

# Farm Union Pins Its Hopes on Victory in Coast Grape Strike

## EARLIER SUCCESS SPURS U.S. DRIVE

Workers' Gains in Dispute With Processors Inspire Wide Organizing Effort

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WASHINGTON, Oct. 1—The tattered Mexican-American pickets who tramp the macadam roads in the verdant vineyards in California's fertile San Joaquin Valley know how to wait.

More than 200 families have been on strike against 32 grape growers there for more than two years, and they say they are resigned to striking two more.

Their struggle is concentrated now against the Guimarra Vineyards Corporation, whose 6,000 acres of grapes point like a finger through the hot and rich valley, and the outcome of the strike may tell whether the farm workers can build a viable labor union.

"Guimarra is one of the biggest growers, and if we can crack Guimarra we can crack them all," says Dolores Huerta, the 37-year-old mother of seven who conducts the union's contract negotiations in Delano, Calif.

**Contracts With Processors**  
The achievements of the strikers have been modest, but they have won several contracts with big companies that process grapes into wine.

This was the first success of any magnitude for farm workers in 30 years of sporadic organizing efforts, and it is encouraging workers elsewhere to seek unionization.

The Delano movement has spread into bleak Starr County, Tex., where it seeks to organize fruit and vegetable growers. Another union drive is under way among migrant workers in Florida's citrus belt.

There has also been some union success in Wisconsin, and there are reports of activity in Michigan, New York, Oregon and Arizona.

Those promoting unionization see it as the best way to ease the oppressive poverty of most of the nation's 1.8 million regular farm workers.

They earned an average of \$1.23 for each hour worked last year, and those who worked 150 days or more averaged \$2,300 for all employment in 1965.

This, however, would have been relative affluence for the migrant workers among them. There are about 400,000 migrants, and in 1965 they averaged \$1,362 from all sources of income.

The migrants are generally unprotected by unemployment insurance or workmen's compensation, and it was only last February they were covered by the Federal minimum wage of \$1 an hour. Their living conditions are generally substandard, and thousands of them live in quiet despair.

The United Farm Workers Organizing Committee is trying to change things for the California migrants. The contracts with the wine processors marked the first step, and now it is tackling the growers of fresh table grapes.

The union, an affiliate of the American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations, chose to concentrate on Guimarra now because this is the time of the grape harvest.

Most authorities agree it must win over Guimarra to maintain the momentum of its victories over the processors.

The key figure in organized labor's drive to improve the lives of farm workers, is César Chávez, a stocky, unassuming man who operates out of a spare office in a pink stucco house in Delano. Atop the house is a flag with a thunderbird, the symbol of the grape strike. Mr. Chávez, who learned community organizing techniques from Saul Alinsky, the professional organizer of the poor, began to work among the Mexican-American grape pickers in 1962.

He wanted to build a union and after three years his National Farm Workers Association joined a strike begun by Philippine-American workers of the Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee.

The strikers won unexpected support from church groups, civil rights workers and students. They also were aided by a Federal decision in 1964 to end the bracero program, under which growers were allowed to import Mexican workers, who could have broken the strike.

### 9 Companies Settle

The Mexican-Americans and the Philippine-Americans merged to form the United Farm Workers Organizing Committee, which in the last two years has won contracts covering about 5,500 workers at nine companies that process grapes into wine.

The contracts with the grape processors provided minimum hourly wages of \$1.65 to \$1.81 an hour, some benefits, and hiring halls through which the union can refer workers to the employers.

The union says the prevailing wage for grape pickers around Delano is \$1.30 to \$1.40 a



MARCHING: Striking grape pickers of the National Farm Workers Association passing through a vineyard near Malaga, Calif. More than 200 families have been on strike against 32 grape growers for more than two years.

hour. The growers say that with piece work the grape pickers can earn as much as \$2.15 an hour, but the union disputes this.

Mrs. Huerta, meanwhile, sits in her cluttered office in slacks and sandals and explains the strike.

All the major agreements so far have been with big processors, and she rattles off their names: Schenley Industries, Di-Giorgio Fruit Corporation, E. and J. Gallo Winery, Almaden Vineyards, Novitiate of Los Gatos Winery, Christian Brothers Winery and A. Pirelli-Minetti and Sons.

Because they are big, she says, it is easy to seek a boycott of their products. But it is harder to boycott growers of fresh fruit, she says, because their names are unknown to consumers.

The Rev. James L. Drake of the United Church of Christ is Mr. Chávez's assistant. He estimates that several hundred workers have stayed away from Guimarra because of the picket lines, and he says the company has lost "close to \$2-million on spoilage of grapes," picked by inexperienced help.

### Boycott in 34 Cities

Mr. Drake says that the boycott of Guimarra is working better than the union had expected. The union, he says, has established a boycott of the grapes in 34 cities and that 15 store chains with 13,000 outlets have stopped selling them.

However, Philip Feick, Guimarra's labor relations counsel, says the strike has had "very little impact" on the harvest and that there is no labor shortage.

