

Delano Grape Boycott Reading

Extreme poverty and the disorganization that accompanied it had always been a major obstacle to organizing farm workers, who were generally regarded as too demoralized to be even potential union material. But in 1959 the nation's largest labor organization, the AFL-CIO, opened an offensive on the farm-labor front with a new Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee (AWOC).

Soon afterward, Cesar Chavez left a secure and comfortable job as an official of a Mexican American community service society to begin the hard and hazardous task of organizing a new and independent union called the National Farm Workers Association (NFWA), at a salary of \$50 a week. Chavez had been born near Yuma, Arizona, on a small homestead near the Colorado River. This family farm was lost through unpaid taxes in the depression of the 1930s. He had worked as a migrant farm laborer from early childhood and consequently had obtained his 8 years of formal education with difficulty in nearly 40 different California public schools.

Chavez conceived the new NFWA as a labor organization that would offer its members the benefits of a credit union and other services while it offered employers a stable and dependable work force made up of skillful and well-organized crews of NFWA members working with no-strike contracts. At that time he placed no hope in agricultural strikes, having seen too many disheartening examples of them, but in September 1965 AWOC members began a strike against 33 grape growers in the district around Delano in Northern Kern County, and 2 weeks later Chavez's NFWA decided to join it. For the first several months there seemed to be no chance that the strike could win. So many strikebreakers were brought in that the grape harvest in the district was larger than in the previous year. Yet the strike continued until, in the spring and summer of 1966, it won a series of brilliant victories that set a precedent for ultimate unionization of at least the larger farms throughout California.

If the Delano strike had been attempted a few years later, it would have met the fate of every previous attempt to organize farm labor. But now a new force was at work—the strong and increasing sympathy of a part of the Anglo-American public for the civil rights of ethnic minorities in general and farm workers in particular. The AWOC local in Delano, under Larry Itliong as regional director, consisted mainly of Filipino Americans, while most of the members of Chavez's NFWA were Mexican Americans. Gifts of money and food for the embattled strikers poured into Delano from several other labor unions, from church groups throughout California, and from many other sympathizers with the civil rights movement.

The dock workers in the San Francisco Bay area refused to load grapes from the struck vineyards, of which the largest were owned by Schenley Industries and the Di Giorgio Corporation. Nationwide boycotts were launched against Schenley wines and liquors, against Di Giorgio's S&W canned goods, and against stores that sold them. In the spring of 1966, executives of Schenley concluded that the adverse publicity was counteracting the effects of the large sums the company spent to advertise its products. In this light, the much smaller amounts the company saved by refusing to raise wages in its vineyards were obviously a poor economy. On April 6, 1966, Schenley Industries made the historic announcement that it had agreed to recognize the National Farm Worker's Association as the sole bargaining representative for its field-workers—the first recognition of a farm worker's union by a major California grower.

The next day the Di Giorgio Corporation announced that it would permit its workers to decide by ballot whether they wished to be represented by a union, and if so, what union. The victorious allies, Itliong's AWOC and Chavez's NFWA merged to form the United Farm Workers Organizing Committee. In the election in August 1966, although the Di Giorgio Corporation had always insisted that its employees did not want to be unionized, its field-workers voted overwhelmingly for the United Farm Workers (UFW).

Several northern California growers of wine grapes then signed contracts with the UFW, but the great majority of California producers of table grapes held out. They were encouraged by the election of Ronald Reagan, a vigorous opponent of farm unions, to the governorship in 1966. In 1968 the UFW launched a national boycott of all California table grapes. This move captured the attention of the whole country and became a burning social issue. Although Governor Reagan and presidential candidate Richard Nixon condemned the boycott, the mayors of San Francisco, New York, Chicago, and several other large cities announced their approval of it. The boycott became so



effective that growers were threatened with ruin. At last, in July 1970, most of the large California table grape growers agreed to union contracts with the United Farm Workers.

Chavez's next move was against the lettuce growers of the Salinas Valley, but as soon as those growers learned that the grape producers were about to surrender, they hurriedly negotiated contracts with the Teamsters Union in order to forestall the UFW drive. One maverick Salinas lettuce grower, Bud Antle, had included his field-workers in his contracts with the Teamsters since 1961. Now there was a rush to imitate him because, said a Salinas growers' representative, "the Teamsters are a trade union; Chavez's union is a civil rights movement." Chavez denounced the Teamsters' agreements as "sweet-heart contracts."

In March 1977, after several years of struggle and periodic negotiation, Chavez and the Teamster executives signed a 5-year jurisdictional agreement. The UFW was to represent all field-workers in future contract with the growers, leaving all cannery workers and some truck drivers to the Teamsters.

The ending of the bracero program had been an important preliminary to reform, but only a negative one. At long last, in 1964, Congress made its first positive moves toward correcting a shameful set of conditions. The Economic Opportunity Act of 1964 included grants to agencies aiding migrant workers, and an amendment to the National Housing Act provided direct loans for construction of farm-labor housing. In September 1966, Congress took the historic step of extending the protection of a new federal minimum wage law to farm workers. This was only a token beginning. While the minimum wage for most other workers was raised to \$1.60 an hour, effective in 1968, the national minimum for farm labor was set at only \$1, and not even this would apply to small employers.