

VIEWPOINT

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For ailing United Farm Workers, is there life after 30?

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Hispanic Link

The year 1992 was more than the occasion of another nasty presidential election. It marked birthday No. 30 for the United Farm Workers. Regrettably, this milestone was obscured by the year-long debate centered on an ailing economy that dragged millions of middle-class families closer to poverty and distracted us all from the plight of our nation's poorest, most mistreated workers. So go easy on the birthday congratulations. The UFW, once one of the country's most visible and popular organizations, is not what it used to be.

There's hope, however, for a resurgence - more hope than in a decade, a time during which the UFW has declined steadily in the face of severe government and employer opposition and greatly diminished public support.

UFW President Cesar Chavez and the union's other founders set out in the fall of 1962 to win for the nation's wretchedly treated farm workers the union rights granted non-agricultural workers in the 1930s. After a series of hard-fought strikes and widely supported boycotts, they won those rights in California, the country's leading farm state.

That victory came in 1975 with passage of the Agricultural Labor Relations Act. The act required California growers whose employees voted for unionization to bargain with their union for contracts setting pay and working conditions.

The act worked well until 1983, when Democratic Gov. Jerry Brown, a staunch UFW ally, was succeeded by Republican George Deukmejian. The GOP governor slashed the budget and staff on the agency that was supposed to enforce the law. He also appointed anti-union grower allies to run it.

Fueled by the agency's reluctance to move against growers who refused to bargain with the UFW and otherwise violated the law, the agency - initially designed to encourage unionism - became a prime mover in discouraging it. The situation has become even worse under Deukmejian's Republican successor, Gov. Pete Wilson. Since Wilson took office in 1990, the agency has scarcely functioned at all.

The state's quarter-million farm workers, whose pay had risen to as high as \$10 an hour during the first seven years after passage of the law, are now fortunate to make half that. They average a mere \$5,000 a year and have few, if any, of the fringe benefits and vital rights previously granted them in union contracts. Many lack even such basic on-the-job amenities as fresh drinking water and toilets.

The UFW once had hundreds of contracts with California's fruit and vegetable growers. But growers have simply refused to renew previous agreements or to negotiate new contracts.

As a consequence, the UFW, which once claimed more than 100,000 members, is down to fewer than 10,000. Raising funds to finance largely unsuccessful boycotts and political lobbying; merchandising T-shirts, posters, videos and other goods; these have

been the UFW's main activities in recent years, conducted amid constant internal argument over tactics that led to the resignations of key UFW leaders.

But with little fanfare this year, the UFW began acting like its old self. "Join with your brothers and sisters and strike out against humiliation and indignity," Chavez urged vineyard workers at the start of California's grape harvest in May.

Thousands walked off the job over the next three months. Their strikes won raises of 5 percent to 7 percent in pay that had been frozen for almost 10 years.

Chavez concedes it is "only a very small beginning." The workers still urgently need union contracts that will guarantee them decent working lives. As was proved in the UFW's formative years, strikes alone will not win contracts. That's why the UFW is now relying primarily on boycotts.

The UFW seeks to win broad support for a renewed grape boycott by stressing the growers' use of pesticides that endanger workers and the public. The union contends that growers will not stop using the dangerous chemicals unless union contracts force them to do so. The boycott has had some effect, but the UFW needs much more support if those who harvest the food that sustains us all are to be re-armed with the essential weapon of unionization. Providing them support is the least we can do.

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