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WHY A GRAPE BOYCOTT

Eliseo Medina

In nearly every major city of the United States today there are California-based union farm workers. They are there, they hope temporarily, to promote the boycott against California grapes and seek broad understanding and support from the consumer community.

They are far from their homes and most of their relatives. They are away from their friends, living new lives in strange places under difficult conditions. Why do they do it? Because there is no other way forward. The alternative is to stand still, and in so doing to hand down to their children the bleak frustration they have lived with, with no security, no dignity, and very little hope. To get from where they are to where they want to be, they must go together. They must organize, and for workers that means to unionize.

This is not the first effort to unionize among farm workers. It is simply the first one that has succeeded, and it is succeeding, slowly but surely. To understand the significance of the progress that has been made, one only needs to know that previous efforts of farm workers ended in bitterness and often bloodshed.

A reasonable person might ask, "Aren't there legal procedures for determining the rights and the wishes of workers with respect to having unions?"

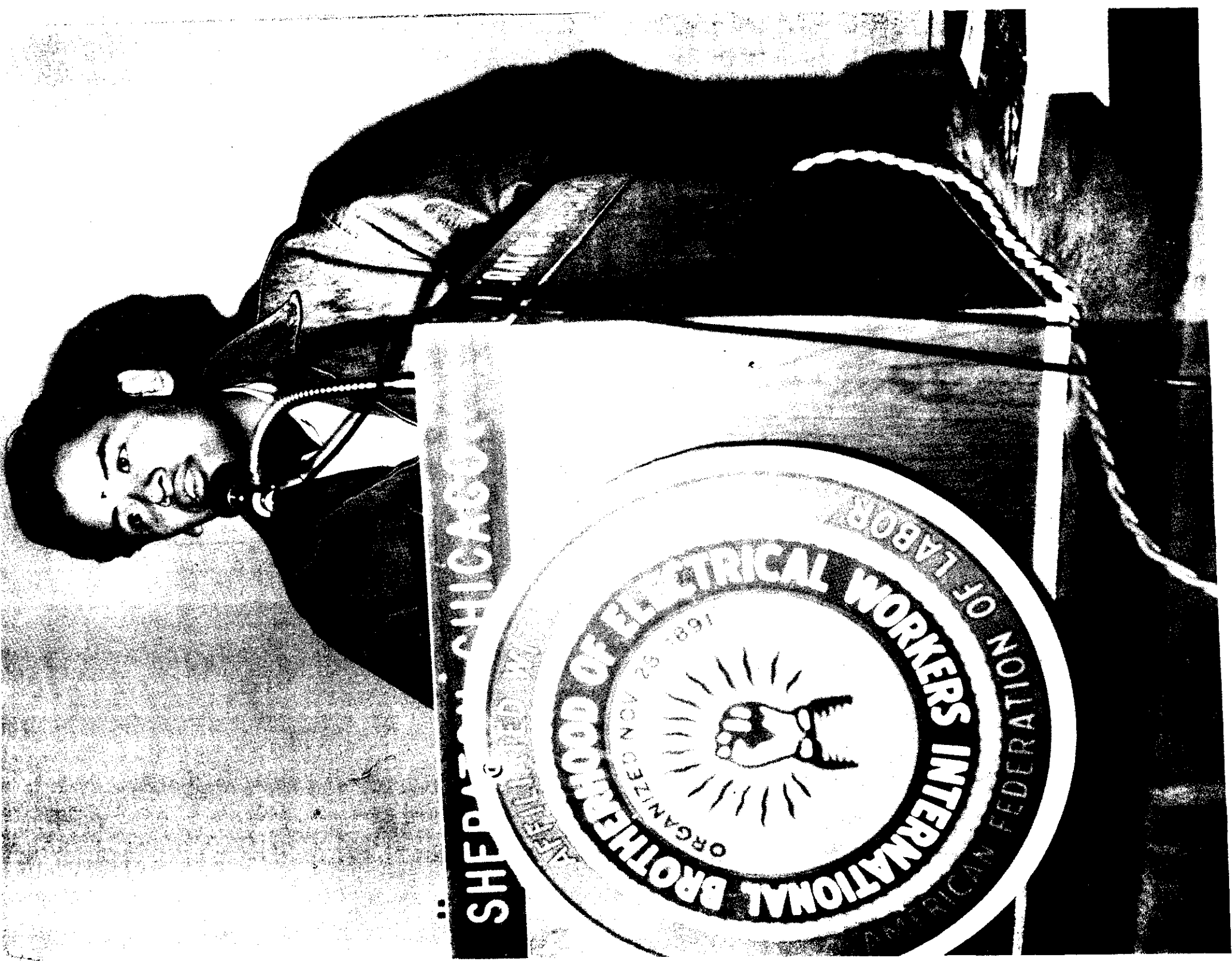
The answer is "Yes" for millions of American workers — but not for farm workers! They are specifically excluded from the coverage of the Federal law that assures and protects the rights of other workers to organize and to bargain collectively. The same person might say, "But surely

