Viewpoints

Can a Grape Boycott Succeed Again?

In the '70s, a grape boycott yielded union protection for farm workers in California. But today's conservative political climate means a tougher struggle for Cesar Chavez and his allies.

By Dick Meister

It's time again to stop eating grapes; it's time, once more, to heed a cry of "boycott" -- according to Cesar Chavez, president of the United Farm Workers, and other UFW advocates.

The last time people did that -- some 17 million of them between 1968 and 1975 -- it led to enactment in California of the first law anywhere to grant farm workers the union rights that nonfarm workers won a half-century ago under federal law, and raised high hopes for enactment of similar laws elsewhere.

The workers, however, have won nothing in the decade since then. On the contrary, the rights they won through California's pioneering Agricultural Labor Relations Act are being seriously eroded by the anti-labor forces that are battering unions and union members all over the country.

That, in essence, is why the UFW is once again calling for a nationwide boycott of California grapes. It is simply attempting to keep -- if not to get back -- what it had won previously, a defensive position that has become common among unions in recent years.

The UFW's earlier struggle was extremely difficult. But farm workers face perhaps an even more difficult task this time than they did back in the 1960s and '70s. Those were the days of the civil rights movement, of the war on poverty, of Vietnam War protests, and of pro-labor Democrats in the White House and in the California governor's office.

Cesar Chavez, president of the United Farm Workers
But the usual is the days of the "me generation," self-centered "yuppies," and of Ronald Reagan and George Deukmejian, the Republican newspaper of Californians who is as staunch a union foe as Reagan.

Deukmejian, who has made good on his promises to the anti-union interests that contributed more than $50 million to the election campaign that brought him to office in 1986, succeeds a labor ally, Democrat Edmund G. (Jerry) Brown Jr.

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Deukmejian has slashed almost 30 percent, or nearly $3 million, the already sparse budget of the Agricultural Labor Relations Board that administers the farm labor act. He has asked the board's staff of less than 200 people by one-fourth and has appointed a pro-business, former GOP (State Assembly) David Sterling, as the board's general counsel.

"The law that guarantees our rights has been gutted," declares Chavez. "It doesn't work anymore."

Chavez may be exaggerating — but not by much. The farm labor board has been taking months, sometimes years, to rule on union labor practice complaints, even after they are upheld by the board's field examiners. There has been variation in deciding which issues are the only ones to elections and certifying the results.

Most of the farmers who refuse to bargain or reach contract agreement with the UPW despite their employees' votes for UPW represent the owners of firms that are union sympathizers, denying union organizers access to their employees.

The overwhelming farm labor board has a backlog of more than 1,000 such complaints. At least as many other complaints have been dismissed or settled arbitrarily by Sterling, whose post gives him the power to declare that complaints are not met the board's standards, set

The most prominent of these violations are the wrath of gun owners, currently the subject of some 400 unenforced unfair labor practice complaints. Some grape producers, the first employers to grant union contracts to the UPW, virtually all of them have long since refused to renew the contracts, originally signed by 140 growers.

Now, says Chavez, "it's time for the faith in the court of last resort — the grape boycott that symbolized the farm workers' struggle in the past. The UPW's hope is that the economic pressure of a boycott will force growers to press Deukmejian to peacefully follow the law.

Generating sufficient pressure obviously is not going to be easy. The union has been losing members steadily, largely because of its inability to protect workers' legal rights, and now represents probably no more than 20 percent of California's 200,000 or so farm workers.

The UPW nevertheless managed to put more than $750,000 into the election campaigns of friendly members of the state legislature's Democratic majority over the past two years. But though the legislators have lined up to vote for higher growers' salaries, the law has been ignored.

The legislators' reluctance to act stems in part from a lack of public pressure on them. That, in turn, stems from a lack of dramatic, highly visible UPW activity such as the strikes and boycotts that brought the union the broad public support it used to win the farm labor law. The victory caused the UPW to take for granted the support of the unions, and to join organized labor's non-competitive establishment and shift to quiet legal and political activity.

Even Chavez concedes that if the UPW cannot legally draw the heavy support — 10 to 12 percent of the adult population — cited by politicians during the union's previous boycotts.

But he says the UPW is certain to get its 5 to 7 percent of the public behind the new effort, and that will be enough to hurt the growers economically.

Chavez is banking on the new boycott, serving public enthusiasm, especially among those who helped us before when they were young students and who are now in position of power in their communities — as elected officials and religious leaders, for instance — and who will have access to a lot of people they have access to. We make a lot of friends, and they are still out there."

"The UPW expects to reach its old friends and make new ones in part through the high-tech methods used in modern political campaigns. The union has used its data on the farm labor voters to identify voters that will enable it to pinpoint, in direct mail pitches, members of the traditionally liberal groups most likely to help blue-collar union members, racial and ethnic minorities, young college-educated professionals and others.

The old-fashioned, tried and true methods are not being neglected, however. Chavez has been touring the country in recent months to meet with groups of supporters on college campuses and elsewhere, lead a few low-key demonstrations and speak at talk shows. He already has won boycott endorsements from the city councils of Boston and Detroit, Mayor Raymond Flynn of Boston, Gov. Michael Dukakis of Massachusetts, the Massachusetts State Legislature and the AFL-CIO's national executive council.

Although the UPW has been talking about the boycott for almost 10 months, the effect actually is just getting started. But that doesn't disturb Chavez. His major weapon always have included patience. He is confident, he says, that farm workers eventually will stand up through public support to win their latest of their constant struggle to drug agricultural employees and the employer-government alliances into the 20th Century. They'll be better, though. We've only got 15 years to go in the century, and they're still arguing in the labor departement and the Congress over whether workers should be exposed to pesticide employees with safety and fresh drinking water."

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