

After Chavez, Farm Union Struggles to Find New Path

Published: July 19, 1993

Three decades after Cesar Chavez founded the United Farm Workers, which brought hope to thousands of impoverished laborers, the union is struggling for survival.

From the lemon groves in this desert community to the tomato fields outside Stockton in the San Joaquin Valley, many workers today toil under conditions not seen since the charismatic Mr. Chavez first took up their cause in a series of hunger strikes, boycotts, marches and protests in the 1960's and 1970's.

Mr. Chavez's death in April has thrown the organization into a leadership crisis that compounds an identity crisis that already existed: Should it spend its money and energy seeking support from middle-class consumers, or should it be in the field organizing and fighting on behalf of workers? Boycott Ineffective

Indicative of the union's lack of momentum is the fact that few Americans know that for the last six years it has been urging consumers to boycott grapes and that in that time grape sales reached record levels.

The union began the boycott to get grape growers to limit the use of pesticides. It contends that the growers use more "cancer and birth-defect causing pesticides" than any other California industry.

But the apparent ineffectiveness of the boycott has led some of the union's supporters to worry that Mr. Chavez may have left behind little more than his name. While that name is being liberally applied to things like streets, parks and holidays celebrating Mr. Chavez's birthday, these testimonials provide little for the workers on the front lines of the nation's food supply.

"You've really got abysmal conditions, conditions that are as bad as at any time in the post-war era," said Clete Daniel, a professor of American labor history whose book "Bitter Harvest" (University of California Press, 1981) records the California farm labor movement.

"It's hard to see any vestiges of the achievements of the 1970's," Professor Daniel said. "If you know all the struggle and sacrifice that occurred in the course of building the farm workers' union and see how few lasting gains have been achieved, it's very, very discouraging." Economy in Slump

The United Farm Workers today reports about 10,000 members, down from more than 70,000 in the 1970's. Illegal immigrants from Mexico and Central America, more willing to work in spite of low wages and poor conditions, have diluted the union's strength. And it does not help that the California economy remains in a slump despite an improving picture elsewhere in the nation.

While the union faces such large problems, conditions in the fields have become nearly as grim in many cases as they were before the union wrought improvements.

For example, union officials say, because of lax enforcement, children are again illegally being put to work harvesting crops and some growers are paying \$2 an hour or less, in violation of Federal minimum wage laws. The labor contractors who supply growers with groups of workers in return for fees charge the workers exorbitant rates for rent, transportation and food. The infamous short-handled hoe, which forces workers to stoop for hours, has reappeared in some fields despite being banned by California law, and there are growing reports of sexual harassment of female workers by growers and labor contractors.

In addition, the union has been hit with a \$2.9 million legal judgment resulting from an Arizona case in which a grower accused union leaders of illegal tactics in a boycott of the company's lettuce. The award could bankrupt the union, which has \$2.5 million in assets, but U.F.W. officials say they are optimistic that it will be overturned on appeal. Challenge for New Leader

Confronted with so many problems, can the union's new president, Arturo Rodriguez, succeed where his father-in-law, Mr. Chavez, ran into obstacles.

"I alone could never think of replacing Cesar Chavez," Mr. Rodriguez said in an interview. "He's just an extraordinary human being. But I have a great team of people to work with. The rest of the leadership of the organization is very dedicated, very committed to wanting to see Cesar's dreams come true."

Mr. Rodriguez said Mr. Chavez's death, in a paradox, had helped the union, creating a resurgence of interest in it and in the welfare of farm workers. Many people, on learning of the boycott of table grapes, have volunteered to help promote it, he said.

In Los Angeles, officials recently agreed to rename Brooklyn Avenue, a main thoroughfare in heavily Hispanic East Los Angeles, Avenida Cesar Chavez. A new center for Chicano studies at the University of California at Los Angeles will be named for Mr. Chavez. The California Senate recently declared Mr. Chavez's birthday, March 31, a state holiday, and city leaders in Delano, Calif., Mr. Chavez's home and the site of the union's first headquarters, renamed a park for Mr. Chavez despite years of tension between the union and city officials.

"You would never believe that in Delano, Calif., you could go before the City Council and get any support for us," Mr. Rodriguez said. "And yet all of those things are becoming a reality for us. There's a tremendous rebirth taking place." Some Gains Seen

It remains to be seen whether interest can be sustained, and whether Mr. Rodriguez can translate the current revival of interest in the union into tangible gains in the fields. Already, some are complaining that Mr. Rodriguez is putting too much emphasis on public relations and not enough on organizing workers.

Mr. Rodriguez said the union had learned from experience that support from consumers was essential to bringing growers to the bargaining table. Thus a good part of the organization's

resources are being spent on mailings, bumper stickers, buttons and videos to persuade people to stop buying grapes. Still, growers continue to report record harvests and sales.

"The fight needs to be conducted in the fields where the workers are," Professor Daniel said, "but more and more the effort is addressed to this boycott, to consumers and environmentalists and to people interested in the use of pesticides and the use of toxic chemicals in growing our food."

Experts said the union's primary message in the current boycott -- that pesticides threaten the health of consumers -- has not struck home in the way that public anger over farm working conditions fueled the successful boycotts of the 1960's and 1970's. And a new political climate combined with shifting attitudes toward unionism in general has not helped.

David Duarte, a 28-year-old native of Mexico, is a worker whom the union has helped. He earns a basic union wage of \$5.25 and has health benefits, unemployment insurance and worker's compensation, thanks to a union contract.

Despite poor health and a cramped living situation -- he shares an apartment with his parents and seven siblings -- Mr. Duarte is grateful for the U.F.W.

"We have security," he said in Spanish during a recent union rally here. "We have stable work, and we have rights."