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STOP THE SLAUGHTER!



Viva la Causa! Viva la Huelga!

AN INTERVIEW WITH ELISIO MEDINA By Norman Roth

Over 17,000 farm worker families have joined the United Farm Workers Organizing Committee since it was formed in August, 1966 out of the merger between the National Farm Workers Association, led by Cesar Chavez, and the Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee of the AFL-CIO. The UFWOC consists of many ranch committees; it holds a direct charter from the AFL-CIO. Its symbol is the Aztec black thunderbird. The red and black colors are those of the flag seen in Mexico at every strike . . . red for the blood of the workers, black for mourning.

The grape boycott is probably the most successful in recent history in the U.S. The UFWOC has signed contracts with eleven growers of grapes and other products such as almonds, lettuce and peanuts. The resistance of the growers and the government are a measure of their fear that further success will be contagious. The U.S. Army claims "neutrality" in sending over five times as many grapes to Vietnam as before the boycott.

NORMAN ROTH is a millwright. He has been a unionist for 28 years. He helped found the first United Auto Workers' Summer Labor School. He was president of a UAW local for four years and is a member of LABOR TODAY's editorial board.

What is the main problem faced by the farm workers today?

The main problem is that we are not covered by the same legislation which gives industrial workers the right to organize. When the law was passed in 1935, we were excluded as a concession in the political bargaining to get the bill passed. Because we are not covered by these laws, we don't have any protection for organizing our union. That is the major stumbling block at this point.

Why was the boycott decided upon as the main tactical struggle instead of cutting off the source of labor through the strike and picketing?

The strike is the ultimate weapon for all other unions. We have found that for us it is usually the first step. When we walk out on strike we always get the local workers to walk out. But, within two or three days, buses rolling from Tijuana and Mexicali, Mexico, arrive loaded to the gills with "greencarders" to replace the strikers. "Green-

carders" have permanent residence in the U.S., but return to their homes in Mexico every night. There is a federal law that says that no "green-carders" can be brought in from Mexico to break a strike. It is an amendment to the Immigration and Naturalization Act of 1952, Public Law #414. There is also a state law that says when you recruit workers to work in a struck place, they must be informed that there is a strike in progress. But these laws are seldom complied with. We complain to the government. Last year we had the Justice Department nailed to the wall. They had to act because they had beaten around the bush and hadn't done anything. But within three days, a federal judge in Los Angeles granted an injunction prohibiting the federal government from enforcing its own laws. Everyone was happy except us. The growers were happy—they had their scabs. The federal government was happy—they didn't have to enforce their laws. It is

How far did you get in school and what type of an education did you get?

I went up to the sixth grade. It is very common, at least where minority groups are concerned in rural areas, that the growers control the school boards and everything else. They try to rush the kids through school, or push them into dropping out. For instance, in Delano, many times the children of the strikers have been suspended from school for wearing their "Huelga" (strike) buttons and union buttons. What they wanted us to do was very obvious. They wanted us to drop out of school so we could go to work in the fields. The basic philosophy of the growers is that if the children get an education, they are not going to be willing to work for such low wages and bad conditions. They'll go on at least to become a mechanic or something else and not a farm laborer. Growers believe that the more educated people get, the less willing

three managed to go on to high-school. Two or three out of about 130, and only one or two of those got to a two year college.

What is the attitude of the teachers toward the students?

In my school there was only one Mexican-American teacher. No black teachers or Puerto Ricans. The rest of the teachers were "Anglos," and were friends or relatives of the growers. They have this paternalistic attitude of "well, these kids don't know anything." They were indifferent to our problems. They don't understand that Mexicans and black people have a different background, different culture and there are concessions they have to make. They are only interested in seeing that these kids get into the fields and work, picking the grapes of the growers.

What were the major organizing difficulties you had to overcome?

Getting the Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, Filipinos, blacks and whites to work together. You wouldn't believe how



ELISIO MEDINA is 23 and Chicago Coordinator for the UFWOC since late 1967. He came to this country at the age of ten, and quit school two years later to work full time supplementing the family income. He joined the union when the famous Delano strike started in 1965, and soon became a picket captain. His present assignment covers Illinois, Wisconsin and Indiana.

a classical example of using the poor people in Mexico against the poor in the United States.

I understand that the growers attempted to take your union to court to break the boycott.

This was the case when our strike began. Even though we couldn't be protected under the protective clauses of the NLRA, the growers still saw fit to raise hell with us because we were engaging in a secondary boycott. We said, "You can't have your pie and eat it too! Either we are covered on everything or nothing at all." Last year the NLRB handed down the decision that we were not covered at all. Since we are not covered we can set up a boycott against any store or any individual and it would not be illegal.

they'll be to take whatever the growers want to give.

What kind of schools do the children attend?

