

## *Chapter 9*

# CONCLUSION

California agriculture has distinctive characteristics, and as a consequence the farm labor problem in California is unique. As this history has shown, each of the groups involved with farm labor in California understood the agricultural system from its own point of view, and each misrepresented the system's features to itself and to others. Unlike the Jeffersonian ideal of the small family farm, which was approximated by the pattern of land settlement in the East and Midwest, California's agricultural system is based on large tracts of land and an abundant, flexible labor supply to work them. The labor supply established and maintained by the system consisted of persons of color held in a subordinate position within a wage labor hierarchy. The ideologies of workers, labor organizers, and political reformers did not accurately reflect these facts. Nor did the growers as they consolidated their position and struggled to contain the conflict generated by American democrats and farm labor reformers.

The growers allied themselves with corporate interests and strove to promote the prerogatives of business, denying all the while that they were corporate giants whose base of support extended beyond local communities. Effective political support for the farm workers came late, as a by-product of the Civil Rights Movement. Reform politicians of earlier

periods had established civic peace as their primary goal and thus lent support to business interests generally. Against great odds, the unions fought for control of the labor force. But the unions also fought each other, and the mainstream of the labor movement sided with business against radical labor organizers. The early union power struggles ended with an alliance between big labor and big business. With the Civil Rights Movement at its peak, however, the UFW introduced new ethnic and religious elements into the situation and CRLA, with its legal tack, reinterpreted and invigorated basic liberal values. These two groups were successful as no other group or combination of groups had been, but their attempted partnership failed. They, too, came into conflict with one another.

As often as not in our story, allied groups worked at cross purposes, and indeed, progress seems to have come from unintentional, if not completely inadvertent, factors. It is the marked changes in the social perspectives of American democrats and reformers engaged in the farm labor issue that I have documented, together with grower efforts to contain the conflicts they generated. My principal conclusion is that each group understood land tenure and the position of agricultural workers in reference to its own views and acted accordingly, with unexpected consequences. First to be considered were the agrarian idealists.

The agrarian idealists tenaciously clung to Thomas Jefferson's model of the family farm, however rapidly land speculation, industrialization, and monopolies in banking and transport raced ahead. Jefferson believed that farm labor was the ultimate form of self-reliance, and the family farmer the ultimate autonomous citizen, immediately dependent upon God and his own toil; not part of the stream of commerce, polluted by greed. A nation of family farms would check the development of predatory commerce, finance, and manufacturing, and the growth of extremes of wealth and poverty. Democracy and farm labor in a system of small farms would guarantee one another. By the turn of the century, however, the agrarian idealists were grossly outnumbered by those who profited from the special organization of agriculture along the lines of a rationalized plantation system.

Progressives in California had their major impact on farm labor from 1911–27, beginning with the inauguration of Hiram Johnson as governor. The Progressives were influential reformers, but they opposed unionization. They documented the evils of farm labor life and helped advance the

education of elite and public opinion. They saw the social conditions of farm labor as pathological, and this was radically new, but they did not seek solutions involving new structures of economic or political power. Hence, their characteristic solutions, when they ventured beyond immediate relief and welfare measures, became diffuse and symbolic. During this period, the only systematic efforts at organizing farm labor came from the International Workers of the World, whose efforts were crushed, with Progressive cooperation, under criminal syndicalism laws enacted during World War I.

The Communist Party, during the 1930s, encountered obstacles similar to those faced by the IWW, and met with a similar fate in its attempt to organize California farm labor. These obstacles included grower unity, judicial hostility, police repression, and the isolation entailed by reliance upon an ideology extrinsic to the situation of farm workers. Underlying these obstacles were firm and persisting economic realities: (a) a system of concentrated ownership of very large parcels of land, often held by single families, (b) the industrialized form of agricultural production, utilizing mechanization, chemicals, a seasonal but concentrated work force, and high speed processes of handling and transport, and (c) a network of relationships with the larger institutions of American life, through interlocking corporate directorates and government subsidies.

The larger developments in American society in the 1930s, the coming of the New Deal, legal recognition of collective bargaining, and the organizing success of mainstream labor in crafts and trades and industries, did not advance the cause of farm workers because New Deal labor policy was largely paternalistic and conservative, and did not allow for protracted hostile and competitive relations between workers and management. Where labor organizing would increase social conflict before it would diminish it, New Deal officials and AFL leaders alike shunned it.

