

Grape Growers Disagree on Talks With the Union; Feel That Public Misunderstands

By STEVEN V. ROBERTS
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ARVIN, Calif., July 5—This is the 43d season that John Kovacevich has grown grapes in the sandy soil of California's vast San Joaquin Valley. His father and five uncles before him also raised grapes here after they migrated "to the promised land" from the Austro-Hungarian island of Hvar in 1900.

After all that time, Mr. Kovacevich still lives in uncertainty. In 1961 a fierce "burn"—a sudden heat wave two days before the harvest began—almost wiped him out. Two years later a rain storm during harvest season destroyed 80 per cent of the unpicked grapes. Mr. Kovacevich had to sell half of his land just to stay in business.

And for almost four years, the United Farm Workers Organizing Committee under Cesar Chavez has staged strikes and boycotts against Mr. Kovacevich and other growers, demanding recognition as the bargaining agent for farm workers and labor contracts guaranteeing higher wages and job security.

The farm workers' cause has received strong support from organized labor, many liberal politicians, including Senators Robert F. and Edward M. Kennedy, and countless numbers of average citizens who have refused to buy and eat California table grapes.

His 'Reward in Hell'

The growers believe they are "misunderstood" by the public, but they have disagreed among themselves on how to proceed. Two weeks ago Mr. Kovacevich and nine other major growers agreed to open negotiations with the union—an act that infuriated the majority of growers who refuse even to talk to the union.

"Some of the growers have told me I will get my reward in hell," said Mr. Kovacevich, a tall and powerful man whose 60 years show only in his thinning hair and creased face. "And they have been my friends all my life."

While the negotiations continued, 81 other growers filed an antitrust suit against the union. They charged that the boycott had cost them \$25-million in reduced sales and asked the court for treble damages, or \$75-million.



John Kovacevich, 60 years old, at his vineyard in the San Joaquin Valley in California

The suit was the first acknowledgment by many growers that the boycott was succeeding. The 10 growers who decided to start negotiations had insisted the boycott was hurting them badly.

But if the growers differ on strategy, they generally agree that the strike can only be settled, as one put it, "if the union shows it understands our problems and indicates that it wants us to stay in business."

These problems begin with the fact that table grapes "are one of the most highly pampered commodities in the world," according to John Giumarra Jr., the general counsel for his family's farm, one of the state's largest growers.

Numerous procedures such as pruning and girdling the vines must be carried on throughout the year to produce the kind of grape demanded by the consumer, he said.

Another problem is that wages have risen since 1960 from about \$1 an hour to about \$1.65 an hour, partly because of the union's organizing activity, as have taxes, interest rates and the cost of machinery.

The wholesale price of grapes, however, has stayed steady for about 15 years—

roughly \$3.50 to \$4 a box for a popular, seedless variety. "The result," Mr. Giumarra said, "is that the entire industry is caught in a cost-price squeeze."

In the Coachella Valley, several hundred miles to the south, the squeeze has helped bankrupt two-thirds of the growers, according to Lionel Stenberg, a large grower in the town of Thermal and co-chairman of the group of 10 negotiators.

Here in the San Joaquin Valley, growers are selling more of their crop to the booming California wine industry, which requires far less care than the table grape market.

Mr. Giumarra, a 28-year-old lawyer with slicked-down hair and an outgoing manner, conceded that "efficient vineyards are still making a good profit," but many growers believe at least two laws are necessary to enable them to survive in the long run.

One is a national minimum wage law for agriculture that would put California on an equal footing with other states. Farmers here pay as high as 25 per cent more for wages than other states but must sell their produce on the same market.

Second, the growers point out that farm work will always be

a seasonal occupation and assert that workers should be protected by Federal unemployment insurance. Most agricul-

tural workers are now excluded from unemployment benefits.

Third, the farmers want a law that would establish ground rules for labor disputes in agriculture. In particular, they want to prohibit strikes at harvest time. But the union insists that they only have economic power during the picking season and could not force the growers to bargain in good faith if they could not threaten to strike at harvest.

The hostility of most growers toward the union, however, springs not only from economic considerations but from their own experience and the prevailing political climate.

Like Mr. Kovacevich, many of the growers were immigrants or the children of immigrants who came here from Italy or Eastern Europe with little money and considerable ambition. Mr. Giumarra's father and three uncles, for instance, came from Sicily and started as fruit peddlers before buying their first piece of land. They now own thousands of acres planted with a dozen different crops.

"You have to realize," said one grower, "that to break desert ground and fight sand and wind and frost for five years before you pick one grape takes

a certain kind of man—a rugged individualist, a kind of Marlboro man."

Fears Over Chavez

These farmers have long fought the idea of any agricultural union. Many are gradually accepting the inevitability of some union; but they remain deeply apprehensive about Mr. Chavez and his allies.

"These people might make demands that are unreasonable, just like the non-negotiable demands made by revolutionaries on college campuses," Mr. Giumarra said. Robert Sabovich, a large grower in Lamont, added:

"I keep reading in the paper that Chavez and his bunch is associated with S.D.S. and the Third World Liberation and groups like that. It makes you wonder."

Union officials believe the deeper problem is that the growers see their Mexican and Filipino workers as essentially inferior—an attitude that has long permeated the social fabric of California and helped keep the Mexicans submerged in the same way that the Negro was subjugated in the South.

To some extent, the growers acknowledge that they fear the union's long-range aim of in-

stilling dignity and independence in farm workers. As Mr. Giumarra put it:

"They give the appearance of wanting something other than unionization. They are just not the normal type of labor leader. They're associated

for years with trained radicals and they talk the language of social revolutionaries. They talk about 'our vineyards' and 'agrarian reform', and obviously the growers who own the land are going to be frightened."