

# Chavez Union Struggling for Survival

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COACHELLA, Calif., June 26—Despite long picket lines of banner-waving, impassioned United Farm Worker Union strikers, the grapes are being harvested from this mountain-girded desert.

The harvest may be a bitter one for Cesar Chavez and his union, which is struggling for survival in the face of a drive by the International Brotherhood of Teamsters to represent all West Coast agricultural workers.

Earlier this spring, most of the grape growers in the area signed up with the Teamsters after their three-year contract with the United Farm Workers expired. Although only a small percentage of California's table grape crop comes from Coachella, they are the first grapes to be harvested.

Unless Mr. Chavez's union can stop, or at least slow, the grape harvest here, grape growers throughout California may try to rid themselves of the fiery Chicano leader by signing up with the Teamsters.

So far—and it is still fairly early in this year's late harvest season—Mr. Chavez's pickets have not been able to stop workers from going into the vineyards or grapes from coming out. In fact, the California Department of Human Resources reported, there are more harvesters at work in Coachella's vine-

yards now than at this time last year — 3,900 against 3,200 last June.

The grape workers, organized by the farm workers union in 1970 after years of boycott activity, are the heart of Mr. Chavez's 60,000-man union. His success has been limited in other areas, including the lettuce fields, where a boycott of iceberg lettuce has failed to keep the Teamsters from signing contracts with growers.

All observers, including Mr. Chavez himself, agree that if the farm workers union should lose the grape

workers, its chances of survival would be slim.

How the strike will end is not predictable at this point. The farm workers are pitted against the biggest, richest union in the world—the 2.2 million member Teamsters union. Moreover the teamsters—particularly their president, Frank E. Fitzsimmons—are close to the Nixon Administration and are also on the side of the American Farm Bureau Federation.

The Chavistas have the support of liberal and some radical groups as well as many churchmen. This sup-

port is valuable in the union's boycott activities, which are now spreading to the stores that sell table grapes as well as the grapes themselves.

But more important, the union is a member of the A.F.L.-C.I.O. and allied to George Meany. Mr. Meany, who has already given the farm workers \$1.6-million in strike support, could not easily allow one of his member unions to be crushed by the Teamsters union, which he expelled from the federa-

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tion for corrupt labor practices.

However, Mr. Meany's lieutenants are reportedly meeting with teamster officials far from the Coachella vineyards to see if there could be some kind of solution to the jurisdictional war.

Mr. Chavez is still confident. In an interview at his union's cramped store-front strike headquarters here, the softspoken Mexican-American labor leader said that the growers in the valley would not have enough workers to take out the grapes in marketable quality. If the teamsters are not stopped in Coachella, they will be stopped in vineyards farther north, he said. And if the strike does not bring the growers around, then the boycott of their grapes will force them to terms, he insisted.

Mr. Chavez asserted that the grape growers had made three "horrible mistakes" in signing up with the teamsters: they told the teamsters that "the people were mad at us," that the grape boycott would not work again and that the A.F.L.-C.I.O. would not support a new grape strike and boycott. The growers have already been proven wrong on all three counts, according to Mr. Chavez.

The fact that there are thousands of workers picking grapes in the Coachella vineyards despite \$90 a week in strike benefits is claimed by William Grami, director of organization for the Western Conference of Teamsters, as evidence that Mr. Chavez does not have the support of the majority of Chicano farm workers.

Mr. Grami said that the United Farm Workers had lost the support of the grape pickers because "they exploited the hell out of the workers" through the use of a hiring hall.

When Mr. Chavez organized the grape workers, he replaced the labor contractor, who in effect bought and sold the labor of migratory farm workers, with a system of union-run hiring halls. The halls acted as a referral agency, sending workers to jobs on the basis of seniority. The Teamster contract restored the contractor system.

## Favoritism Charged

Talks with workers now in the fields—strikers call them scabs—indicated that in Coachella, at least, the hiring hall process alienated a considerable number of workers. Some charged that the union officers who ran the hall showed favoritism in assigning jobs, split up families who wanted to work together, and did not allow the workers any choice in where they would be sent.