The early and mid-1930s, then, saw the burial of ideological movements and the selective protection of labor. In the final three years of the decade, 1937–39, *The Grapes of Wrath* appeared, Senator Robert LaFollette's subcommittee held hearings on farm labor in California, and the AFL, supporting its affiliate, the Teamsters, cooperated with growers against CIO attempts to organize farm workers. While awareness of the farm workers' desperate conditions was rising, their organization was still held hostage

to conflicts between larger actors. Effective institutional support and assistance from beyond the localities was still missing.

The import of outside power structures is underscored in another period of reform activity, covering the years 1947–52. During this time, the National Farm Labor Union, under the leadership of H. L. Mitchell, launched a sustained effort to organize farm workers in the southern San Joaquin Valley. Mitchell's drives, directed chiefly at organizing workers on the DiGiorgio holdings, utilized many of the same tactics later employed by Cesar Chavez, but to no avail. Farm strikes, boycotts supported by organized labor, and demands for legal protections that were endorsed by various liberal groups, as well as skilled organizational techniques — all these tactics were brought to use. The national political system, however, during these times of postwar economic boom, and a return to war in Korea, was not engaged with groups and issues of high salience to the farm workers' cause. Under these circumstances, the superior resources of the farm employers prevailed.

During the years 1956–64, the preconditions for successful farm worker organization may be seen finally to emerge. In the late 1950s, liberal organizations and the AFL-CIO joined forces to form a National Advisory Committee on Farm Labor, which led to the creation of a four-point program to abolish "alien" worker programs, enact health and welfare laws to cover farm workers, educate the public, and organize farm workers. During this critical time, two successive secretaries of labor, under Republican President Eisenhower and Democratic President Kennedy, supported termination of the bracero program, an objective not achieved until Lyndon Johnson was in office. Secretaries Mitchell and Goldberg did advance other protections for farm workers, including a somewhat more meaningful minimum wage.

Chavez's success depended vitally upon the ideology that he and the UFW developed and came to represent. At the same time, the group alliances that Chavez and the UFW struck, though they did not last, were crucial to the success of the farm workers' movement in California. Beginning in the late 1950s, the Civil Rights Movement had steadily inched toward the center of liberal awareness. The struggles, defeats, and victories of this movement manifested a number of features which became characteristic of the approach of Chavez and the UFW. The Civil Rights Movement was

led by a single dominant and charismatic figure, Martin Luther King, Jr. King appealed to values that he traced to Christianity. He espoused non-violence as a principle and a tactic. He utilized the tactic of boycott. He led large marches. He drew national media coverage of local elites responding to peaceful protest with abuse and violence. He became a moral hero as well as a political leader to millions of Americans. In all these respects the progression of Chavez and the UFW replicates King and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference.

The War on Poverty was an attempt to rationalize a series of parallel programs which served traditional but not always allied constituencies of the Democratic Party; the poor in the cities and in the countryside alike. Michael Harrington's book, *The Other America*, which helped advance American awareness of the poverty issue, called particular attention to rural poverty. Edward R. Murrow's television program, *Harvest of Shame*, aroused indignation. A major thrust of the administrative umbrella of the War on Poverty programs of the Office of Economic Opportunity was community organizing and participation of the poor. This sensitized liberals to the need for both, and it made Chavez and the UFW seem to be serving national interests.

A second major thrust of the OEO was legal assistance to the poor. This was to serve the two-fold purpose of protecting the poor and vindicating the integrity of the legal system. Liberals ardently supported both objectives, particularly the first; attorneys and conservatives were drawn to support the second. The OEO legal aid programs, often called the best in the nation, were specifically designed to serve the legal needs and interests of California's rural poor. CRLA demonstrated the contribution the courts could make to admitting farm workers to full and equal stature within the American legal system by appealing to constitutional provisions embodying basic national values. With the use of class-action cases, CRLA attorneys, at one and the same time, raised farm worker consciousness and public awareness of the rural poor as a distinct group.

Nevertheless, Chavez maintained support among activists and voters who supported the Civil Rights and poverty movements long enough to win important concessions from the growers. His support was based on an appeal for a more adequate implementation of basic standards of fairness and equal treatment. California growers had lost control of the

political environment due to redistricting following the 1960 census, due to reapportionment decisions, and due to the strength of the liberal-labor coalition that was mobilized to support farm workers. By 1969, rather than struggle for uncertain outcomes in an uncertain legislative process to protect marginally greater profits, growers preferred stable and predictable recognized bargaining that a business-oriented labor union would advance. They wanted to avoid damaging political and economic actions directed against them. The success of Chavez rested partly upon the process of labor organization as an extension of the rationalization and control of the economic world undertaken from opposed but convergent perspectives by California agricultural businesses and national organized labor. And so it was that progress was a result of factors not directed by the social movement organized to achieve it. Progress came from an unanticipated and unintended array of things.

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