

## Farm Labor Organizing in California

Acknowledgements: Present and former CIRS staff: Ed Adams, Maricela Aguilar, Anne Mabuchi, Linh Hyunh, Jay Kaufholtz, Lynn Kusnierz, Luis Magaña, Grace Oseki, Celia Prado, Judith Redmond, Rosario Ruiz-Dark, David Runsten, Martha Salazar, Jill Shannon.

Others whose private conversations have contributed to this work: Marguerite Decierdo, Mike Johnston, Art Rodriguez

This is an opportunity for reflection - on where efforts to build viable organizations to directly represent farm workers in California have succeeded and where they have not, and also to reflect on where, at present, these efforts seem to be headed. 1995 will see both the twentieth anniversary of the passage of the California Agricultural Labor Relations Act (1975) and the thirtieth anniversary of the great Delano table grape strike (1965), the watershed event in building the modern farm labor movement. With your permission I would like to begin with a review of some key events of this recent history.

In 1961, Bud Antle, Inc., a large Salinas-based vegetable grower, signed a labor agreement covering field workers with the International Brotherhood of Teamsters, Local 890. Though the union had represented truck drivers and warehouse workers, it had never represented farm workers. No Bud Antle field worker was asked if they wanted to be represented by the Teamsters and the reasons for the contract remain obscure. However, Antle was both a grower and a packer-shipper and the company employed a large

number of truck drivers and warehouse workers. Teamster union representation was not unreasonable. Moreover, only workers not part of the Bracero guest-workers program were under union contract.

Shortly after signing the contract, the company borrowed a large sum of money from the Teamsters pension fund and used the loan proceeds to expand into a new technology: vacuum cooling of harvested lettuce. The previously existing technology had involved using ice to cool lettuce, located in off-field packing sheds. Vacuum cooling made it possible to eliminate the packing sheds by doing what we now call field packing, essentially taking cartons of lettuce packed in the field directly to vacuum cooling units. Bud Antle was the first company to adopt this new technology.

One year later, in 1962, the National Farm Workers Association (NFWA) was founded by Cesar Chavez. He hoped to build an organization among the Chicano and Mexicano farm workers who had been largely by-passed by the Agricultural Workers Organizaing Committee (AWOC). AWOC, initiated by established national labor unions, was largely built by staff on loan from AFL-CIO unions, mainly the United Packing House Workers of America, such as Lou Krainock and Clive Knowles. By and large these organizers did not speak Spanish and were unable to communicate with the many Mexican nationals who were then working in California's fields. AWOC

concentrated its efforts on the many workers who did speak some English, and found their greatest success among the Filipinos.

On December 31, 1964, thirty years ago, Public Law 78 (Bracero program) was purposefully allowed to expire by Congress. Under this program Mexican guest workers were brought into the fields and then sent back to Mexico when their jobs were concluded. Labor movement activists and the scholar-activist Ernesto Galarza devoted years of effort to persuade Congress to end the program, successfully arguing that Braceros were being used to drive down wages for all workers and had even been used as strike breakers.

On September 16, 1965, thirty years ago this coming September, the Delano table grape strike, which had been initiated a few days earlier by the AWOC (Larry Itliong & Philip Vera Cruz/Filipinos) was greatly expanded when the three-year old NFWA (Chavez/Chicano-Mexicano) voted to join the strike. Just one month later Cesar Chavez announced a new tactic to win support for the on-going strike: a consumer boycott of table grapes produced in Delano, a brilliant new tactic that transformed farm labor unionization efforts. The boycott captured the imagination of thousands of liberals and leftists across the nation, as well as support from the insurgent civil rights, student and anti-war movements.

On July 29, 1970, twenty-five years ago, and after five years of bitter strife, the Delano grape growers signed contracts with

the UFWOC. Word of the agreement spread among farm workers throughout the state. The UFW was recognized to be a force that had shaped a victory that had eluded generations of farm worker organizers: solid, three-year union contracts with some of the industry's biggest and most recalcitrant employers.

