

FARM WORKERS FACING NEW TEAMSTER CONTEST

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Even as the United Farm Workers won a significant victory with a new boycott tactic, forcing the McDonald's restaurant chain to stop buying one brand of lettuce, the union faces a serious new challenge from an old antagonist.

The International Brotherhood of Teamsters recently notified Cesar Chavez, founder of the farm workers' union, that it would not renew a 1977 agreement that ended competition between the unions in organizing agricultural workers.

The agreement ended more than four years of often bloody strife, set off when some growers acted to thwart Mr. Chavez by signing with the teamsters. Borrowed From Fundamentalists

In the new boycott campaign against the Bruce Church lettuce company, Mr. Chavez has used sophisticated computer-generated direct-mail appeals to consumers, a technique that he calls a "high-tech boycott" that he says he borrowed from religious fundamentalists.

In addition to McDonald's, Mr. Chavez has persuaded two of the nation's largest supermarket chains, A.&P. and Lucky Stores, and several smaller ones to stop buying lettuce from Bruce Church. These successes are part of the union's effort to revive its faltering drive to unionize American farm laborers.

The company, the valley's second largest lettuce producer, has refused since 1979 to meet contractual demands from Mr. Chavez that it asserts would force it out of business.

The Chavez union appears to have a promising new means to apply pressure on growers. But the teamsters' decision has dampened some of Mr. Chavez's optimism. Public Optimism on Future

In recent interviews, officials of both unions said that they did not expect the expiration of the truce to revive the old hostilities.

"There's no problem," Armando Garcia of the United Farm Workers declared. "If they want to organize, fine; we'll continue to organize, and the workers will have a choice."

Roy Mendoza, an organizer for teamsters Local 890 here, said: "We're going to avoid a head-on confrontation."

Privately, however, some members in both unions, as well as many growers and others in the Salinas Valley, say that confrontation is inevitable.

An internal teamsters memorandum deplored the farm workers' failure to organize more and said that problems in the Chavez union made this an opportune time for the teamsters.

"Of approximately 350,000 farm workers in California," it states, "the U.F.W. has less than 15,000 under contract." 'Image' Problem Is Seen

The memorandum emphasizes that the union would have to work hard to discard an "image" as "the big, bad teamsters."

"The teamsters," it says, "should appear to be cooperative, reasonable and almost the underdog by allowing the U.F.W. to be the 'bad guy.' The teamsters will need to be on their best behavior and not allow Cesar to exploit the issues."

Mr. Chavez, 56 years old, burst into prominence in the mid-1960's while leading a strike of grape pickers.

With good publicity and generous financial aid from Eastern liberals, he led a boycott that, according to one opinion survey, persuaded 17 million Americans to stop buying table grapes. Growers eventually capitulated.

In 1977 came another big victory with the teamsters' agreement. Since then, however, big triumphs have been rare.

Agricultural labor researchers say that life for California farm laborers has been improved by the threat of union organization; those who now work under union contracts earn \$7 an hour or more while nonunionized workers earn more than \$5 hourly.

Here in the Salinas Valley, where the union has had its greatest strength, less than a dozen of nearly 150 vegetable producers have contracts. Aliens Wait for Jobs

An ever-present pool of illegal aliens willing to work for low wages, and increasing mechanization have hampered organizing efforts. But critics in and out of the union more and more fault Mr. Chavez.

Former senior aides have accused him of paranoia, of poor administration, of refusing to share authority and of forcing them out if they dissent.

And, as the farm workers union has evolved from being a social cause into an everyday union, support has ebbed, often causing its appeals to go unheeded, until its new boycott got going this year.

According to an internal U.F.W. document, the primary objective is not to persuade consumers to shun a supermarket or restaurant because it sells a grower's product, but to tarnish its

"corporate image by associating something negative about the store in the minds of certain groups of consumers sympathetic to our cause." Value of Pickets Diminishes

The document states that Americans generally no longer are moved by picketing, marches and rallies; instead, it said it should now attack growers on the basis of three issues with emotional appeal: consumerism, toxic wastes and sexual harassment.

According to union officials, if a retailer does not agree to drop a product, letters critical of the company are sent to certain consumers near its stores.

The recipients of the letters are selected by computers using demographic data to pinpoint people likely to be sympathetic to the union, including Hispanic consumers, "white liberals, blacks, Jews and union families."

Similar appeals are used by many political fund-raisers and church groups. Company Denies Charges

The company says it has been accused of tolerating sexual harassment of its female employees, of requiring workers to use injurious chemicals and of other misdeeds. "None of it is true," Michael Payne, the company's general manager, said of the allegations. "It's corporate extortion."

He estimated that the company's business had been cut by as much as "15 to 20 percent" this year by the boycott.

Because of new customers, Mr. Payne said the company's sales had rebounded partly, and he added that it would not give in to the union.

Mr. Payne said that last year the company paid its more than 1,000 field workers an average of \$9.98 an hour, plus benefits, "probably the highest agricultural wage in the world."

Both sides agreed in interviews that the major sticking point in the impasse, which began in 1979, was Mr. Chavez's insistence on contractual provisions that would allow the union to determine which of its members work for the company and to dismiss any who do not adhere to union discipline.

"If you boil it all down," Mr. Payne said, "the differences we have are not economic, but who's going to control the work force."