

Teamsters Gaining In Bid to Organize Lettuce Workers

By WALLACE TURNER

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BURLINGAME, Calif., Jan. 16 — The Western Conference Teamsters announced significant improvements today in its contract with lettuce growers, an area where the teamsters are in competition with Cesar Chavez's United Farm Workers Union.

This week, the teamsters began an organizing drive among lettuce workers, using the contract improvements as their strongest talking point. While the teamsters contend that 30,000 workers are covered by their contracts, union officials will not say how many are members of the International Brotherhood of Teamsters.

Early this month, the farm workers sued the teamsters in Federal court. The two suits charged that the teamsters had "sweetheart contracts" signed by growers who want to break the farm workers' union. The suits charge that the growers have selected the teamsters as their weapon.

At a news conference today in a hotel at the San Francisco Airport, William Grami, director of field organization for the Western Conference of Teamsters, maintained that the farm workers' suits were lacking substance, and described them as "propaganda-type suits."

Wage Spread

Mr. Grami said the contracts with about 170 employers who grow, pack and ship row crops had been improved by wage increases and fringe benefits that are not in the farm workers' contracts.

The fringe benefits include 10 cents an hour to be paid by employers into a Western Conference of Teamsters pension fund. This compares with 35 cents an hour going toward pensions for warehousemen under teamster contracts, but Mr. Grami said the fieldworkers' contract would be improved.

Wage increases will provide a spread ranging from \$2.30 an hour for fieldworkers to \$3.05 for skilled machinery operators, he added.

Fieldworkers now get \$2.08 an hour. When the initial contract with the teamsters' union and growers was signed in August, 1970, fieldworkers were paid \$1.65 an hour. Further increases are scheduled to bring the fieldworkers an hourly pay of \$2.415 next July, and \$2.535 in July, 1974.

Mr. Grami said farm workers' contracts call for much less. According to his analysis, the farm workers' contracts will give fieldworkers \$2.27 an hour; this would increase to \$2.33 an hour next September.

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