Men, not rented slaves

La Causa

The California Grape Strike.
The Hollywood Film
and George D. Horwitz.
Illustrated.
159 pp. New York:
The Macmillan Company.
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By STEVEN B. ROBERTS

There is a gray stubble on
the man's time-toughened chin
and stains on his tattered jack-
et. His hands are curled into
fists as he stands in front of
the grape vines it has been his
life to thin, girdle, prune and
pick. And he is angry:

"I'm a broken man. I made
him a millionaire and got
nothing. I worked 40 years and
got nothing. I never had any-
ting until the union." 

The United Farm Workers
Organizing Committee—and its
leader, Cesar Chavez, have
become legends; their struggle
to organize farm workers into
the first successful
agricultural union is well-
known. This is a modest book
with a limited aim: to give some
sense of what life is like for
the campesinos, the workers
who have suffered more than
four desperate years for la
causa.

Paul Fusco's spare, bleak
photographs—it always seems to
be rainy or foggy—and George D.
Horwitz's understated text
do not glorify the campesinos.
Their attitude was probably
stated best by Chavez in a let-
ter to the executive director of a
growers' organization:

"We are not saints because
we are poor but by the same
measure we are not immoral.
God knows there is nothing
more burdensome than we
are not agricultural implements
or rented slaves, we are men."

Mr. Horwitz sometimes has
a tendency to wander. He seems
fascinated by trivial and often
irrelevant details, and inordin-
ately proud of his own intimacy
with the farm workers. But he
does capture bursts of insight.
For example, in a letter to
George Catalan, a Filipino immi-
grant, describing his life:

"There was no steady job.
One month, maybe 45 days,
the job is over and you go
another town. That's what
life of farmworker is. . . . As
far as I go, Spokane, Yakima,
Montana, picking potatoes,
picking beans. Then come back
to Delano . . .

When you are living in a camp,

Mr. Roberts, the Los Angeles
bureaucrat of The Times, has
covered la causa for almost
two years.
you have to work when they want you to, or you get fired and kicked out—I don't mind to work, but one time I don't like to do it is when they spray the chemicals or the sulphur on the vines. That day and the next day, I don't want to work because the dust, the pesticide, fall down in my face, burns my eyes, makes me sick. I say to hell with it.

Then there is Horwitz's description of Chavez at a rally last year on the Mexican border: "But each time he recognized the face of someone he knew, he smiled in a way that rejoiced, 'I see you now, my really perfect friend.' An hour is not a long time to wait for such a smile."

As Fusco's pictures show, the campesinos have little to smile about. Picket lines in the chill morning fog, plaster falling from the ceiling of crowded hovels, rows of bent backs, cracked hands chopping the dry earth with short-handled hoes, faces seared by heat, sweat, dirt, pain. For a few moments a respite, a tomato eaten under a truck to escape the sun. On Sunday, playing with the baby and drinking a Coke.

Yet it is these men and women who are making a genuine revolution in America. They are making it not with guns but with guts, not with bombs but with faith. Their fight is still just beginning. As soon as the major California grape growers signed contracts, the union became embroiled in a fierce battle with lettuce farmers in the Salinas Valley. After that, there is citrus. And after that, there are New Jersey and Florida and Texas.