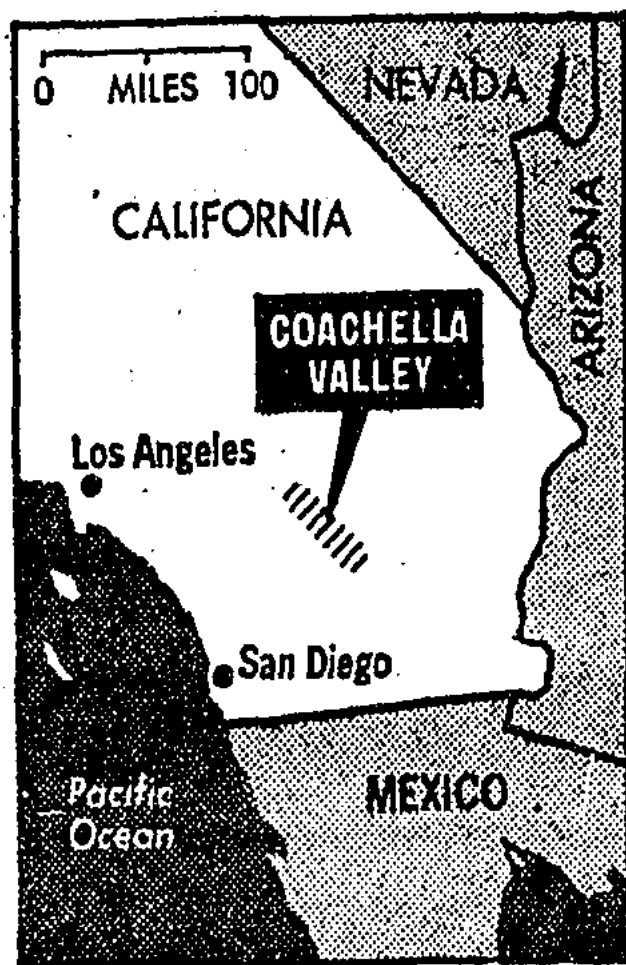
And contrary to the claims of the Chavistas, not all the grape pickers who are working are there only because they must have the money and would eagerly continue their membership in the United Farm Workers if they could.

A number of the workers interviewed indicated that they wanted no part of Mr. Chavez or "La Causa," his almost mystic crusade to achieve social and economic justice for Chicanos through the power of trade unionism.

Every morning during the harvest, before the sun has risen over the valley and the San Jacinto Mountains are still a cool, misty blue-gray, the harvesters leave their ramshackle camps and depart for the vineyards in caravans of battered buses, trucks and cars.

Before they reach the grapes the workers must pass the men, women and youths manning the picket lines, carrying red banners with the black thunderbird symbol of their union, and shouting, "Huelga, huelga" ("strike, strike.")

Once the workers are in the fields, the strikers exhort them over bull horns, urging them to walk out and join the strike, to come back to the cause. One day recently five of 16 workers in one



field were observed walking off the job and, amid uproarious cheering, joining the pickets.

But the harvesters generally go about their work ignoring the pleas of the strikers—or so they profess. Their heads covered, scarves against the sand and dust covering all their faces but their eyes, they look a little like Berber Tribesmen as they crouch beneath the lush, green vines, cutting and trimming the grape clusters with their clippers.

"This strike is a disgrace," said Blanca Martinez, a pretty young harvester about to start her morning's work. "Chavez started out O.K., but then he put in that hiring hall and you could sit around there all day without getting any work. The Teamster union is better. You work whenever you want and when you don't work they don't make you pay dues the way Chavez did."

"There was some good to Chavez. He brought wages up," said Jose Rojas. "But he didn't run the hiring hall well. The people were not treated with courtesy. As for me, I would rather have no union."

And one shy young harvester who spoke little English said: "Teamsters O.K. Chavez O.K. All I want is to work."

On the picket lines there is no ambiguity.

"The teamsters? They have the contract but they are against the workers," asserted Hilda Ramirez, a tiny but spirited young striker. "Those teamsters don't know what we are fighting for."

Manuel Vega, a slim, quiet 55-year-old Mexican who stood diffidently with his flag on the picket line, has been working in the fields since he was 8 years old.

