

Chavez and the Farm Workers

Back to Square One

WASHINGTON — *Si se puede*. "Yes, it can be done." That has been the motto, the rallying cry, of Cesar Chavez and his embattled United Farm Workers Union in their long struggle to organize the Chicano field workers of California.

Recently it appeared that, yes, it would be done. The giant International Brotherhood of Teamsters, which had taken away from the United Farm Workers the contracts to represent grape workers in the California vineyards, seemingly had agreed earlier in the fall to give up immediately jurisdictional claims to the vineyards. Moreover, the tentative agreement seemed to provide for the Teamsters to leave the lettuce fields after their current contracts expired.

But the apparent agreement, painstakingly hammered out with the American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations, with which the farm workers are affiliated, evaporated over the past 10 days. Frank E. Fitzsimmons, the Teamsters' president, said his union would not abide by the agreement and, indeed, insisted that there had never been an agreement in the first place.

George Meany, president of the A.F.L.-C.I.O., charged that the Teamsters had reneged on their agreement. There was an agreement, Mr. Meany said, and he proceeded to publish its terms.

The Teamsters' action was a direct slap at Mr. Meany and his 13-million-member federation. And Mr. Fitzsimmons went out of his way to rub it in last week with a statement calling Mr. Meany a man who "poses as the head of the American labor movement," who regards workers as "chattels" and who has little regard for the sanctity of contracts.

To let the Teamsters get away with casually crushing a small A.F.L.-C.I.O.-affiliated union would, of course, seriously weaken the federation's prestige and authority — all the more so in view of the fact that Mr. Meany had expelled the Teamsters, the biggest and most powerful international union, from the federation for corrupt labor practices. The stage is now set, therefore, for a head-on confrontation.

Mr. Fitzsimmons said that there never was any agreement because the union had a moral and legal obligation to honor its contracts, and because the A.F.L.-C.I.O. would not assume the legal liabilities that might arise if the Teamsters did fail to honor their agreements.

One possible answer to the Teamsters' riddle is James Riddle Hoffa, former Teamsters president. He has announced plans to depose Mr. Fitzsimmons in 1976 despite an embargo on his own union activities in the terms of his release from Federal prison two years ago.

Mr. Hoffa has been saying that the Teamsters cannot give up jurisdiction over field workers in California. It is an issue that apparently has struck a responsive chord among some rank and file members and local union leaders in the West where, according to testimony by some Teamsters, there has been a strain of racial antagonism toward, and a fear of, the Chicano farm workers.

Mr. Fitzsimmons may feel, therefore, that political considerations dictate that he take a hard line on the jurisdiction issue. "Fitz wanted the agreement with Meany but he wasn't able to deliver his own union," was the way one labor observer put it.

As a result of these developments, Mr. Chavez's union, which had made progress toward its goals of organizing migrant workers and achieving social and economic justice for the poor, was almost back where it started in the early nineteen-sixties. The union has only a handful of contracts left and its dues-paying members, close to 70,000 at its peak, are down to a couple of thousand. And it must not only try to wrest recognition from the California growers, but it also must battle the Teamster goliath.

It was not too long ago that Mr. Chavez seemed to be well on his way toward his objectives. Winning broad public support for his cause — "La Causa" — he pressed a boycott of table grapes that finally forced the grape grow-

ers to sign contracts with his union in 1970.

But when the grape contracts expired early this year, the growers, instead of renewing with the U.F.W., turned to the Teamsters instead. Lettuce growers also signed with the Teamsters rather than with Mr. Chavez's union. The growers claimed that the Teamsters were more professional and reliable than the fiery Mr. Cha-

vez, but the U.F.W. and the A.F.L.-C.I.O. charged that the Teamsters had made an unsavory deal with the growers at the expense of the workers.

Mr. Chavez can now count on help from Mr. Meany. If it is to preserve its own prestige, the A.F.L.-C.I.O. will have to go all out to save the United Farm Workers. Although it had given money and advice before, the fed-

eration has not directly supported the grape and lettuce boycotts because those boycotts might have hurt some members of other affiliated unions.

Now, the federation can be expected to throw its whole weight behind the nationwide boycott of lettuce and grapes and thus help Mr. Chavez rewin his jurisdiction in the California fields. Up to now, the boycott has not been going well; there has not been the same response from the American people as in the past. "This is," explained one Chavista, "not the nineteen-sixties anymore."

—PHILIP SHABECOFF