

First Grapes With Union Label Shipped to Market From Coast



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Cesar Chavez with supporters carrying the union label

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DELANO, Calif., May 30—The first table grapes bearing a union label—a fierce black eagle in a white circle on a red flag—were shipped to market this week.

The event marked a turning point in the historic effort of farm workers to win union recognition and labor contracts here in the lush farmlands of central California.

In the last two months, the United Farm Workers Organizing Committee, headed by Cesar Chavez, has signed contracts with seven grape growers representing about 4 per cent of the grape industry. Many more growers are waiting to see how the union grapes sell before committing themselves.

No figures are available yet, but Keene Larson, a grower in the Coachella Valley, about 300 miles south of Delano, reported that "the demand seems to be very healthy for grapes in areas like Boston and New York, and that hasn't been apparent for the last two years."

Pressure Still On

The union, however, is not relaxing its pressure. "We hope these contracts will have a domino effect, but the battle is not over by any means," said Jerome Cohen, a lawyer for the union, which has its headquarters in Delano, 150 miles northeast of Los Angeles. "We still have a full-scale fight on our hands."

The union intends to keep up the pressure on recalcitrant growers by continuing its nationwide boycott of nonunion grapes while urging its supporters to buy union fruit—when they can find it.

Union grapes, now reaching the stores are marked only by labels on the wooden shipping crates. Later shipments will also have union labels stuck on the grapes.

Mr. Chavez and his union of Mexican-American and Filipino farm workers started their strike against the table grape industry more than four years ago (they have had contracts with the wine industry for several years) but the rootlessness and poverty of union members, in addition to a number of restrictive court rulings, made the strike ineffective.

So the union shifted its main efforts to the boycott, which became an important political issue in cities across the country. "The boycott has had a significant impact on the market," conceded Anthony Bianco, one of the growers to sign a union contract "and any grower who doesn't admit it is a liar."

Talks Break Down

Last spring, 12 growers opened negotiations with the union, but the talks broke down.

One of the catalysts that revived negotiations this year was a special committee set up by the National Conference of Catholic Bishops, headed by Bishop Joseph F. Donnelly of Hartford. The Bishops acted as neutral observers during the talks and the first contracts were signed April 1 by David

Freedman and Company and the Wonder Palms Ranch, both in the Coachella Valley.

A few weeks later, Mr. Larson, who has traveled around the country arguing that farm workers do not want a union, agreed to have an election on his ranch. In a secret ballot, the workers voted 72 to 2 in favor of the union. At the ranch of C. C. Larson, Keene Larson's brother, the vote was unanimous for the union.

Last week, Mr. Bianco and two other growers became the first ranchers here in the San Joaquin Valley to sign. It was not an easy decision for men who had long feared that the union would threaten their whole industry and way of life.

"It was time we started thinking with our heads instead of our hearts," said Mr. Bianco, whose business has entered bankruptcy proceedings. "Every year Chavez was getting stronger and stronger, and if the union didn't come today it would come tomorrow. Labor will be organized, it's the way the whole country is going."

"The union has really been very reasonable," added Keene Larson, "they don't want to destroy the grape grower. We're all living off the same vine."

The union contracts have reflected this spirit of conciliation. Workers are getting \$1.75 an hour, a raise of 10 cents, plus a 25-cent bonus for each box picked. Next year the rate goes up to \$1.90.

"Both sides had a political problem as well as an economic one," said one observer of the negotiations. "The union had a problem with workers who were expecting a bigger wage increase and the growers were under a lot of pressure from other growers not to raise wage levels, but once they were able to separate politics from economics, they were able to reach a settlement."

Not the Only Barrier

Money was not the only obstacle to an agreement. The Rev. Roger Mahoney, a staff member for the Bishops' committee, explained:

"I don't like to use the word racism, but a feeling really exists between the growers and their Mexican-American workers. The growers had to completely switch their relationships. They're not used to sitting down and talking with their workers; for decades they've just been telling them this is the way it's going to be. They're not used to dealing with workers on an equal plane."

No one pretends that the remaining growers will sign contracts willingly. Many still hate and fear the union, and some of their animosity has rubbed off on the Catholic Church, which helped arrange the settlements, Father Mahoney said:

"A lot of people are telling us that you can't mix religion with economics and politics, but the Bishops are saying that to live like a Christian you have to be concerned with the everyday problems of people. Everybody is for social justice someplace else. When you get in your own backyard, that's where you really have a problem."

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