"Before Chavez came we were always treated badly by the foremen and crew leaders," he said through his wife, who translated his Spanish. "You'd pick fast but they wanted you to pick faster, like machines. I used to make \$60 a week, sometimes \$50 even in season."

"But when Cesar came with the union our wages went up so that now I can live even though we have nine children."

Since Mr. Chavez came, Mr. Vega said, things have gotten generally better for the workers. "We are not pushed to work so fast," he said. "We have rest rooms and water."

What about the teamsters?

Mr. Vega thought for a moment.

"I am pretty sure they are not right for us," he said.

Mr. Meany, along with Mr. Chavez, has charged that the contract between the teamsters and the growers is a "sweetheart contract," meaning that the union has sold out the workers by negotiating a contract that is good only for the employers.

However, there seems to be relatively little difference between the teamster contract and those signed between the U.F.W. and two Coachella growers. The farm workers negotiated a basic wage of \$2.40 an hour compared to \$2.30 under the teamster contract. But some of the teamster benefits are slightly better, and growers say that the cost of the two contracts is almost identical.

The director of organization for the A.F.L.-C.I.O. William Kircher, insists that although the contracts may be alike, there is a "sweetheart" relationship between the teamsters and the growers, who, he charges, got together on a contract for their own reasons, without consideration of the desires or interest of the workers.

Mr. Chavez has formally charged a conspiracy exists between the growers and the teamsters, involving the payment of cash to the big union, to destroy the United Farm Workers.

The teamsters deny these charges, declaring that over 4,000 workers in Coachella have signed petitions saying they want to be represented by their union. The Chavistas contend these signatures are phony.

An election could disclose the true wishes of the grape workers, but agriculture is not covered by the National Labor Relations Act and employers are thus not required to hold elections for union representation.

Mr. Chavez has been calling for elections among the grape workers, but the teamsters, who have the contracts in hand, regard the issue as settled and oppose elections.

What is certain is that the Chavez movement had its roots among the Chicano and Filipino field workers in California and that the movement is hated by most growers.

The growers, meanwhile, seem happy with the teamsters. Harry Carian, whose 300 acres is one of the smallest vineyards in the California valley, said he would rather have no union but that at least the teamsters were "professionals."

And the strike goes on, punctuated by increasing violence. This last week there have been several clashes between teamsters and farm workers. Lieut. Jack Reid, spokesman for the Riverside County Sheriff's Office, said that the recent incidents had been generated by "unprovoked attacks" by teamster security guards.

There are 350 of these guards, according to Lieutenant Reid. Most of them are huge and beefy, wear bushy beards and look frightening behind their dark glasses. Teamsters organizers have themselves dubbed the guards "animals," and the flat bed truck sometimes used to transport them is called "the garbage truck."

Yesterday, Lieutenant Reid reported, two of the guards forced a car driven by strikers off the road, smashed in the windows, pulled out the occupants and beat them. Last week other teamster guards went into a worker camp, dragged away a man and stabbed him with ice picks.

The man turned out to be a citrus fruit worker who had nothing to do with the grapes or Mr. Chavez. The teamsters were charged with kidnaping and assault with intent to commit murder, Lieutenant Reid said.

