

Tension Mounts in Texas Melon Country as Striking Field Hands Press for Union Recognition, More Pay



Women hold signs saying "strike" in Spanish outside one of farms in Starr County, Tex.



Laborers and machines cooperate to harvest cantaloupes in the Rio Grande City area

FARM STRIKE STIRS A COUNTY IN TEXAS

Politics, Race and Wages Among Issues in Dispute

By DOUGLAS E. KNEELAND
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RIO GRANDE CITY, Tex., May 16 — Rio Grande City, parched and dusty, sits uncomfortably astraddle modern, well-paved U. S. 83, which runs down the valley 100 miles to Brownsville and the Gulf of Mexico.

At this time of the year, the midday sun in the center of town faces down all comers. The business district, crumbling with age, lies out of sight of the slow-moving green waters of its namesake. But the river is never out of mind, for the river is Rio Grande's wealth, such as it is.

Rio Grande City is not really a city at all, but an unincorporated town. Taxes, local residents explain, would rise with incorporation.

Control Jeopardized

Besides, they add, the party in power might lose control of the dozens of patronage jobs in this community of 6,000, which is the seat of Starr County. The county has a population of 17,000, of whom 95 per cent are Mexican-Americans.

Farming is Starr County's business. The river provides life for about 25,000 irrigated acres on 120 farms where men have pushed back the mesquite and cactus that invade relentlessly from the hostile lands to the north and west.

The Texas Employment Service estimated the county's labor force last month at 5,270 of whom 9.1 per cent were unemployed. Of those working, 2,370 were in agriculture.

Total employment was listed at 4,790 and unemployment at 480. But the county welfare of-



Pickets demonstrate outside the main gate of La Casita Farms, Inc. Eight Starr County growers are being struck.

fice noted yesterday that 1,007 families, composed of 4,772 persons, were on relief.

With a hint of community pride, almost anyone in town will work into a conversation an unsolicited statistic. "You know, of course," they will say, "that Starr County is the 17th poorest county in the nation."

Last June the valley was shaken from its summer torpor when the United Farm Workers Organizing Committee of the American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations called a strike against eight major Starr County growers.

The strike affected the farms that produce most of the county's crops of cantaloupes, honeydew melons, carrots, onions, lettuce, peppers, cabbages, tomatoes, celery, potatoes and cotton.

Since then the county and

many of the growers and businessmen in the richer palm-studded lower valley have concerned themselves with little else.

To an outside observer, the issues sometimes shimmer disconcertingly, as elusive as the outline of a distant tree in the valley's searing sun.

Prices Are Down

The farmers have the problems of farmers everywhere in the nation. Prices are down and costs are up. Even with the high unemployment rate, stoop labor is hard to find. Many of the valley people would rather work on the migrant trail than work in the fields at home.

Local politics gets involved in strike seems more a reflection of the still embryonic but growing militancy of the state's two

million Latins, more a civil rights than a labor movement.

But this was also true in Delano, Calif., where Cesar Chavez founded the movement in 1962.

The red huelga (strike) flags with their black thunderbirds are here, as there, carried almost religiously by the Mexican-American strikers. The growers are denouncing the strike as a fiction, even as the big grape producers of the San Joaquin Valley did.

Despite the unreality of a handful of padded pickets, many of them wrinkled grandmothers, challenging some of the most powerful growers of the Rio Grande Valley, the lesson of Delano sobers those who would scoff.

For the grape pickers won contracts. The National Farm Workers Union of Mr. Chavez has become the United Farm

Workers Organizing Committee, a part of the A.F.L.-C.I.O.'s grassroots attempt to unionize farm labor. Mr. Chavez is its president.

But the overtones of the civil rights movement remain in a border area where non-Latins are "Anglos" at best and "gringos" at worst.

"It's a demonstration," Ralph Ross declared angrily the other day in the air-conditioned offices at the packing shed of La Casita Farms, along a rail spur just east of town. Mr. Ross is assistant general manager of La Casita, the California-owned corporation that has been the chief target of the strikers.

Mr. Ross and Ray Rochester, vice president and general manager, contend that only five of the strikers ever worked regularly on La Casita's 2,700 irri-

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gated acres or in its packing sheds.

