

CODA

The United Farm Workers' movement has been remarkably successful. After a century of exclusion, many California farm workers are now unionized and protected by strong labor legislation. The farm workers' union is a political and economic power. It uses a portion of its membership dues to finance a substantial lobbying effort in Sacramento, and, in 1979, it conducted the best organized strike in its history, involving 4,100 workers in an action against ten companies in the Imperial Valley. When the strike was settled, seven months after it began, the union had won a 57 percent increase in wages from the nation's largest lettuce grower.¹

In the most recent phase of reform activity, however, the farm workers' movement has come up against a fundamental limitation, a Weberian-style dilemma, brought on by passage of the Agricultural Labor Relations Act, diminished public interest in the farm workers' cause, and the routine concerns of farm workers as workers. Chavez has continued to use the strategies and tactics of a charismatic social movement, but he has been less successful with them than in the past. The union must administer the contracts it has.

¹ "Pioneer Farm Labor Act is Imperiled in California," *New York Times*, May 22, 1983, A24.

Adversaries and allies alike demand that this be done in an efficient, professional manner. Chavez, however, has continued to maintain his staff as volunteers who subsist on pocket money and live communally in a converted tuberculosis asylum in Keene, California, a tiny town in the foothills of the Tehachapi Mountains near Bakersfield. The union is regulated by a tough labor law. Concessions were made to Chavez and the UFW when it was framed, but the law is interpreted and enforced by “designated authorities,” and as a consequence, more and more of the farm workers’ battles are taking place within a legalistic framework. The union is being shaped by regulation it cannot avoid. Administrative forums are the new arenas of conflict.

Much of the UFW’s early success, especially in winning the support of liberals, stemmed from its role as a downtrodden David battling the corporate Goliaths of the farming industry. That changed as former UFW members found they could live with the Teamsters and as liberals lost interest in Chavez and the UFW. “We were — maybe in our hearts we still are — with Chavez. We were members of his union for two years, good years. Then the Teamsters came. We were on the picket lines last year, striking against the growers who got the Teamster contracts. But we signed the Teamster petition this year. It was printed in Spanish for a change. We work regular now.”²

Public support for Chavez and the UFW has subsided, too. A San Francisco woman, who once worked as a volunteer in Chavez’s boycott of the chain stores, was quoted in *The New York Times* as follows: “I was really a believer. My kids had never even tasted grapes, and for three years I used spinach to make salads. I still wish Chavez well, but I’m out of it now. Maybe Vietnam, the civil-rights thing, Watergate and all the rest of it wore me out. I worry more now about the price of a head of lettuce than the issue of who picked it.”³

Passage of the ALRA in 1975 helped Chavez and the UFW stage a comeback, but it forced the UFW to become more like a conventional labor union and political pressure group. The union’s most recent activities provide ample evidence of this. At the annual convention of the UFW in September 1983, Chavez told reporters that he had formed what he called a “Chicano lobby” to help Democratic candidates and that the union had ordered computerized direct-mail equipment to help spread a political message to members

² Winthrop Griffiths, “Is Chavez Beaten?” *New York Times Magazine*, September 15, 1974, 22.

³ *Ibid.*, 18–20.

and supporters. He also indicated that the union was interested in representing the needs of Hispanic Californians as well as its traditional constituency, California farm workers. At the convention, Chavez did give details of a previously announced effort to resume a consumer boycott, but the boycott was to be backed by “the use of computers and demographic studies to select people who are most likely to support a boycott.” Once the union had a list of such people, plans were to “attempt to change their buying habits by altering the image” of the union’s principal boycott target, the Lucky supermarket chain. Chavez called the union’s plan “the new consumerism” and pledged one-third of the UFW’s annual income of \$3.5 million to it.⁴

The press used to emphasize Chavez’s almost shy charisma and the Catholic-Latin spirituality associated with the movement. Increasingly news reports have focused on the kind of activities that many associate with established unions, such as occasional reports of violence during strikes, assertions by dissident members that their rights have been abused by the union leadership, and disclosures that the union’s lobbyists have become contributors to state legislators in Sacramento. In describing the union boycott of 1983, for example, the *San Francisco Chronicle* printed the following: “[T]he union has launched a new campaign that is being planned by one of the brightest political strategists in the state. Placards and marching are being put aside for the electronic tools of the corporate and political worlds — television advertising, census studies and carefully edited direct mail into selected households.”⁵

The union’s high technology campaign is a response to legalistic maneuvering on the part of its adversaries. In Sacramento, Governor George Deukmejian, a Republican who received large campaign contributions from farmers, sharply cut the budget of the Agricultural Labor Relations Board, which enforces the Agricultural Labor Relations Act. One result, farm union officials say, is a huge backlog of unresolved complaints against growers by workers. Board members serve four-year terms. Governor Deukmejian will not be able to appoint a majority until 1986, but soon after his inauguration in 1983 he appointed David Stirling, a conservative Republican friend, as its general counsel. The board’s general counsel is its chief staff officer. Stirling quickly moved to change the agency’s direction. He transferred staff

⁴ “UFW War on Lucky Stores,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, July 25, 1983, 1.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 5.

members whom growers had criticized out of key positions and began seeking to reduce some of the cash penalties levied against growers. One board member, Jerome Waldie, asserted that Deukmejian was trying to dismantle the ALRB. “Agribusiness, Deukmejian’s biggest contributor, has long had as its primary objective elimination of the board. He’s trying to do the same thing that his tutor, President Reagan, did with the EPA, if he can’t repeal a law, he’ll enforce it at the minimum level, or maybe not enforce it at all.”⁶

Farm workers are no longer outsiders. They have been admitted to the system, but they have been admitted under pressure. The earlier tactics of growers against farm workers — notably the use of undocumented temporary workers — continue. The UFW estimated that 35 percent of the farm laborers working in the Imperial Valley in 1979 were illegal aliens. No one disputes these figures. Other tactics — in particular, the mechanization of planting, cultivation, and harvesting — have been sharply stepped up since the UFW won its major victories. The farm workers’ allies have fallen away, as admission to the system has complicated and interwoven the problems faced by farm labor. The intensified awareness, the canons of conscience, the opportunity for popular participation and support, all have receded.

Unionization, then, has borne bitter fruit for the farm workers. Their ideology and tactics are disarmed; having attorneys and administrative forums, their leader has no dramatic cause to place before the bar of popular conscience. The questions that formed the group out of urgent human need are now cast in legal terms, in courts, board hearings, and meetings. Adversaries press ahead with a mix of old tactics and new. The system to which the UFW has gained admission is a pressure system, with strong tendencies for power to be transferred upward. It is a system that offers farm workers protections they did not have before. It is a system that is overtly rule-based and nonviolent. Yet it is a system in which the powerful use the rules — and the weak.

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⁶ Harry Bernstein, “State’s Organized Labor Can Look Forward to Four Rough Years,” *Los Angeles Times*, January 26, 1983, I-3; Robert Lindsey, “Pioneer Farm Labor Act Is Imperiled in California,” *New York Times*, May 22, 1983, 24.