

Chavez's Union: A Future?

By Ronald B. Taylor

VISALIA, Calif.—While many people deplore the heavy-handed Teamster raids on California vineyards once under the jurisdiction of Cesar Chavez's United Farm Workers, an argument is now being made by some that Teamster control may prove best for the farm workers because the International Brotherhood of Teamsters is big, powerful, and above all, "efficient."

This line of reasoning exposes a disturbing national trend to accept the "efficiency" of autocracy disguised as democracy. At issue are questions of efficiency in the U.F.W. and Mr. Chavez's ability to administer an orderly union bureaucracy. This argument contends that Mr. Chavez and his followers are excellent guerrilla fighters but that they are not trained administrators—that the man and the movement have brought farm workers a long way, but now it is time to turn matters over to a more sophisticated, efficient trade union.

But this argument begs the larger, underlying issue: Who controls the work force? Historically, the farmers have had absolute control over field labor, except for 1966 to 1973, when the Chavez-led forces wrested control from a relatively few employers in California, Arizona and Florida.

There is no question that some measure of inefficiency and caprice crept into the dispatch of workers from U.F.W. hiring halls, and the farmers made much of this, but their quarrel was not with the internal malfunctions so much as it was with the institution itself. The hiring hall was the instrument that replaced the labor-contractor and crew-boss system farmers used to exploit the work force.

Agribusiness had to regain control of the work force, and the Teamsters offered them the opportunity; Teamster leaders told farmers they would abolish the hiring halls and allow agribusiness to return to the nefarious patterns of labor procurement and

management that have kept farm workers powerless for a century or more.

Here is an example of how the surface argument obscures the underlying issue. Ernest and Julio Gallo of Modesto, Calif., produce about one-third of the wine consumed in the United States; the Gallo winery buys most of its grapes, but the company does farm 3,500 acres of vineyards, employing 200 full-time farm workers and up to 600 people at the peak of the harvest.

In 1967, the California Department of Industrial Relations verified a U.F.W. claim that it represented the Gallo farm workers. A three-year U.F.W.-Gallo contract was negotiated then, and renegotiated in 1970.

Ernest Gallo said, "We have always favored farm labor unionization and we were delighted when Chavez started his movement. We also know that he has encountered many difficulties administratively developing his young union."

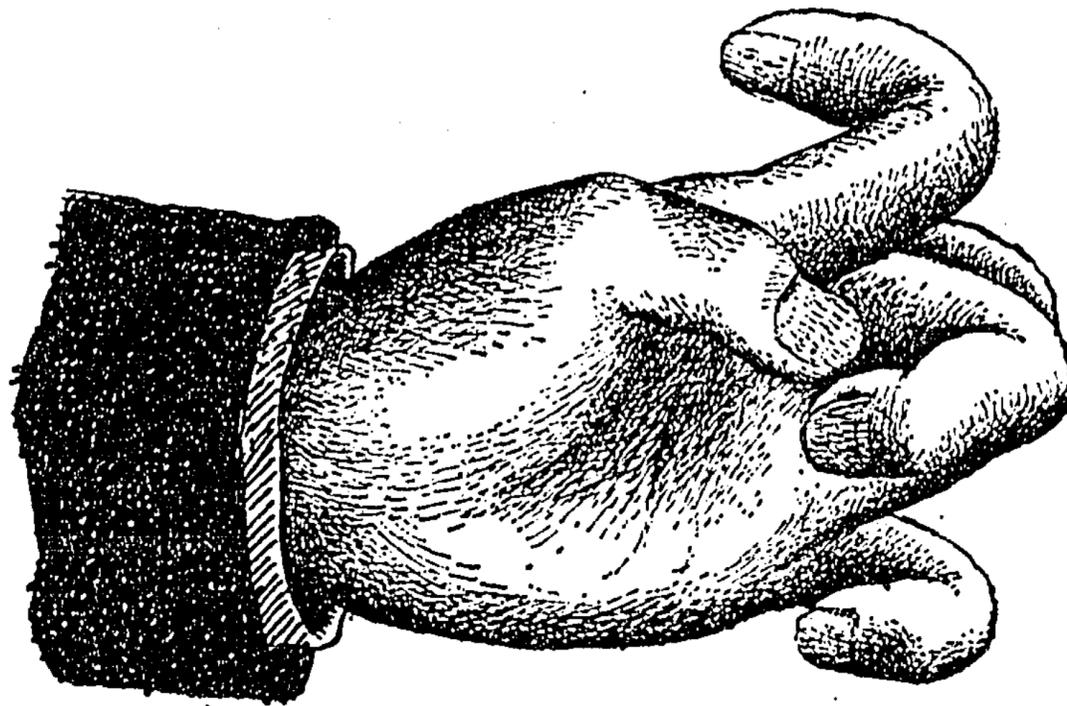
Mr. Gallo is a man used to making decisions and he prefers to work with men who have the authority to get things done. Dealing with a committee of farm workers is not his idea of efficiency. But a committee of farm

workers is exactly what he had to deal with for six years.

On each of the 200 farms under U.F.W. contract the workers elected five men and women to represent them in all of their dealings with their employer. All of these ranch committees, meeting in convention, set the U.F.W. operating policies, including those governing the hiring halls. Mr. Chavez considers the ranch committee the basic U.F.W. building-block.

Obviously Mr. Gallo doesn't understand or share Mr. Chavez's theories on union democracy. Referring to Mr. Chavez, he said: "There was never enough supervision, and leaving it up to a ranch committee was entirely impractical."

The 1973 efforts to renegotiate the U.F.W.-Gallo contract failed, and Gallo workers went out on strike. When the U.F.W. crews refused to return to the job, they were discharged and Gallo recruited a strikebreaking work force. Sometime during this process the Teamsters asserted that "Gallo workers" had petitioned them to enter the dispute, and shortly thereafter a Teamster-Gallo contract was signed. Company officials and Teamsters claimed the workers had ratified the contract



Drawings by Mel Furakawa

158 to 1, but no independent third party verified the claim.

Mr. Chavez called for a boycott of Gallo wines, and said of the Teamsters: "They don't organize workers, they organize growers. They sign sweetheart deals with the growers then tell the workers they belong to a union."

Ernest Gallo protested: "Because we have honored the wishes of our farm workers to change unions we have been caught in the middle of a jurisdictional dispute between two unions."

But when questioned, Ernest Gallo acknowledged that the U.F.W. "Gallo workers" who had gone out on strike had not taken part in the contract-ratification process. Only those strikebreakers working behind the U.F.W. picket lines had signed cards authorizing the Teamsters to represent them, and the contract ratification was made by checking those cards.

Like 350 other growers, Gallo had signed with the Teamsters under circumstances that indicated that the workers sympathetic to the U.F.W. had little or no voice in the proceedings. And now the thousands of workers on farms covered by the Teamster contract find they have no voice in union affairs. Officials of the Western Conference of Teamsters have made it clear the field workers will hold no membership meetings nor conduct any elections for years to come.

Thus the farmers who were forced to relinquish control over their work force to the U.F.W. have come full circle. While they must pay higher wages and add fringe benefits, they are back in control. Agribusiness has used the Teamsters to gain some time, to forestall the Chavez-led movement while combined agribusiness political forces work for a more permanent defense against the democratic unionization of the farm-labor force.

Ronald B. Taylor is author of "Sweatshops in the Sun" and the forthcoming "Chavez and the Farm Workers."