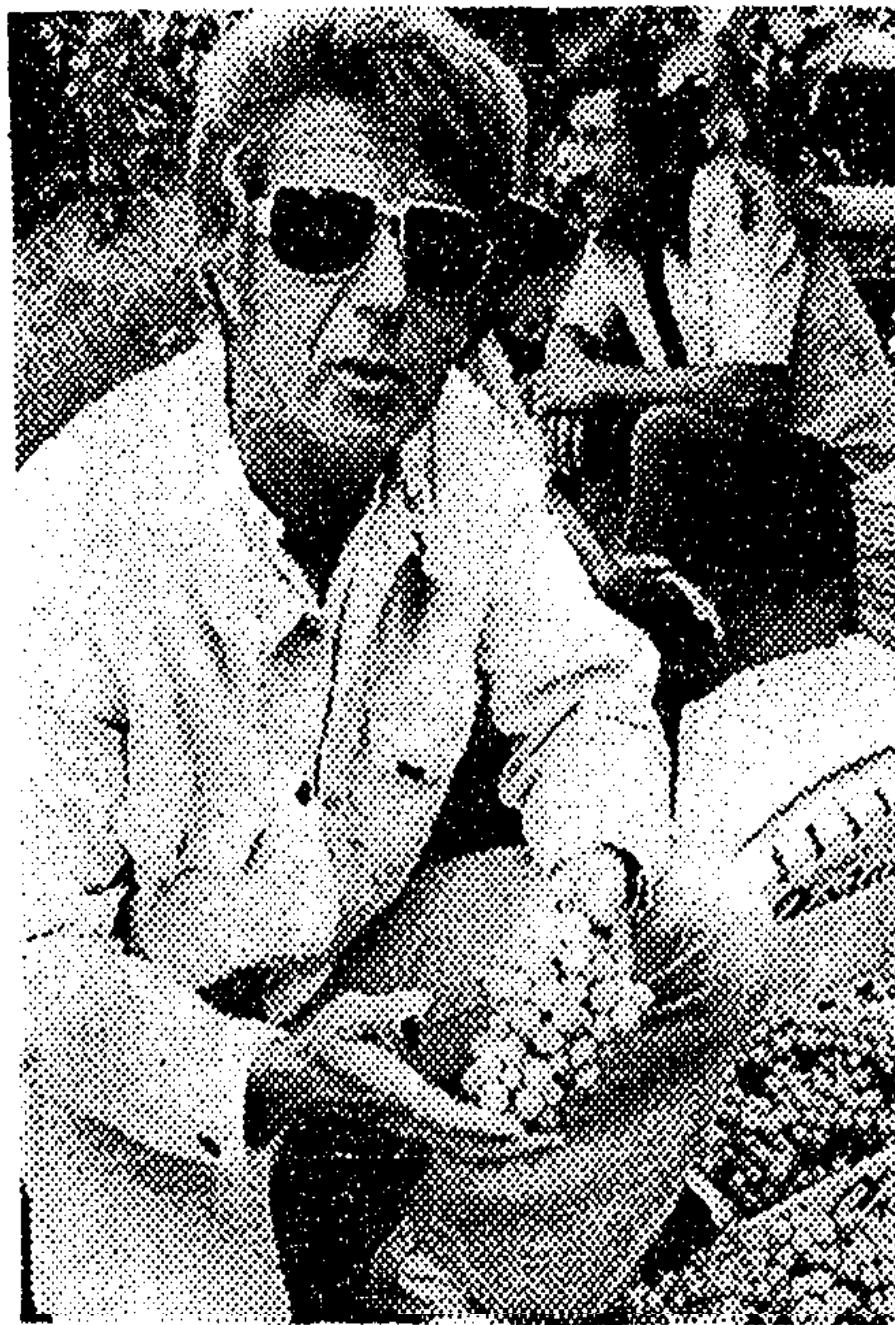
The violence is not one-sided, despite Mr. Chavez's reputation for nonviolent methods. A few days ago Mr. Grami, the teamster organizer, had his scalp laid open during a rockthrowing melee started when several hundred Chavistas marched on a worker camp. There have also been several grape packing houses burned down, although the police are careful to point out that the arsonists are still unknown.

The effectiveness of the grape boycott is considered likely to be decisive. There are some indications that boycotted food chains are already starting to feel its impact. Safeway, for example, recently ran an advertisement calling for elections among farm workers.

