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Dick Meister

He Made It Happen

Few employers have been as important in the never-ending struggle of U.S. farmworkers for social and economic justice than Lionel Steinberg, the influential California grower who died at 79 last month in Palm Springs.

Steinberg, who ran three of the Coachella Valley's largest vineyards, was the first table grape grower to agree to a contract with the fledgling United Farm Workers union headed by César Chávez. That 1970 agreement led quickly to UFW contracts with virtually all of Steinberg's fellow growers and the end to five years of strikes and boycotts that had drawn worldwide public support. Although the UFW's grape boycott was costing the growers millions of dollars, they had adamantly refused to negotiate with the union -- or even acknowledge their losses.

Steinberg, a Democratic appointee to the State Board of Agriculture, was one of the few political liberals among the growers. But it wasn't liberalism that moved him.



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"It is costing us more to produce and sell our grapes than we are getting paid for them," he told the growers. "We are losing maybe 20 percent of our market... The boycott is illegal and immoral, but it also is a fact and we must recognize it and try to deal with it in a manner fair to both sides... We cannot continue to sweep this problem under the rug."

Nine growers joined Steinberg to seek contract negotiations with the UFW in 1969, but most growers initially rejected his pleas.

Their trade association, the California Grape and Tree Fruit League, actually issued a report claiming the boycott had been a "Total Failure."

The UFW readily agreed to negotiations with the 10 growers led by Steinberg. But those talks, held under the auspices of the Federal Mediation and Conciliation Service, got nowhere.

Steinberg then tried but failed to reach an agreement covering just his vineyards. Steinberg estimated that growers lost \$3 million during the 1969 harvest. But the standoff continued until just before the start of the next year's harvest, when the unrelenting force of the boycott and the mediation efforts of a committee from the National Conference of Catholic Bishops brought Steinberg and the UFW back to the negotiating table.

The union was now especially eager to settle, since other growers had told the bishops' committee privately that if Steinberg could reach an agreement they would follow him rather than face another losing year.

STEINBERG'S SUPPORT WAS PIVOTAL

Steinberg soon agreed to a contract with the UFW, as did virtually all of the Coachella Valley's other growers and three of the most prominent growers in Kern County to the north, the state's major vineyard area.

Within a few months, the rest of California's grape growers were calling for peace.

Finally, all the state's vineyard workers got the union contract protections they and their millions of supporters had so long fought for.

The UFW would face many other arduous battles in the years to come, some of the roughest against those very grape growers, and some which continue to this day.

But the initial contracts signalled that the farmworkers' movement was here to stay. They provided the foundation the UFW and its allies had to have if they were to carry on effectively their struggle for justice.

(Dick Meister is a freelance columnist in San Francisco.)