He also says "there is some truth" to union claims that the company is shipping grapes under the labels of other growers because of the boycott.

But this, he says, is only "a precautionary measure" for buyers who "might be apprehensive" about the boycott. It does not mean the boycott has been effective, he says.

Most informed sources believe that the union operation here, which, Mr. Chávez says, costs about \$50,000 a month, will survive. But there is a question of whether it will grow into a national union, and of how long this will take.

Mr. Chávez asserts that about 8,000 members pay the \$3.50 monthly dues for at least nine months a year, but that the union pays a per capita tax to the A.F.L.-C.I.O. on an annual membership of only 1,700.

He estimates it may take 10 years to build a self-sustaining union, with thousands of members who pay year-round dues from all around the nation.

### Extensive Preparations

Much of the union success here is attributed to the three years Mr. Chávez spent in community organizing before the strike began. It led to a small health clinic, a gas station and a 600-member credit union, all of which are run by the National Farm Workers Service Center.

The absence of preliminary spadework has handicapped organizing efforts in Texas and Florida.

The Texas strike began more than a year ago when a California organizer went to Rio Grande City and called a walk-out.

The Texas strike is in the harsh Rio Grande Valley, which now is being swept by floods. The growers, with the support of the Texas Rangers, were able to ship the key melon crop last spring without significant trouble.

The union organizers, faced with a hostile community, have fallen back to emphasize community organizing. But the going is slow, the outlook bleak.

The outlook is only a little brighter in Florida, where Walter P. Reuther's A.F.L.-C.I.O. Industrial Union Department tried last year to organize fruit and vegetable pickers around Belle Glade. But a lack of resources, poor organizing, and the absence of indigenous leadership led to disaster.

Last March Mr. Reuther called in the United Packinghouse Workers, which decided to follow the Chávez formula of tackling an industry dominated by big processors with brand



LEADER: César Chávez led workers in their strike against the grape growers.

names that could easily be boycotted.

Consequently, it moved the effort about 115 miles north to

the citrus groves around Winter Haven, Fla.

Vernon Thomas, a 39-year-old Negro organizer, says service centers on the Chávez pattern have been set up to aid the predominantly Negro farm force in Winter Haven and Tampa and that a third will be established in Orlando.

He indicates that the union hopes to strike a processor in early 1968 for a contract that could be used as a wedge against other processors and fresh fruit growers.

The growers are uniformly opposed to the organizers in Florida, Texas and California.

They argue that the unions are irresponsible civil action groups, that the workers are happy, that unionization would produce unbearably higher costs, and that farmers cannot tolerate unions because they are peculiarly vulnerable to a strike at harvest time.

Mr. Feick of Guimarra agrees, saying the Chávez group is not a "responsible" union but "a socialist-civil rights movement."

Furthermore, he says, Mr. Chávez has enlisted the aid of "do-gooder elements, beatniks and socialistic-type groups," and that "they don't represent regular Guimarra employees."

Martin J. Zaninovich, a De-

lano grape grower, says the employers do not make big profits, cannot afford higher labor costs, and fear that a union would interfere with management.

### Disagreement with Meany

"I think any employer is going to resist unionization because then you're taking on a partner in the management of the business," he says.

"The people in the citrus industry don't feel they run a sweatshop, and feel they pay the pickers adequately," says Thomas W. Osborne of Florida Citrus Mutual, an association of 14,500 growers.

"The average grower wouldn't see any need for a union, and would think the worker would be better off without one," he declares.

The strategy for cracking the growers' opposition, and building a national farm worker union is a major issue in the feud between Mr. Reuther, president of the United Automobile Workers union, and George Meany, president of the A.F.L.-C.I.O.

The Meany forces want to

score a major victory in Delano as a foundation for a broader effort. But the Reuther forces, while saying they want to keep fighting in Delano, are eager to push quickly into new areas with a big burst of spending.

The A.F.L.-C.I.O. is spending \$10,000 a month, not counting extensive staff time, in Delano. The Industrial Union Department is spending \$17,500 a month in Delano, Texas and Florida. Mr. Reuther's auto union is spending \$7,500 a month in Florida and Delano.

Mr. Reuther contends this is far too little, and he has called for a commitment of nearly \$5-million a year.

But the Meany forces believe such an expenditure would be wasted unless Congress amended the National Labor Relations Act and gave collective bargaining rights to farm workers.

Mr. Chávez admits he is torn between the two ideas. He says money alone will not organize farm workers, and that he is committed to sticking in Delano until he wins.

But he also says he needs more money, and that he would like to respond to "a large and increasing demand for organization from many places around the country."

"It's getting to be a very large movement," he says. "But we find that although it is very healthy, we have to be very careful that we don't spread ourselves so thin that we can't win any place."

"The hell of it is that we can't intensify the strike [in Delano] because we don't have the money to do so," he says. "We have to do a great balancing act. If we overspend, we're out of the game."

What is really needed, he says, is legislation to give collective bargaining rights to farm workers. Otherwise, he says, "It's going to be one death struggle after another. The growers are going to hold out to the very end."