Chavez Union Struggling for Survival

By PHILIP SHARECOFF

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 that more harvesters are at work in Coachella's vineyards 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. Now 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—have close ties to the Nixon Administration and are 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 support 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 federation.

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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."