Mr. Rochester, a tanned, husky, 52-year-old native of Fort Worth who has been farming most of his life in Texas, Arizona and California, grows angry when he talks of the strikers.

"Most of the people who are out there on the picket lines are just not workers," he said in an interview. "A lot of them are off our welfare rolls."

"When I came down here six years ago," he said, "the wage rate was 50 cents an hour and that's disgraceful in the United States of America."

Declaring that the Federal minimum wage law that went into effect last Feb. 1 was "the best thing that ever happened to this valley," he said that La Casita had started paying the minimum of \$1 an hour last year and was paying \$1.15 this year, which will be the minimum next year. Next year, he added, the farm will go to \$1.30, a year ahead of schedule.

David Lopez, a youthful former newspaperman who was assigned to the strike as an international representative of the A.F.L.-C.I.O., sat behind a cluttered desk in the hot, fly-plagued office of the rundown old movie theater that serves as union headquarters and took issue with Mr. Rochester.

"It started as a strike in the fullest sense of the word," he said, "by people who had been employed on these farms for a long period of years."

Mr. Lopez said that members of most of the 50 families who receive \$1 a week from the union plus food, rent and utilities, had worked for La Casita long enough to have "reasonable expectations of being rehired each year."

The families receiving maintenance from the union's strike funds of about \$6,000 a month provide most of the pickets and receive most of the ire of the townspeople opposed to the action.

Cry of Strike Critics

"Most of those people never worked in their lives and they wouldn't work if they got \$5 an hour," the opponents declare.

What anger is not spent on the pickets is aimed at the veterans of the strike in Delano, Calif.

Gilbert Padilla, vice president of the United Farm Workers Organizing Committee, and Eugene Nelson, a freelance writer who came to the valley and called the strike, are condemned as "outside agitators."

According to local observers, Rio Grande City became a strike center almost by happenstance. Local politicians from the Democratic faction that has been out of office for years decided a farm workers union might win them some favor. They approached the Chavez group and reported that the valley was ripe for organization.

Mr. Nelson was sent here to head the effort, but has since moved into the background to make way for Mr. Padilla and Mr. Lopez.

The ties between the union and the so-called Old party, which had sought for a couple of decades to regain its lost dominance from the New party, are now tenuous.

Many Workers Unmoved

Although the union maintains it has 3,000 members in the valley, the strike obviously has failed to claim the imagination of large numbers of workers despite the marches, demonstrations and bridge-blockings that have led to 57 arrests.

After months of lackluster struggle, the union concentrated all its efforts last week on an attempt to halt the harvest shipment of the county's rich cantaloupe and honeydew crop, which is described as the best in five years.

The growers spent a nervous day last week when the union got the powerful Confederacion de Trabajadores de Mexico [Confederation of Mexican Workers] to put up pickets on the Mexican side of the international bridge at Roma to keep fieldhands from crossing.

La Casita, which contends it cannot find fieldhands on this side of the river, employs 100 or more Mexicans during the harvest season.

But Mexican authorities put pressure on the Confederacion, the pickets were removed and the harvest proceeded normally.

Last night as La Casita shipped 32 refrigerator cars of melons from its Missouri Pacific siding, the union sent five women pickets 30 miles east to a crossing at Mission in an attempt to halt the train.

Six Texas Rangers and almost a score of highway patrolmen, local policemen and railroad policemen stood watch in the darkness as the train approached. But after stopping to switch crews, the train rolled slowly on.

Crack in the Ranks

What seemed on the surface to be a crack in the growers' ranks appeared this week when Virgilio Guerra of Roma signed a recognition agreement with the union.

Mr. Guerra, who has 300 acres in cantaloupe among his 75,000 acres and is a partner with his four brothers in widespread ranching, agriculture, oil and banking interests in Starr County, was among the eight struck growers.

But his willingness to negotiate with the union was chiefly a manifestation of the now-you-see-it-now-you-don't character of Starr County politics. Mr. Guerra is a brother of Joe Guerra, a stalwart of the Old party who has consistently put up bond for arrested strikers.

More Arrests Made

RIO GRANDE CITY, Tex., May 18 (UPI)—The Texas Rangers arrested today about two dozen demonstrators picketing a Rio Grande Valley melon farm.

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