen the red banner many times, since that day - the new world-famous symbol of the United Farm Work-
ers Union, waving high above demonstrators in virtually every state. We've heard their chants of "boycott" in front of supermarkets, their cries of "Strikers" on the edge of vineyards and lettuce fields. We've heard Cesar Chavez' plea for La Causa — the quest of farm workers for the basic right of unionization, granted most nonagricultural workers in the United States more than four decades ago.

But the banners are rarely seen now by most people, the urgent voices rarely heard. The surface drama of the farm labor movement that carried millions during the 60s and 70s is gone, and with its disappearance has come word that the UFW is in deep trouble, nearly 20 years after the banner was unveiled.

Tragedy the UFW is, but not nearly as troubled as imagined by the media's messengers of doom, who too often equate the lack of highly visible, dramatic and easily reported activity with failure.

The UFW, while hardly no longer has the local right
grower employers are legally obligated to bargain with them collectively on all matters concerning wages, hours and other terms and conditions of employment. 

Pressing for effective operation of California's farm labor law thus has led to the union's preoccupation, one requiring relatively undramatic political and legal action. It requires, too, that the UPW put together a bureaucracy able to administer an established union and to stress quiet bargaining for current members over the exciting phenomena of winning new members for the union is to remain true to its original goals, it must do this while making certain the UPW is not run by and for farm workers.

The new task has plunged the UPW into a struggle against unremitting grower attempts to cripple the farm labor law, and into internal turmoil over its own tactics.

Three times the UPW has been forced to persuade Gov. Jerry Brown to veto weakening amendments passed by the legislature, and it is fighting constantly against cuts in the budget of the board that enforces the law.

The UPW already has been trimmed from 120 to 80, even though it must now handle more twice as much business as it did in its initial years.

Some growers have refused to bargain or reach contract agreements with the UPW for as long as two years after unions were certified on their farm, under California's laws. To counter these refusals, the UPW, as an effective union, has hired UPW sympathizers, who have directed growers to their workers and have hired masses of illegal aliens from Mexico, who are in no position to demand union representation or any other legal rights.

For the UPW, each such union contract struggle means a battle before the overwhelming farm labor board, and although it generally upholds the UPW, it has been taking as long as 30 months to rule on charges and 18 months to certify some elections. Growers sometimes have delayed resolutions of disputes longer by appealing board rulings in court and, though the growers usually lose, these appeals further drain the limited resources of the board and the union.

Hence workers and UPW supporters complain that the union's accomplishments have been taken for granted. The time and money spent on victorious legal actions and political maneuvers on behalf of Brown and others have not been believed by all.

Not surprisingly, the union has scarcely grown in recent years. Only about one-fifth of California's farm workers are under UPW contracts, and there are few signs of effective organizing in other states. So what to do?

Abandon legal action and adopt a revolutionary posture, accept the non-Chicano "Anglo" activists who once labored for the UPW as part of a broader cause, that of radically transforming all of society. They are unhappy that the UPW has become part of the labor establishment.

No, argue old-time unionists. Do what many unions do.

Hire well-paid professionals. Replace the inexperienced Chicano farm workers who get the same substandard wages as the UPW's elected officials for helping run the union.

The arguments have led to the firing — some call it "purging" — of lower level Anglo staff members whose ideological fervor was essential in the union's formative stage, and of a dozen local UPW representatives. It also has resulted in the resignation of several top staff officers.

The layoffs were part of the UPW strategy to "impose their own agendas" on the UPW and with not sufficiently involving these officers in decision-making. They were attached at the union's convention last fall as "traiors and conspirators," along with about 30 delegates who put forward a slate of officers to challenge Chavez and staff. Dissidents charged that Chavez has become a dictator who demands unquestioning adherence to his views.

The charges on both sides were greatly exaggerated. But it is clear that Chavez and his supporters are demanding adherence to their views of a large, effective union run solely by deeply committed members with the active participation of all members. They insist this can be realized through continued membership training and education and a reorganization now under way.

That might seem highly unlikely, especially considering the attitude of many farm workers. Like other workers today, they tend to regard unions merely as organizations that should provide services in exchange for dues and not require anything else of them except occasional votes of confidence in the officers and the contract they negotiate.

Yet it also seems highly unlikely that the UPW would do any of what it already has done. The average pay of California farm workers — well below $1.50 an hour when the union began organizing — has more than tripled. Thousands of farm workers now have the legal right to medical care, protection against health and safety hazards, pensions, paid vacations and holidays. They have the right to be fired only for just cause, to act against employers who treat them unfairly, to be allocated work by seniority rather than employer whim, to honor the picket lines of others, and other rights that were only a dream less than a decade ago. This includes, above all, the right to unionize, the right that made all the other rights possible.

That the United Farm Workers Union has come as far as it has is compelling argument that it can travel the rest of the way, whatever the odds. The black eagle may yet soar.