some reasonable procedure could be worked out to determine the wishes of the workers and give them some equal treatment where these rights are concerned.

Such a proposition sounds reasonable. As a matter of fact, hundreds of priests, rabbis, ministers, professors, industrialists, and others have thought so, and have offered their services as third party participants. The employers have turned down every such effort.

Denied the protection and procedures under the Federal law and faced with the growers' refusal even to discuss the matter of union recognition, the workers were forced to choose between striking and crawling. They said they would no longer be the last vestige of the "crawling American." In 1965 they struck.

The built-in pitfalls of farm labor



SHERAZADE CHICAGO

Eliseo Medina is the director of the United Farm Workers Chicago Boycott office. Like most of the union members who staff the forty or more offices across the U.S. and Canada, he was working in the grape fields a few years ago. Born in Mexico 23 years ago, he came to southern California with his family in 1956. Vacation and after-school hours were spent working in the fields with the other members of the family; after eighth grade he left school to work full-time.

A copy of the union newspaper led in 1965 to his first union meeting where he heard Chavez. He joined the union and later the union staff because as he says, "Here was somebody who was telling what was wrong but more importantly saying that something could be done about it — that we *can* do something to change things."

The Chicago office was opened in 1966. Mr. Medina joined it in

July, 1967. As is the case with most of their offices, things are run on a shoestring. The staff receives \$5 a week plus room and board. Often the workers try to make their own arrangements for their board and room to take this burden off the union. Office space is sometimes donated; sometimes a local union or other group will pick up the rent tab for the office space or the workers' rooms.

According to Mr. Medina, the biggest problem facing the Chicago boycott office is the size of the city, which tends to make it impersonal. The city has so many problems of its own that it is difficult to turn the attention of Chicagoans to the farm workers' problems. Nevertheless the boycott has been about 40% effective. (The market for grapes has been cut that much.) Prices on the remaining 60% have had to be lowered because of the boycott, so the whole Chicago table grape market

has been affected. If one includes the markets in the other large cities where the union has offices, it is estimated that the growers losses in these areas total between 15 and 30 million dollars.

In addition to the cities which have staff and offices, there are approximately 200 cities and towns where committees of housewives, trade unionists, clergy, and students try to get the farm workers message to the consumer.

(It is interesting to note that the federal government has used its enormous buying power to favor the growers. In one of the last years of the Johnson administration the number of grapes shipped to South Vietnam jumped from 250,000 pounds to 500,000 pounds. In Nixon's first year in office it has gone to 4,000,000 pounds. The Farm Workers Union has filed suit against the Pentagon as a strikebreaker. The case is pending in New York.)



strikes became immediately apparent. Local courts went into action. Judges and public officials who have long been a part of the power structure in agriculture-dominated communities are "soft" on growers. Injunctions were quick and devastating.