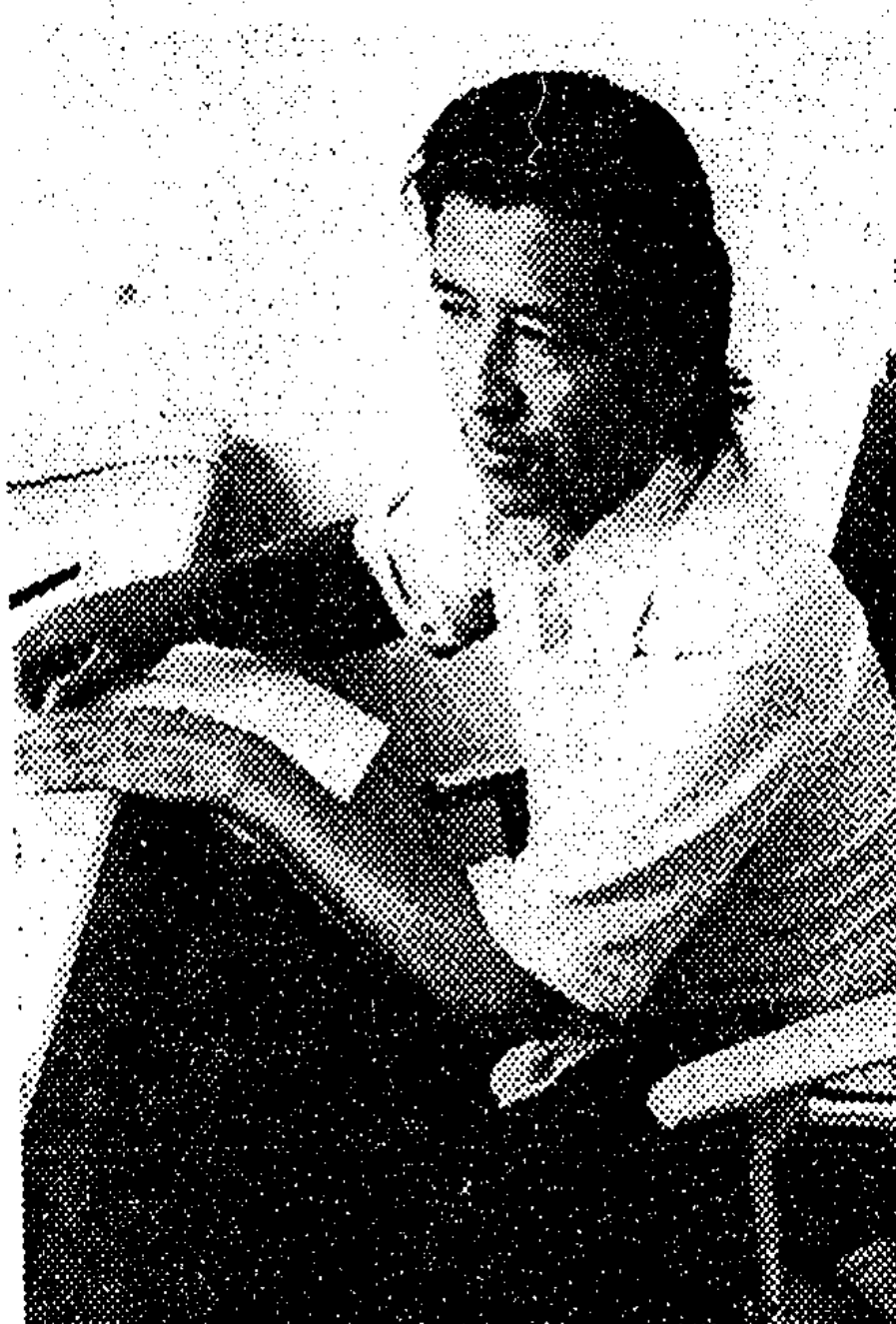
The marketing pattern for grapes is likely to help Mr. Chavez. Over a quarter of all table grapes are sold in New York, Chicago and Los Angeles. Over half are sold in the 10 biggest cities. The first grape boycott was supported in these cities, and Mr. Chavez and his allies express confidence that strategy will succeed again.

If it does not, Mr. Chavez and La Causa—the first viable effort to organize agricultural workers in this country—will be in deep trouble.





