

Time for Farm Votes

Another bitter and perhaps bloody contest is about to begin over union representation for the long-exploited field laborers who pick grapes and lettuce in California's fertile valleys. Our sympathies in that contest are all with the United Farm Workers, a tiny, idealistic organization that has had to combat not only the hostility of the politically powerful growers but also cynical backstabbing by the biggest of all unions, the International Brotherhood of Teamsters.

Yet, strong as is the case for wishing success to the U.F.W. and its crusading leader, Cesar Chavez, it is plain that the economic instrument on which the farm union places chief reliance is imperfect in both equity and effectiveness. That weapon is the consumer boycott—the posting of picket lines outside stores all over the country, urging housewives not to buy grapes or lettuce without the union's black eagle emblem. The A.F.L.-C.I.O. itself has recognized the danger of abuse in such picket lines by persuading Mr. Chavez to target them specifically at purchases of non-U.F.W. grapes and lettuce, instead of calling on customers to stay out of stores altogether.

The right answer, however, does not lie in diluting the secondary picketing. Rather, it lies in amendment of the National Labor Relations Act to put farm laborers under the same protections for free choice that industrial workers have had for nearly four decades. Government-supervised elections, coupled with monitorship over employer coercion or other unfair labor practices, would provide an avenue for democratic determination of the workers' own desires. Mr. Chavez's reluctance to abandon the secondary boycott has been a potent obstacle to Congressional action. It is past time for Congress to move.

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