The gates that these injunctions opened in the picket lines were soon filled with masses of strike-breakers, green-card visa holders from Mexico, who had easy entrance into the United States because of the laxity of the Government in enforcing its immigration policy. The green-carders flooded the strike-bound fields, often in buses provided by growers and escorted by local police, ready and willing to undercut their brothers because of economic conditions in Mexico that make U.S. farm wages, however miserable by American standards, look very, very good.

Another technique, one familiar to those in the civil rights movement, was to try to break the back of the union by raising wages and cleaning up the camps of the farm laborers, but without union recognition or any contract. The "reforms" of course lasted only as long as the company wished. One grower increased wages to \$1.30 an hour, but with no contract; wages were reduced again after a few months. Those who traveled in the South just prior to the Supreme Court decision regarding school segregation will recall the new schools for Negroes which blossomed all over the landscape. This sudden effort to make the dual school system "equal" might, it was hoped, enable it to survive.

Faced with such limitations on the strike's effectiveness, the farm worker reinforced his strike activities by introducing the boycott, which he realized was his last best hope of success.

The current boycott was started against one company, Giumarra Vineyards Corporation in the Bakersfield area of California, probably the Nation's largest shipper of fresh table grapes.

To frustrate the boycott, the Giumarra Company started shipping



its grapes in cartons bearing the labels of its competitors. Whereas Giumarra normally shipped under a half dozen labels, suddenly there were 50 or 60 labels available to them, lent by their "competitors." Under such conditions the union had no alternative but to include all of the "competitors" in the boycott. thus the action against all California grapes.

That is where it stands today and that is why California farm workers — Mexican-American, Filipino-American, Negro-American and "Anglos" — can be found in Boston, New York, Washington, Chicago, Cleveland, Seattle, and the other big cities rallying support for the "Don't Buy Grapes" campaign.

Here, in Chicago, the boycott had been very effective until Jewel Food Stores started to buy grapes, once again, in June. Jewel officials, as usual, claimed neutrality. It wasn't until a couple of weeks ago that we really knew just how "neutral" they

were. Examples are:

On May 20, 1969, one month before they started to buy grapes, they wrote a letter to Congressman Charles Melvin Price, requesting legislation that would give farm workers the right to have union elections but which would also prohibit strikes, boycotts and would subject farm workers to compulsory arbitration.

They are also pushing a bill, to be introduced by Rep. James "Pate" Philips in the next session of the Illinois General Assembly, which would prohibit picketing by more than three people and impose a \$500 fine and six months in jail as punishment. It was specifically drawn up against the grape boycott but can be applied to anybody.

On June 24, 1969, they put out a mass mailing to all their managers giving them grower anti-union literature and telling them that these were the true facts.

With Jewel, the name of neutrality is money.





So we ask the public to support us by not shopping at Jewel Food Stores. Every person that refuses to shop at Jewel is a vote for social justice.

The growers have complained about having the boycott used against them, but in at least one instance they had no scruples about applying boycott pressure against a fellow grower. The grower in question had a franchise for cars and tractors and a seed company. He was told by the other growers that they would no longer buy these products from him if he negotiated a contract with the union.

The first series of boycotts were against the wine grape growers. By and large these were successful. The union now has contracts with approximately 70% of the wine grape growers. The next step has been to win union recognition from the growers of table grapes, beginning

with Giumarra, one of the largest; the union began by seeking union recognition from them. They got nowhere even after they succeeded in 1967 in organizing 95% of the strike breakers brought in by Giumarra after the initial strike. The union requested a meeting with the company to discuss a union election. When, after many delays, a meeting was finally held, those present said they could not speak for the company. Again as had been the case with the wine grape growers, the only course open to the union was the boycott. The boycott against Giumarra began well over a year ago.

We are determined to continue our struggle until we win. As the great revolutionary Mexican leader Emiliano Zapata said, "It is better to die on your feet than to live on your knees." We have lived on our knees long enough; now we are demanding justice and we will not turn back.