

TEAMSTERS SHIFT STAND ON COAST

Chief Says They Will Honor Grape Grower Contracts

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WASHINGTON, Nov. 7 —

Frank E. Fitzsimmons, the president of the International Brotherhood of Teamsters, indicated today that his union would continue to honor contracts with grape growers in California despite a tentative agreement with the A.F.L.-C.I.O. president, George Meany, to get out of the vineyards.

Under the agreement with Mr. Meany, reached in late September, the teamsters union would have abandoned its contracts with grape growers immediately and would give up its lettuce contracts when they expired, leaving Cesar Chavez's United Farm Workers union free to negotiate with the growers.

However, today Mr. Fitzsimmons told reporters that the teamsters would honor their "moral and legal" obligations to the growers with whom they had contracts.

Mr. Fitzsimmons did not say that he would repudiate his tentative pact with Mr. Meany. At a seminar of the Federal Mediation and Conciliation Service here, he said that he would make a formal announcement in a week or so after consulting with the president of the American Federation of Labor or Congress of Industrial Organizations.

Meanwhile, the California growers and teamster officials in San Diego, are planning to meet next week.

If the teamsters continue to honor their grape contracts, however, it would mean that Mr. Fitzsimmons has repudiated his agreement with Mr. Meany, an accord reached after long, arduous negotiations.

Possible Impact

It would also mean continued strife between Mr. Chavez's union on one hand and the teamsters and growers on the other in the farmlands of California.

When told of Mr. Fitzsimmons's statement, Mr. Chavez commented, "We are not surprised. We had no trust in the teamsters. We've been down that road with them too many times. We knew right along that they never intended to keep their agreement with Meany. They were just trying to buy a little time and take the pressure off them."

In a telephone interview from his California headquarters, Mr. Chavez said that he was glad that Mr. Fitzsimmons had stated his intentions because that "cleared the air."

Now that the agreement appears dead, Mr. Chavez said, he hoped for new support for the boycott of grapes. The boycott of iceberg lettuce, which had been "de-escalated" because of the possible pact between the two unions, will now be resumed he said. And new strikes will be called against grape growers starting next spring and, possibly, lettuce growers this winter, Mr. Chavez said.

Mr. Chavez and his union won the right to represent grape workers after a long boycott beginning in the mid-nineteen-sixties. Earlier this year, however, when their original three-year contract with the growers expired, the growers, instead of renewing, signed a contract with the teamsters. There was no vote of rank-and-file farm workers.

The United Farm Workers responded with a strike and boycott of table grapes and some wines. The strike was broken after thousands of U.F.W. pickets were arrested and two members of the union were murdered. The boycott continued.

Meanwhile, the A.F.L.-C.I.O., of which the U.F.W. is a member, began negotiating with the teamsters to see if a settlement could be found. At one point this summer, Mr. Fitzsimmons specifically repudiated 30 contracts with grape growers that had been arranged by one of his organizers.

Mr. Fitzsimmons's statements today seemed to indicate that the teamsters intended to honor even the 30 contracts he had already repudiated. However, words were characteristically ambiguous.

If he does intend to make an about-face on his agreement with Mr. Meany, one reason could be a fear of legal reprisals by the growers.

An attorney for the growers, Lee C. Shaw of Chicago, was also at today's seminar at the Sheraton Park Hotel here and told reporters that the growers had warned Mr. Fitzsimmons that they would "sue him to death" if he did not honor the contracts.

However, United Farm Worker lawyers have insisted that there is no valid legal threat to the teamsters should they give up their contracts.

Mr. Fitzsimmons, who faces a possible fight with the former teamster chief, James R. Hoffa, to hold on to the presidency of the union, may have decided that political prudence requires holding on to the grape contracts.

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