Chavez's United Farm Workers Union Facing a Crucial Test as White California Grapes Near Harvest

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Special To The New York Times

THERMAL, Calif., April 20
The slow ripening of the white table grape in the vineyards of the Coachella Valley is arcing the beleaguered United Farm Workers union a test of its ability to remain a potent force in the American labor market.

In less than six weeks grapes will be ready for picking, a harvest that will open a new round in the chronic labor disputes that have simmered down to a simmer as regular as the rich land has yielded seasonal crops.

As the Mexican-American laborers tend the vineyards, other workers are busy in New York City and other urban centers preparing for a new drive to urge consumers not to buy grapes.

At the center of the struggle once again is Cesar Chavez, who hopes to repeat the success of the 1968-69 boycott that won major concessions from California's 300,000 farm labor force and forced the state to legalize vegetable and fruit producers to agree to union representation.

But the last two years have been difficult for Mr. Chavez. He has had to contend not only with resentful growers but with a rival group, the International Brotherhood of Teamsters. Meanwhile, the strength of the U.F.W., fallen from a peak of 55,000 members under contract to 12,000 members today, has been sapped by the number of incidents that have weakened its resolve.

Chavez has been supported by a growing number of farm workers who had joined the union in the last five years after the initial boycotts.

Chavez also has been faced with the challenge of the Teamsters, who have moved in to take advantage of the weakened state of the U.F.W.

So the question now is whether the Teamsters will gain control over the U.F.W., or whether Chavez will be able to build a strong enough union to compete with the Teamsters.

But Chavez is determined to continue the struggle.

In his current efforts, Chavez is encouraging the membership of his union to participate in the boycott, which seeks to force growers to recognize the U.F.W. as the bargaining agent for farm workers.

Mr. Chavez's confidence in his ability to bring about a national boycott is based on the success of earlier similar efforts.

The teamsters have a strong presence in the area and are determined to take control of the U.F.W.

Chavez has been able to organize a significant number of workers in the area, but the Teamsters have been able to recruit more members.

The U.F.W. has been able to negotiate contracts with growers in the area, but the Teamsters have been able to negotiate better contracts with growers who have decided to hire Teamster members.

Chavez is determined to continue the struggle and to see that the Teamsters do not gain control of the U.F.W.