

DISPUTE INTENSIFIES OVER CHAVEZ'S LEADERSHIP OF FARM WORKERS

By JUDITH CUMMINGS, SPECIAL TO THE NEW YORK TIMES

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A small but insistent rebellion in the United Farm Workers against the leadership of Cesar Chavez has hardened into a bitter conflict.

Nine dissidents have vowed to go into Federal court again to win reinstatement as paid union representatives at ranches in the Salinas Valley. The move would follow their legal victory in November, when the court ruled that Mr. Chavez did not have the authority to dismiss them from their elected posts.

Mr. Chavez has filed a \$25 million libel suit against the dissidents over charges in their earlier lawsuit that union money was misused.

The dissidents contend that Mr. Chavez, who founded the union 20 years ago, has grown increasingly autocratic. Hermilo Mojica, one of the dissident leaders, has accused Mr. Chavez of turning the union's top leadership into a family cartel. Besides Mr. Chavez, the nine members of the union's national executive board include his sister-in-law, a son-in-law and a brother. Other Pressing Problems

The conflict is deepening at a time when the union has other pressing problems. It is losing its best friend in California, Gov. Edmund G. Brown Jr., who lost a bid for the United States Senate in the November elections. Mr. Brown will be replaced Monday by George Deukmejian, a Republican whose campaign against Mayor Tom Bradley of Los Angeles received strong support from the state's growers.

At the same time, Mr. Chavez is trying to revive the union's most successful tool, the mass consumer boycott. Aided in part by successful boycotts of nonunion lettuce and table grapes and by the passage of the California Labor Relations Act in 1975, permitting elections in the fields, the union now has about 30,000 members.

Last month, when Mr. Chavez began a lettuce boycott at a supermarket chain in San Jose, he told a small group of picketing supporters that the union had developed modern tools for the boycott, including television commercials to be broadcast locally. Ads Spurned by TV Stations

However, two San Jose television stations that had been approached for air time, KNTV and KICU, turned the advertisements down, saying they preferred to reserve "controversial issues" for news programs.

Both sides in the union's internal dispute trace its roots to complaints about administration of the union's medical plan, the Robert F. Kennedy Farm Workers Medical Plan.

Workers complained that medical claims were being processed too slowly by a volunteer staff set up at La Paz and that their credit was being damaged. In early 1980, the Salinas union representatives began to press for faster service.

As union representatives, the dissidents handled workers' problems and administered provisions of the contract the union won in 1979 with growers in the Salinas area.

The dissidents were dismissed by Mr. Chavez in 1981 after they tried to field a slate of candidates for the union's national executive board. The dispute broke into the open at a union convention in September of that year. Chavez Bars Reinstatement

Mr. Chavez has refused to reinstate them without a direct court order. "They are never going to get those jobs back," Mr. Chavez said. "They didn't represent the workers the way they should have. They didn't do the job they were supposed to do."

In addition to Mr. Mojica, the other plaintiffs in the suit challenging Mr. Chavez's authority are Aristeo Zambrano, Sambino Lopez, Simon Rios, Mario Bustamante, Rigoberto Perez, Bertha Batres, Juan Gutierrez and Augustin Herrera.

Ellen J. Eggers, a union attorney at the farm workers' headquarters high in the Techachapi mountains near Bakersfield, called the eight men and one woman "a threat to the survival of the union."

"One of the reasons we fought for the rep jobs in the contract was because we knew there were administrative problems, and we felt if we got these reps they could solve the problems at the ranch, full time," Mr. Mojica said. "The job became to push the union to solve the problems, and the union started seeing us as a threat." Workers' Performance Questioned

Mr. Chavez maintained that the dissidents were incompetent and that the union was financially liable for their mistakes. He cited a case in 1977 in which an arbitrator assessed the union for \$28,000 in damages when a union representative did not try to end an illegal strike.

Miss Eggers conceded that the union had made no issue of the workers' performance until after the fight at the convention. "I understand why people believe that," she said. "It did happen on the heels of the convention, but that wasn't the case. We found out about some of these things after the board members went out to the region, after the convention, to see why things were so screwed up."

Federal District Judge William A. Ingram in San Jose ruled in November that the dissidents "were elected officials not subject to summary dismissal."

A week later, Mr. Chavez filed the libel suit over a charge by the dissidents in their suit that several board members had misused union funds last year by using union time and resources when they campaigned to retain their seats. Special Campaign Fund

Mr. Chavez, producing canceled checks as evidence, asserted that a special campaign fund had been set up with a \$10,000 loan from a St. Louis contributor and was used to reimburse the union for expenses.

The charge was dropped from the dissidents' lawsuit after they presented no evidence to Judge Ingram. But they insisted that it was only their action that caused the reimbursement, and two months ago they distributed leaflets in Salinas taking credit for the reimbursement.

The leaflets showed photocopies of two checks signed by Mr. Chavez that were dated September 1981 but bore cancellation dates of the following December and January, after the dissidents filed internal union charges of misuse of the money.

Miss Eggers said one or both of the reimbursement checks were found belatedly in the desk of the union's financial director, Florence Weaver, who was killed in a car accident in October.

Members Blame Both Sides

Union members say that there is fault to be found on both sides of the conflict and that it is hurting the union. "You don't know who to believe," said Jaime Lopez, a 26-year-old broccoli cutter. "The guys that sued Chavez, I don't think they ever talked to anybody on their crews about what's going on."

He said the backlog with the medical plan continued to be "one of the main problems of the union." Jose Avilar, another member of the crew, said, "The way Chavez took out those guys, without asking the people, I think that's wrong."

"They're not respecting the membership," Mr. Avilar added, "and eventually that loses respect for the union."