This enormous success propelled Chavez to declare that the Salinas vegetable producers would be next. But the Salinas Valley growers had already taken steps that they thought would protect them from the UFW: on July 23, 1970, just six days before the Delano table grape growers settled, the Salinas Valley lettuce growers signed contracts with the Western Conference of Teamsters, expecting that this would head off UFW efforts. None of the Salinas Valley lettuce field workers covered by these contracts were asked if they wanted the Teamsters to represent them.

On August 24, 1970, in an action that everyone who witnessed it has termed "incredible" nearly all of Salinas Valley agriculture was shut down by a largely spontaneous strike that brought 10,000 farm workers onto picket lines. The UFW flag, a black eagle on a red banner, was soon waving in the hands of farm laborers next to nearly every field in the Valley. Just one week later, Inter-Harvest, Inc., the largest lettuce producer, signed a contract with the UFW. But the other lettuce growers remained under Teamsters contract.

For nearly five more years, despite winning a few more contracts in the lettuce industry, the UFW was locked in a stalemate with a majority of the growers, and the growers' sweetheart ally, the Teamsters, for the right to represent workers in the fields. When the table grape contracts expired these growers turned around and signed contracts with the Teamsters. It seemed that whenever the UFW would take an initiative the Teamsters would show up: industry giant E & J Gallo Winery signed a contract with the Teamsters shortly after their UFW contract expired in 1973.

And the level of violence grew. The UFW made a compelling film about this period: "Fighting for Our Lives" which shows scene after scene, throughout all of the agricultural areas of California, in which the largely Anglo Teamster goons attack the mostly Chicano UFW activists with pipes and baseball bats.

In June 1975, twenty years ago, Gov. Jerry Brown signed the ALRA into law, and, in so doing, hoped to bring an end to the violence in the fields and state-supervised procedures to govern collective bargaining in California agriculture. The new law also marked the symbolic end of the historic exclusion of farm workers from the protections afforded all other private sector workers in this country. Within six months the UFW won 114 ALRB-supervised union representation elections and ultimately defeated the Western

Conference of Teamsters in election after election. However, Teamsters, Local 890, soundly defeated the UFW in elections held at Bud Antle, Inc.

On March 10, 1977 the UFW and Western Conference of Teamsters reached a five-year agreement under which the UFW was given sole jurisdiction over all agricultural field workers. The agreement was silent regarding Bud Antle, Inc., and was not renewed when it expired in 1982.

By 1978 the UFW had won some 250 ALRB-supervised elections. In 1982, they could claim 182 contracts with growers, and another 89 were in active negotiation. Estimates of the number of farm workers under contract in this period range from 30,000 (peak work force of all growers under contract) to 108,000 (UFW membership count based on number of different individuals employed).

By 1981 the UFW had clearly established its deserved position of national leadership of the struggle of farm workers for a better life. But there were already signs of trouble, both external and internal.

The 1979 lettuce strike, initially called to force lettuce growers to renew their expired contracts, quickly degenerated into a bitter, no-holds-barred contest for survival. Just eleven of the twenty-eight Imperial Valley growers were struck, but their production accounted for about one-third of the winter lettuce

harvest. Ultimately, just six of the struck lettuce growers signed contracts with the UFW, including Sun Harvest, Inc., the largest.

The rancor of the 1979 lettuce strike brought the UFW face-to-face with a hardened and even tougher employer community. Some growers relocated their operations to Yuma, Arizona, to evade the ALRB and its requirement to bargain in good faith. Most importantly, Sun Harvest, Inc., the largest lettuce grower and the most important UFW contract, re-organized their operations, sub-contracting work that had previously been performed directly by unionized Sun Harvest employees out to non-union sub-contractors, a practice that is plainly an unfair labor practice, in fact if not in law. Ultimately, hundreds of UFW members were laid off and not rehired. Finally, in 1983, Sun Harvest discontinued business and sold all of its equipment.

