

Strike Leader Comes East

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Summary: Highlights progress in the grape strikes in California and efforts to organize in other parts of the country. Cesar Chavez visits the Catholic Worker and is admired for his non-violent methods. Advises readers to learn more about the struggle. (DDLW #920).

Last year we published at least eight stories on the progress of the “grape strike” which has been going on in California since September of 1965. During these two years of struggle and suffering there have been victories against what would seem to be overwhelming odds. Contracts have been signed with powerful growers, such as the DiGiorgio Ranches in Delano, Borrego Springs and Arvin, and on July 19th a representation election will be held at Marysville, the last DiGiorgio ranch not under contract. Contracts have been signed which the workers themselves negotiated with DiGiorgio, which have brought them higher wages, free health insurance and a grievance procedure to settle complaints.

Contracts have also been signed with Schenley. “Now we got rest rooms,” one worker said, “and a place to wash our hands and paper to dry them. They put in some ice water in the summertime. Before we had no rest rooms. We had to walk out into the fields, and far too, because men and women work together.”

One of the ranches of the Christian Brothers has signed a contract and three others will follow after an election.

We have been getting our news from two of our correspondents in California, and from the organ of the farm worker, **El Malcriado**, which is published both in Spanish and in English and has been edited from the beginning by Bill Esher, who was a member of the Oakland Catholic Worker group.

This last month we received a visit from the leader of the strikers, Cesar Chavez, himself. He and a few members of the Association of Catholic Trade Unionists spent a Sunday morning with us at the CW house at Chrystie Street and later on Monday night we saw him again at the Union Theological Seminary, where those interested gathered to see what they could do to help on the East Coast. So far there has been no organizing among the people who pick apples and grapes in the New York State, and potatoes in Jersey and Long Island. (New York is the third largest apple-growing state in the country.)

From 1934 on we have been concerned with this problem of destitution among farm workers, and we are particularly interested in Chavez because of his emphasis on nonviolence. He has a true recognition of the overall problems of agriculture, the problems of the small farmer and the large grower, what the factory system of farming has done to the morale of the employer, and the steady growth of class-war attitudes on the part of both grower and worker. But he has recognized that the problem is insoluble without tapping the deep religious instincts of the people he is leading for patience and perseverance. The banners of Our Lady of Guadalupe have been prominent in the strike and in the march on Sacramento, which took place during Lent this year, just as they were present during the violent wars for independence in Mexico in the past. When Cesar Chavez saw the picture of Our Lady of Guadalupe which has been hanging on our walls for so long that it is dark with age, he immediately left his seat at the table and stood before it a few moments before we began to talk.

He looks just like his pictures, perhaps even younger, straight black hair, face browned by the sun, and brown as an Indian's is brown. I remembered Archbishop Miranda, himself a Mexican, telling me proudly some years ago, "The Mexicans are a new race, a new people, neither Indian nor Spanish."

Chavez does not talk much in such conversations as these, perhaps because there are so many more articulate people around him. The Rev. Jim Drake, member of the migrant ministry and active in the strike from the beginning, recently arrested for praying in front of the Capitol in Texas where the fight to organize has spread (so far without success) did a great deal of the explaining at the CW and at the Union meeting. I would like very much to hear Chavez speaking to the members of the Farm Workers Organizing Committee; or I would like to have a record of his talk at the close of the pilgrimage into Sacramento. When I do hear him, I believe that I will have heard three of the most vital leaders of our time, the other two being Martin Luther King and Fidel Castro. The first two are proponents of nonviolent revolution in our social order and Castro the first successful leader of a violent revolution in our hemisphere in recent times.

Chavez mentioned that the Catholic Workers from the Bay area had helped greatly with truckloads of food and clothing for the strikers. I was interested to learn that the housing where the strike occurred was the same that I visited during the Roosevelt period when the government put up such migrant camps as those portrayed in the movie, **The Grapes of Wrath**. They are still being used today, but now they are owned by the growers and rented to the workers.

The Housing Authority will build new units, a hundred in each camp, but the camps in Tulare County will be torn down by July 1st. The strikers are paying eighteen dollars a month, and the Housing Authority director says that the new units are sixty dollars a month. Actually, farm workers were paying eighteen a month for one shack and an additional eight dollars for a second in order to have a bedroom space. A rent strike started when the rent was raised to twenty-two dollars a month for the first shack and eight for the second.

Chavez was in the East to receive an award from the League for Industrial Democracy in New York City and to visit Ithaca, where a group of Cornell students and others are interested in organizing the migrants in New York state.

He left the office of the Catholic Worker while the Sunday “line” was in full swing, and set out for a late Mass before driving up state to Ithaca. On Monday, in the driving rain and snow, he came back to New York to the larger meeting at Knox Hall, Union Theological Seminary.

The matter of a boycott of Vermouth Industries and all bottled goods bearing the name of Tribuno was taken up. The aim is to force a contract with Perelli-Minetti and Sons, a Delano area grower where an unauthorized contract with the Teamster’s union was signed while the Farm workers were on strike. Actually, what the Farm Workers Organizing Committee is urging, and in this case by means of a boycott, is that a fair and impartial election be held.

Assumption Abbey, a Benedictine Foundation in North Dakota, gains a royalty on all bottles of Assumption Abbey liquor are sold, in return for the use of its name. We urge the monks not to renew their agreement with the Perelli-Minetti people for the use of the name “Assumption Abbey.” And if a settlement is not made we ask our friends to write to the abbot, asking him to take this up with the Perelli-Minetti people.

The head of Vermouth Industries, is John Tribuno, whose office is in New York City. Forty per cent of his vermouth comes from what **El Malcriado** calls the Perelli-Minetti Octopus, which is made up of 26 interlocking family corporations.

Voice of the Farmer

Again we advise our readers to subscribe to the farm workers’ paper, **El Malcriado** (Box 1060, Delano, California, subscription price \$2.50 per year). The last issue contains stories of: the struggle of the farm workers in Texas, and Arizona; congressional hearings to bring the farm workers under the National Labor Relations Act; asparagus pickers’ jobs in the Stockton area being taken by imported workers from Mexico while local Mexicans, Anglos and Filipino workers are left unemployed; stories too of a retired San Francisco longshoreman who is teaching the Mexican children of Delano how to play the recorder and giving them “a sound background in musical notation.” There are art classes too for children and adults, and writing classes under one of the men from El Teatro Campesino, which brought a play West Coast to union audiences. There are also stories about the credit union, the co-op, the Farm Workers Service Center, and a co-op gasoline station which opened a month ago and which, as we sat there talking at the seminary on April 25, was damaged by two cartridge bombs which shattered the windows.

Cesar Chavez told us of the piece of land which the union had bought, seceding as it were from the town of Delano, and setting up some of their own services, which included a blood bank and a child-care center for strikers and workers.

These are all small beginnings and they are accompanied by the suffering, the misunderstandings, the discouragements of all beginnings. But already great victories have been won when one considers the Schenley and DiGiorgio and Christian Brothers contracts.

When finally farm workers are organized in one small town after another and all together begin to feel their strength in this largest of all the United States' industries, which is agriculture, they may begin to have a vision of the kind of society where the workers will also be owners, of their own homes, a few acres, and eventually of large holdings in the form of cooperatives. Perhaps the growers have much to learn from them, and they from the growers, though it is hard to imagine these successful businessmen and owners of factories in the fields becoming willing to teach their workers how to run such large holdings. But such conversations towards a life on the land have taken place, by force, through revolution, or peaceably by a people persecuted and oppressed, as in the foundation of the kibbutzim of Israel, described in Martin Buber's **Paths in Utopia**.