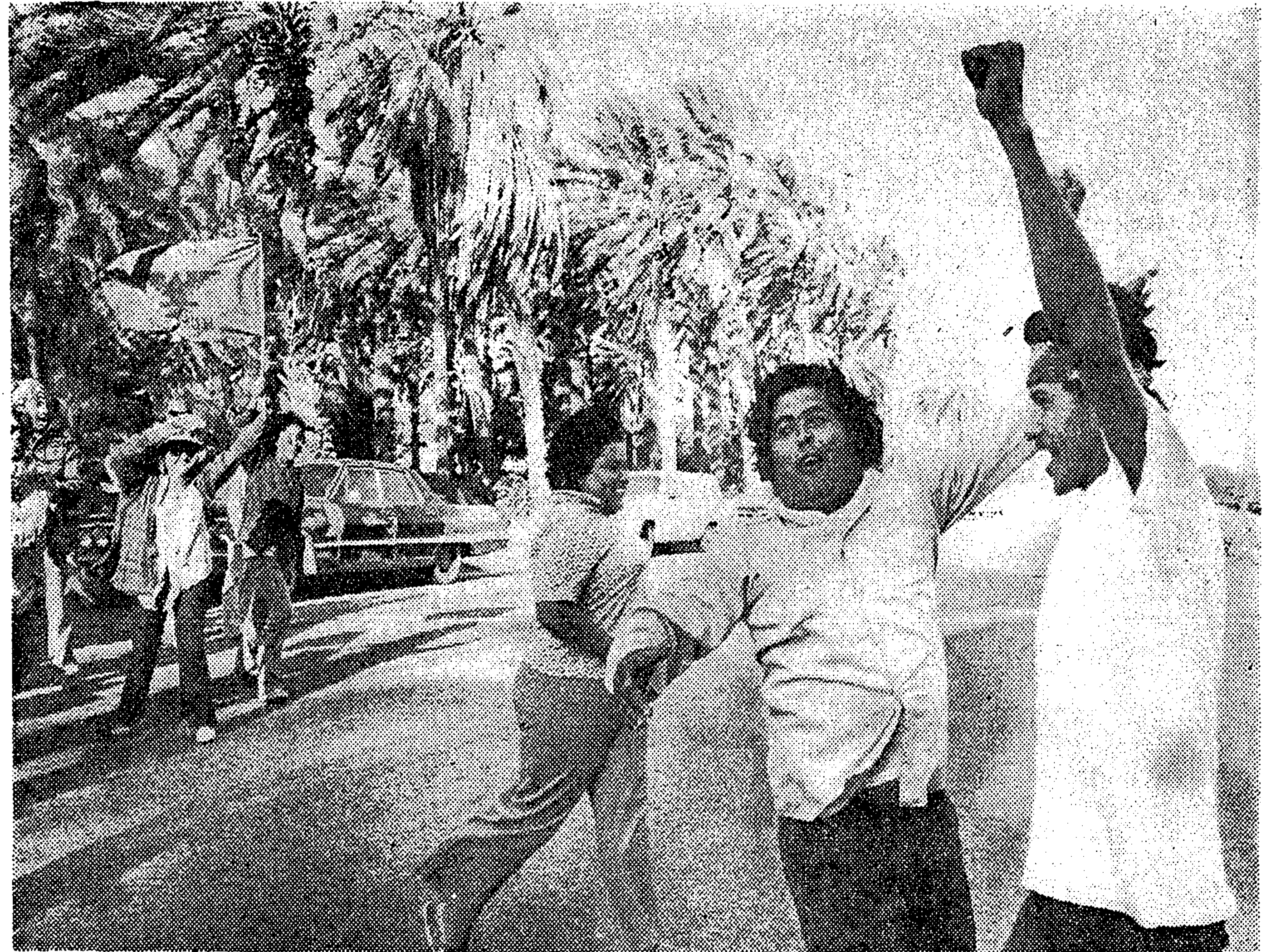
Harry Carian, grower who signed with International Brotherhood of Teamsters, finds it "professional."



Cesar Chavez, head of Farm Workers Union, has A.F.L.-C.I.O. backing and expects to win eventually.



A picker at work in a vineyard near Coachella, in the part of California where the harvesting begins.



Striking members of the Farm Workers Union cheer as they lure a worker, right, into their fold. Such gains are hard won and the strikers are facing serious difficulties in blocking the grape harvest.



Hilda Ramirez, a striker, in front of a group of men connected with the Teamsters Union. Miss Ramirez says, "They have the contract but they are against the workers."