

Letters to the Editor

'Cruellest Human Institution in America Today'

To the Editor:

Cesar Chavez' call for a nationwide lettuce boycott is being met by legislation prohibiting use of this tactic, the only effective strategy for the migrant farm worker.

Heavily exploited, 95 per cent are unprotected by union contracts; average annual income for a family of four is \$2,700; 800,000 children under sixteen work in the field; only 20 per cent reach high school; average life expectancy of the farm laborer is 49 years.

In the face of this situation, which Senator Mondale, past chairman of the Migrant Labor Subcommittee of the Senate Labor and Public Welfare Committee, has called "the cruellest human institution in America today," a callous attitude of both Government and large farmers is evident.

During this Administration, President Nixon has demonstrated his ability as a broken-field runner, but his approach to activism of migrant farm workers has unvaryingly been a

right-end sweep. In 1950, he sat on a Congressional committee investigating the first major strike of the California grape workers.

The committee report vehemently denounced the National Farm Workers Union, and for almost twenty years thereafter served as a powerful legal aid for agribusiness to stifle unionization. During his Presidential campaign he conspicuously consumed grapes and repeatedly denounced the grape boycott. Department of Defense purchases of grapes rose 800 per cent during the strike, and recently purchases of iceberg lettuce by the armed forces have increased 300 per cent.

Moreover, lurking behind the threat of restrictive legislation is the specter of mechanization. A pneumatic pruning machine developed in California with Federal funds was used by agribusiness to replace workers during the grape strike. For the migrant farm worker, the ultimate nightmare would be a mechanical lettuce harvester.

But already on the drawing boards is such a machine. Six hundred such machines would be capable of harvesting the world's iceberg lettuce crop. Thus, the handwriting may be on the wall for a segment of our society—heavily constituted by minority groups (Chicanos, Filipinos, blacks, Japanese and Chinese)—whose history in America has been marked by the ugly fact of exploitation.

Secretary of Agriculture Butz stated at the American Farm Bureau convention last December: "Let's take the Caesar out of the salad." I offer an amendment: "Let's take the lettuce out of the salad, and no Butz about it!"

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