

Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

This is a social history of farm labor in California, focusing on the persistent theme of unrest among the state's agricultural workers. For more than a century, California farm workers were outside the institutional framework of the society in which they lived and worked. They were effectively excluded from economic decision-making, political representation, and participation in the social mainstream. Because their wages were among the lowest in the country, they were peripheral to the wage and consumer markets. In the rural communities in which they lived, they were segregated and treated as inferiors. They were excluded from national labor legislation and many social welfare programs, and they were denied basic legal rights and civil liberties. As a consequence, California farm workers were restless and dissatisfied. They were powerless as well.

Indeed, the history of farm labor in California indicates not a pluralistic social and political structure confronting farm workers but the domination of farm workers by farm employers. During periods of labor unrest in particular, California's agricultural elite was backed by local communities and segments of the state and national governments mobilized to support its interests and prerogatives. The narrowly based and largely autonomous elite comprised of California's big commercial farmers did not act

cohesively with other elites on many issues. It was not part of a power elite in the sense of commanding the entire nation. On the contrary, it tended to pursue a policy of noninvolvement in the large issues of statesmanship, except when the issues touched its particular concerns. Its influence with government officials was not part of a conspiracy. Rather, its power over farm workers was based on its social and economic domination of local communities and its ability to define and control issues locally or to influence the exercise of government authority through private channels. Ultimately, however, the power of California's agricultural elite was rooted in the unique structure of California agriculture and its supporting ideology.

In their book, *American Sociology: Worldly Rejections of Religion and Their Directions*, Arthur J. Vidich and Stanford M. Lyman describe the unique character of California agriculture and reveal its ideological underpinnings. They point out differences between California agriculture and agriculture in other parts of the country.

California's farming and agriculture did not develop in the same ways that they had in the South and the Middlewest where, respectively, the plantation and the family farm and the ideals associated with each had become basic norms. California's farm lands had been blocked out as large tracts during the Mexican period. The Mexicans had initiated California's style of land parcelization by incorporating the Spanish colonial hacienda system into their administration. The hacienda, comparable in many respects to the feudal manorial system, was a self-contained social and economic entity. Farm labor was thought of as a part of a much larger obligation of fealty to the *hacendado*. When, after 1848, the *hacendados* and the hacienda system were formally eliminated, the agricultural tracts remained intact, requiring management under another system. . . . Although the parallels between the hacienda and plantation system are by no means exact, both have large tracts of land and cheap labor as their economic foundation. The great agricultural valleys of California with their vast expanses of land and the intensive labor required for harvesting stood in contrast to small scale farming operations. . . . The ideal of the self-sufficient farmer, idealized in the Middlewest as upholding the values and

virtues of sturdy independence, equalitarianism and direct-action democracy, did not develop in California.¹

There were agrarian idealists in California who, through the nineteenth century, asserted Thomas Jefferson's model of the family farm; but the pattern of land settlement in California, combined with land speculation, industrialization, the growth of monopolies in banking and transport, and the rise of cooperative marketing ventures, undercut and effectively silenced the agrarian idealists. In addition, many of the agrarian idealists were xenophobes. They supported Jeffersonian democracy, but equated local control with local homogeneity and wished to keep out foreigners, non-Christians, and peoples of color. This touches on another fundamentally important aspect of the unique structure of California agriculture, the ethnic composition of California's agricultural labor force. Vidich and Lyman describe the type and supply of labor upon which California agriculture was predicated and indicate what the important issues were for those influential in the recruitment and organization of the farm work force:

From its beginnings the labor force in California was recruited not from Europe, but from the countries and colonies surrounding the Pacific basin — China, Japan, Korea, the Pacific Islands, Hawaii, and Mexico. . . . [T]he critical issue was the availability, the quality, and the condition of the migrant agricultural labor force. The concern was not with assimilation or with saving souls, but with the recruitment of a stable agricultural labor force. This labor force was not conceived as transformable into a small-holding peasantry, moreover, it would have characteristics of neither the serf of the hacienda nor the slaves of the plantation.²

Vidich and Lyman also show how the labor force and the agricultural system in California were understood by those in position to shape and justify it. Their argument highlights the theories of Joseph Le Conte, a sociologist at the University of California at Berkeley, who defined the labor problem in California agriculture and directed Berkeley's powerful role in

¹ Arthur J. Vidich and Stanford M. Lyman, *American Sociology: Worldly Rejections of Religion and Their Directions* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), 242.

