

# Chavez Fights To Bar Defeat

## Past Support Is Lagging As Union Goal Changes

By **ROBERT LINDSEY**

Special to The New York Times

LOS ANGELES, April 6 — Cesar Chavez, whose success in organizing a farm labor union was one of the great victories in the American labor movement, is discovering that there is a difference between leading a social cause and running a union.

**News Analysis** Mr. Chavez is scheduled to arrive in New York Monday in an effort to rally support for his union, the United Farm Workers of America.

It is a trip to tap the financial and emotional support of urban liberals that he has made many times over the last 17 years.

The union has been on strike against 11 California lettuce growers since Jan. 15, seeking wage increases of from 40 percent to more than 200 percent. The strike is a watershed for the union — its first strike directed not at winning recognition or securing a contract for farm workers but at obtaining wages comparable to those paid workers in other, older unions.

Because of reasons related to weather and geography, Mr. Chavez will gain major advantages in his confrontation with growers later this spring and the balance could turn. But for the moment the strike has provided a major setback for Mr. Chavez and his union.

### Divide and Conquer No More

In previous strikes, organized growers had tended to succumb to divide-and-conquer bargaining strategies of the U.F.W., and one or more companies broke ranks to meet union demands that other growers eventually had to follow. This has not happened this time, apparently largely because of the magnitude of the union's economic demands.

Growers contend that although the strike severely affected production at the 11 struck growers, in all, there was more lettuce shipped from the Imperial Valley during this winter's harvest than last year. And, they say that apparently because publicity over the strike led to panic buying by some supermarket chains, the price of lettuce jumped and left the industry with more income than in 1978.

Meanwhile, the union's reputation for nonviolence is coming under increasing attack. And it appears that Mr. Chavez is not finding as much financial or moral support in urban communities as he once did.

Some former supporters appear to be perceiving his efforts to upgrade wages more as the function of a traditional union leader than that of a charismatic leader of a social cause seeking the first decent wages for an exploited underclass.

### Dispute Over Earnings

Union spokesmen stress that the workers' base pay is \$3.70 an hour, plus 30 cents an hour in fringe benefits. But growers argue that most farm workers are paid at a piece-rate basis that averages in harvest time to more than \$8 an hour.

Ironically, it appears that several of the struck companies have maintained limited production despite the strike because of earlier victories by the union. Farm wages, the growers say, have been raised to the point that they can attract what growers call "replacement workers" and what Mr. Chavez calls "strike-breakers."

Mr. Chavez argues that farm workers are entitled to earn as much as other unionized employees in the chain that brings food from the farm to the table such as unionized truck drivers and packinghouse employees, who earn up to \$10 an hour or more.

Growers say that union members have systematically intimidated the replacement workers and in many cases have attacked them physically.

Mr. Chavez has disputed these allegations, arguing that some growers have used armed guards and guard dogs to keep farm workers off their property and noting that the single fatality from the strike was a shooting death of a union member by employees of one grower.

Whatever the validity of the respective arguments regarding violence, it appears that Mr. Chavez's failure to produce a victory by now has provided a crisis for the union leader, who must deal with an increasingly restless membership that has now gone without wages for two months.

### Ads in Spanish Papers

Growers are publicly saying that they beat the strike in the Imperial Valley, which is on the Mexican border and is where the strike began. Growers are attempting to discredit Mr. Chavez among union members in advertisements placed in Spanish-language newspapers, and privately, some growers are predicting a long-term victory over Mr. Chavez as a result of the strike.

In his long battle to organize farm workers, Mr. Chavez's most effective tools were boycotts against table grapes and lettuce. His trip to New York on Monday will begin a tour of Eastern cities to drum up support for a similar boycott against Chiquita-brand bananas, which are marketed by United Brands Inc., the parent company of Sun Harvest Inc.

There is a lull now in the strike, now that the lettuce harvest has ended in the Imperial Valley. Late this month, the six-month spring-summer lettuce harvest will begin in the Salinas Valley in central California, and the strike showdown is likely to occur there. The Salinas Valley is only about one-fifth the size of the Imperial Valley, and its small size is expected to work to the advantage of the U.F.W., which will be able to concentrate its pickets at a few large growers.

"He took a shot at us in the Imperial Valley, and he missed," one grower, Hal Moller, said of Mr. Chavez. "In a smaller area like the Salinas Valley, he is going to be much more effective. Everybody's concerned about what's going to happen there."