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The New York Times / Bob Burroughs

Nonunion workers loading lettuce onto truck during harvest at a farm near Holtville, in California's Imperial Valley

## Lettuce Strike: A Harvest of Frustrations

By ROBERT LINDSEY

Special to The New York Times

EL CENTRO, Calif., Feb. 28 — The winter lettuce harvest is almost over in the Imperial Valley of California, but this year the biggest crop that was harvested here was not lettuce but frustration, bitterness and violence.

Cesar Chavez's United Farm Workers of America struck eight of the valley's 28 major growers on Jan. 15 at the peak of the lettuce harvest, apparently hoping to use a divide-and-conquer tactic to splinter the growers and win a victory in a few weeks.

Mr. Chavez had spent a decade building his union and then fighting growers and the International Brotherhood of Teamsters to win legal recognition for it. In this strike, he attempted to take a second step and begin upgrading farm worker wages to levels comparable to those paid members of older industrial unions — seeking increases ranging from 40 to more than 100 percent.

But with only two weeks of the lettuce harvest left, and after losses that the growers contend have exceeded \$20 million, the U.F.W. has failed to break the growers' united front and is being forced to turn to fields elsewhere in the state to salvage what some critics have said was a strike planned on strategic misconceptions.

"Our harvest is almost over," Tom Hubbard, a grower here, said. "There is no winner in this strike; there can only be losers now."

In previous strikes by the Chavez union during harvest time, individual growers, to avoid losing their crops,

have often bolted from grower organizations and signed separate contracts agreeing to union demands. So far, no growers have broken ranks in this strike.

Since Jan. 15, the union has expanded the strike to 11 growers, but harvesting has continued at 17 others by union members working at old wage rates. About 4,300 U.F.W. members have participated in the strike, which has shut off shipments of almost one-third of the nation's winter lettuce production and has sent the cost of a head of lettuce to \$1 or more in some cities.

The base hourly wage is \$3.70, but many workers earn more than this because their income is based on piece-rate wages. The growers offered an increase of 11 percent in the basic hourly rate and 7 percent in other categories.

Imperial County is situated on the Mexican border 214 miles southeast of Los Angeles and 12 miles east of San Diego. For decades, farmers tapped the plentiful labor market below the border and paid wages that, even modern growers concede, were exploitative. The farmers acknowledge that development of the region would have been impossible without this supply of cheap labor.

It was only after Mr. Chavez began to organize his union that wages were increased substantially.

The current strike has been an angry, often violent confrontation with racial antagonisms looming behind the bargaining table. And the strike has represented a transition for the U.F.W. — from a social cause seeking to organize the unorganized to a union fighting for higher wages.

### 'Viva La Huelga'

The effects of the strike can be seen on the faces of the people surrounding Imperial Valley.

It can be seen, for example, in the hopeful dark eyes of José Jesus Macías, 32 years old, who has spent more than half of his life working the vegetable fields of the Imperial Valley and who, like most of his fellow strikers, is a Mexican national who commutes legally over the border by automobile.

"Viva la huelga," he replied, in the Spanish for "Long live the strike," when asked if he felt discouraged by what appeared to be a lack of progress by the union in the strike so far. He had just left a rally at which Mr. Chavez had told about 1,000 cheering unionists that he knew the union would win the strike and that he expected to lead a nationwide boycott against Chiquita-brand bananas, a trademark product owned by New York's United Brands Inc., which owns Sun Harvest Inc., one of the struck concerns here.

Echoing remarks that had just been made by Mr. Chavez, Mr. Macías said in halting English:

"Why shouldn't we get paid as much as all the other workers?" He said farm workers' labor was as important to getting food to American tables as were truck drivers. He declined to reveal how much money he earned last year, but when he was asked if it was less than \$10,000, he laughed, as if to say that it was much less than that.

Another farm worker, who refused to identify himself, said through an interpreter that he was depressed and was afraid he would be unable to feed his family, despite a weekly parcel of food from the union. Normally, during the harvest season, he said, he could earn more than \$300 a week, but now he felt that that was lost forever.

The effects of the strike can also be seen in the worried expressions of some of the growers and their families. The wife of one of the struck growers, Alice Colace, kept members of the El Centro

Rotary Club, most of whose members come from the local business community, spellbound with a soft-spoken description of how she had been working to help cut lettuce recently when a crowd of strikers that she estimated at 500 stormed the field with, she contended, the purpose of scaring away non-strikers.

"This strike is more than a labor dispute," she asserted. "It is a revolution." She told the Rotarians of how one grower approached a group of strikers and asked, "If you don't want to work here, why don't you go back to your own country," and she said the striker replied, "This is going to be our country soon."

The strike is the latest in a series of natural and manmade crises for the valley. For two winters in a row, growers were buffeted by disastrous storms that destroyed many of their crops. Then there was an infestation of an insect called the tobacco budworm that did millions more in damage; there was an attempt, still pending, by the Department of Interior to enforce a 1906 law placing a limit of 160 acres on the size of farms that any one person could operate if irrigated by water from a Federal reclamation project.

In addition to the loss of crops, the strike has been costly to the community in other ways; county officials estimate that extra law enforcement expenses related to the strike have exceeded \$1 million.

Although most of the winter lettuce harvest is over and the union is shifting much of the strike activity to the Salinas Valley in northern California and

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### Strike centers on Imperial Valley

other parts of the state, the impact of the strike is not over yet for the Imperial Valley. It is at this time of year when seeds are normally sown for the spring crop of canteloupe, asparagus and other commodities; but there are not enough workers to do the planting, and growers say production will be very sparse in the spring.

It is more difficult to predict what effects the strike has sown regarding the future of Mr. Chavez's union.

If wages are raised substantially as a result of the strike, growers assert it will accelerate the proliferation of mechanical harvesting systems that have already displaced thousands of farm workers in this state.

Growers such as Mr. Hubbard say that the reason the strike has not been more successful is that in effect, the union has sought too much, too soon, and has been inflexible at the bargaining table.

"In the past, the growers have never been able to stick together," he said. "But he gave us such demands this time that we couldn't possibly sign; he forced us to unify. I think it was a bad tactical move by Cesar."

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