A second new tactic was also adopted by the employers: sue the workers for lost production during the strike. Maggio, Inc., was the leader in developing this tactic. The main charge brought by Maggio against the UFW was that violent and illegal picketing prevented non-union crews from harvesting lettuce. Moreover, the loss was valued, not at the price level appropriate to normal, non-strike conditions, but instead at prices inflated by the strike. When as little as 10% to 15% of the lettuce supply is removed from the market, prices go up by a much larger factor, nearly doubling

during the 1979 strike. Maggio claimed its losses at the inflated value. Maggio has prevailed in the courts, although the decision is presently under appeal.

Finally, the election of a Republican governor in California in 1982 brought new anti-labor pressures on the ALRB. In the words of one long-time former ALRB staffer, the struggle in the fields was brought directly into the staff and Board of the agency that had been intended to defend the rights of workers.

The newly aggressive grower community, with the tacit, and sometimes overt cooperation of the increasingly pro-grower ALRB, began to challenge UFW representation. In 1986, the Deukmajian-appointed majority took control of the ALRB. By 1987 decertification elections, stripping the UFW of the right to represent workers where they had previously won representation elections comprised a majority of those supervised by the ALRB.

Today, none of the Delano table grape growers have collective bargaining agreements with any union. Only three Salinas Valley vegetable growers have union contracts covering field workers: Bud Antle, Inc., Royal Packing Company, and a small organic farm, Riverside Farms, all with Teamsters, Local 890.

There are probably fewer than 20,000 field workers under union contract today. No one publicly discusses the number of contracts but it is surely fewer than 40.



An indicator of the effect of these developments on farm worker wage rates can be constructed from a direct comparison of field worker wage rates with the corresponding ones for manufacturing workers in California. This ratio, analogous to the concept of "parity" used in measuring the relative trend of prices farmers receive for their products, reflects the economic value placed on farm work.

FIGURE 1. AG TO MFG. WAGE RATES

FIGURE 2. AG TO MFG. WAGE RATES - 5 YEAR

What happened over the past dozen years to bring the once-promising farm labor movement of the 1960s and 1970s to its present state? In this presentation I want to specifically address four factors: within the industry, within the farm labor force itself, within the two principal unions and, finally, the direction that farm labor organizing seems to be taking today.

Industry trends

FIGURE 3. TRENDS IN F-V PRODUCTION

FIGURE 4. LETTUCE

FIGURE 5. BROCCOLI

FIGURE 6. STRAWBERRIES

FIGURE 7. U.S. FARM SIZE TRENDS

FIGURES 8 - 11. VEGETABLE FARMS IN CALIF

FIGURE 12. CALIF FARM EMPLOYMENT

FIGURE 13. FARM LABOR DEMAND

FIGURE 14. WAGES BY SECTOR

FIGURE 15. WAGES, CALIFORNIA FIELD WORKER

FIGURE 16. FARM LABOR CONTRACTOR EMPLOYMENT

FIGURE 17. FLCS, NUMBER BY SIZE

FIGURE 18. FLCS, EMPLOYMENT BY SIZE

FIGURE 19. FLC INTERVIEW STRUCTURE

FIGURE 20. MATCHED INTERVIEW SET 3

FIGURE 21 - 24. INTERVIEW RESULTS

Who are today's farm workers?

- immigrants, young, male, low education
- increasing numbers of indigenous Latino migrants
  - Vista Community Clinic findings
  - Runsten/Kearney

UFW and Teamsters today

Recent history of UFW

- 1994 representation elections
- new contracts
- on-going contract negotiations

Teamsters

Recent history of Teamsters, Local 890

- July 7, 1994, election at Royal Packing Co.

Teamsters	890	307
-----------	-----	-----

No union		46
----------	--	----

Void		6
------	--	---

Challenged		11
------------	--	----

- July 12, 1994, signed contract w/ Riverside Farms

90 employees

Other organizations

Lessons and the future of farm labor organizing

- no substitute for building the grass-roots base
- conflict among competing unions can serve as stimulus
- immigration policy and possible guest worker program