² *Ibid.*

maintaining the state's agricultural system. To Le Conte the labor problem was that of "organizing racial groups to labor in a post-slavery society."³

Le Conte put forward an argument . . . to the effect that "slaves were not property, chattels, in the sense in which other things are," and, he insisted, "in fact they were never so treated in the South." Slavery, Le Conte observed, was simply a system of organizing labor power. With respect to Negro slaves, slaveholders had merely exercised "the right claimed . . . to their labor power." The postwar system meant only a change in social organization "from a slave-system to a wage-system." What had formerly been the market value of slaves would now pass to the land itself, "if the labor remained reliable." Wage labor, like the slave labor that had preceded it, was but another form of warrantable calling. Hence, Le Conte could argue — as he did in 1888 before the California Historical Society — that the South had no need to "repent" of any "sin" of slavery because it was a system of labor organization admirably suited to the condition of Negroes. Although Le Conte intended his comments to be applicable to the plantation system of the South, they were equally apt for the agribusiness of California.

The special organization of agriculture in California — agribusiness — represents a rationalized plantation system wherein the slaves would be replaced by migrant workers and illegal aliens. In addition, under a wage system, the owner of the enterprise, unlike the plantation owner or the *hacendado*, is not responsible for the care and feeding of the laborer. Hence, the migrant worker is housed on the farm and may even be fed in a central dining area, but the costs of these services are borne by the worker, who leaves the farm when there is "no more work."⁴

It was these conceptions and the economic situation maintained by them that created a chronic condition of dissatisfaction among California's agricultural workers.

The dissatisfaction and unrest among California farm workers led to demands for justice, equality, and the right to organize. These liberal ideas

³ *Ibid.*, 243.

⁴ *Ibid.*

were advocated by a range of groups drawn into the farm workers' struggle throughout its history. They were responded to in a wide variety of ways. They were resisted, often with violence. At times, they were supported. Eventually, Cesar Chavez, leader of the United Farm Workers union (UFW), managed to channel the farm workers' discontent and chronic unrest into a sustained social movement that won legal recognition, bargaining rights, contract benefits, and political leverage for farm labor in California. With shifts in national political alliances and the emergence of new political actors in the 1960s, Chavez managed to broaden the issues involved in the farm workers' movement and to put them before a national audience.

An unusual aspect of the changing situation was the role of the Democratic administration in Washington. During the 1960s, the federal government took on the task of organizing unrepresented individuals into groups and absorbing their organizational representatives into the political bargaining processes. Chavez, by 1966, had managed an important breakthrough in the organization of farm laborers, but it was not clear that he could be made a part of the controlled network of benefits, party loyalty, and electoral support. Democratic politicians seized an opportunity to enhance their leverage in California politics by providing funding for California Rural Legal Assistance (CRLA), a legal services program under the umbrella of President Lyndon Johnson's War on Poverty. Gary Bellow, CRLA's first deputy director, pushed to make CRLA an organizing agent and partner in the farm workers' movement.

Growers called on allies at the state and federal levels to oppose CRLA. To combat Chavez, they turned to a national union more to their liking than the UFW: the International Brotherhood of Teamsters (IBT). Growers used the IBT, not only to contain the scope of the conflict generated by farm workers' grievances, but to put forth a type of legitimacy that could garner support for reinstating the privacy and independence of grower business dealings, including their labor policies. The Teamsters claimed to recognize the need for the extension of economic bargaining power to farm workers, but promised to deliver a more "businesslike" administration of labor contracts than the UFW, and to abandon Chavez's political-ideological approach to labor organizing. Growers, stung by charges of

callousness and injustice toward their employees, found in the Teamsters' arguments a legitimating ideology that carried weight with outsiders.

By the mid-1970s, the conflict was costly to everyone involved. The Teamsters and the growers had collaborated with each other, but were not really members of the same team. Their partnership was born of expediency and they quickly came into conflict with one another. According to growers, the fields were in chaos. The Teamsters were under fire from the AFL-CIO, the UFW's national affiliate, and it was clear that the unionization of field hands was not one of the IBT's vital interests. CRLA was fighting a Republican administration in Washington for its survival. The UFW seemed to be losing out to the IBT. And, despite a growing tide of criticism from UFW supporters, Chavez continued to resist stabilizing and professionalizing his organization to make it more efficient. As a consequence, California Governor Edmund G. Brown, Jr. was well-positioned to secure passage of legislation to regulate the conflict. In 1975 he managed to win agreement on a compromise bill to set up legal machinery to order farm labor relations and assure collective bargaining for California farm workers.

The farm workers' push to be included in political and economic institutions did not begin with the Delano grape strike of 1965, nor did it end in 1975 with passage of the Agricultural Labor Relations Act, as recent events have shown, but the decade marked off by those years was the period of greatest popular recognition and response to the farm workers' plight. The events of these years cannot be understood, however, without an appreciation of the history of the farm labor problem in California and a knowledge of the leaders and organizations that mounted organizing drives prior to World War I, in the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s. This study tells the story of these groups and how they fought for liberal conceptions of justice, equality, and the right to organize. It focuses on the growers and their allied business interests, on the politicians involved, and on the labor unions, and tells the story of the two organizations just mentioned, the UFW, with its Mexican-Catholic elements and identity, and CRLA, with its emphasis on legalism and activism.