Most of them are regular schools. Delano is divided down the middle by a highway. There's only one school for the whole west side, the minority side of town, where the Mexicans, Puerto Ricans and others live. One school for about half the town's population. On the east side there are about four or five schools for the other half of the population. The one school is badly over-crowded and the teachers try to get rid of the pupils as fast as they can. There's a fantastic turnover. Kids are there for one or two or three years and drop out. Others take their places and it just keeps going on. Out of my class, I remember only about two or

difficult it is. The growers use race as a way of controlling the workers. They had segregated housing and in some instances they still do. A camp would be like some miniature town. In one part of it all the Mexicans would live. Another part, all Puerto Ricans, another all Filipinos, another, all the black people, and another, all the whites. So, they segregated the farm workers. Now let's say for instance, the white people would have better housing; the Filipinos would get, maybe, a nickel more per hour; the Mexicans would get better transportation; the Puerto Ricans would get better food, or what have you. They kept playing off one against the other. When the strike came, it finally gave us something in which we could unite and understand that we were just lash-

ing each others throats. At first it was difficult. But after a while we would hear, "What do you know, the Filipinos are good guys too! The Puerto Ricans are too, and so are the black people!" After a while, we began to think less and less in terms of race and more and more in terms of united in one struggle.

Was Chavez the spark plug in the struggle?

Yes, yes . . . He was the one who led the basic work. Cesar is the main reason that we are alive today. We have not been wiped out like other unions that have tried to organize the farm workers.

What is the relationship between men and women among the workers?

The traditional thing, especially among the Mexicans is the double standard. The man of course is supposed to be the dominant one. We had those problems and we still have them in some instances. More and more the women are beginning to be like Valentina and

also provides for fines and prison sentences for union leaders who would disobey this compulsory arbitration with the growers and their friends deciding the cases.

How does the United Farm Workers Organizing Committee view the political situation in the country since the Nixon election, specifically as it relates to labor struggles and your strike?

I think we are going to have a hard time with Nixon in office. He has been consistently anti-labor. He was quoted as saying, "I was elected to smash the Labor Bosses." He has been trying to smash the union and scatter the membership if he can. He has been the consistent friend of big business. During the election campaign he called our boycott a "descent into lawlessness." He knew full well we were not covered by the law that would allow us to have elections to determine collective bargaining representation and settle everything in a peaceable manner. We don't expect anything from the federal government. We don't be-

lieve they will enforce the law and stop the importing of "green-card scabs" from Mexico. We don't expect to be covered by the National Labor Relations Act at least for the next four years.

Has your union taken action to get the message back to the people in Mexico, the source of the "green-carders," as to how these people are being used to block the organization of the Farm Workers' union?

Yes. During a melon strike we had in Texas, a very active, very militant, newly organized brick makers local in Mexico kept in contact with us. One day, very early in the morning, about 50 of them took their red and black strike flags and formed a picket line across the bridge connecting the two

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"The last estimate of money lost by the growers (due to the boycott) amounted to about \$17,000,000 . . . Where it used to take around a hundred pounds of low priced grapes to bring in \$20 for the growers, they now must sell 2,000 pounds for the same \$20!"

all those famous women in history who fought side by side with the men in the Mexican Revolution. They are full partners in the struggle. Delores Huerta, our Vice-President, gets them out there and says, "let's get fighting," and really moves them into action. Her work has been outstanding in helping overcome male supremacist attitudes in the union.

How have the growers responded to the boycott?

One of the things they are doing is preparing legislation that would give us the right to organize but destroy our ability to win anything. It would establish a three man board appointed by the governor with salaries of \$23,500 a year. Strikes, boycotts, picketing and any direct action to make a really effective union, would be illegal. The law

your own people striking. Hunger is always the best ally of big business when they try to smash the poor.

What about the statements that are sometimes heard that the union is asking for lower wages than the growers are paying?

The statement is usually made that the growers are paying \$1.50 and we are asking for \$1.40. When we walked out in 1965 our terms were \$1.40 an hour. That has been almost four years ago and we are not going to settle for \$1.50 any more. We have signed contracts and established a minimum of \$1.90 an hour, health and welfare benefits, toilets in the fields, paid vacations, unemployment insurance and many things that farm workers never had in their lives. If they want to talk about just money, it is \$1.90 an hour, a 40-cent

increase over what they are now paying. The union and the workers are fighting for union recognition. The workers will get together in their particular ranches. We don't decide for them, they do. They formulate their set of terms and they negotiate for them. However, we are going to try to stabilize the minimum wage in all the ranches.

What attitude have the giant corporation growers taken to the small farmers?

They have brainwashed small farmers into thinking that they have something in common with the big growers. They tell them that if the farm workers organize "you will be the victim." The small farmer is led to believe that the farm worker is his enemy. He fails to see that our enemy and his enemy is the same—the huge corporation farmers. In Delano they average 3,825 acres each. These same growers, according to the 1966 Agricultural Conservation program, received \$93,773,971 in subsidies. This was just for soil bank and acreage diversion. This does not include price support, water subsidy, labor subsidy, or the money poured into universities for research for new machines to replace the workers, nor things like the state recruiting workers for the growers. They get pampered silly and they still talk and complain about the poor people who are on welfare. In 1967 there was \$3.2 billion allotted to the growers for not planting cotton and soy beans. This never went to the small farmer, it went to the huge corporation farmers. It is no longer a case of small farmers. In California, 7% of the farms employ 75% of all the workers. 60% of the farms average less than 60 acres. This 60% own only 5% of the total arable land in California. The other 40% own the remaining 95% of the land. The 40% will strangle the 60% out of business.

What is your position on the growers' use of insecticides?

We sent a letter on Jan. 14, 1969, to the growers suggesting that we begin negotiating immediately the application of poisonous insecticides. These are used in the fields supposedly to kill

insects, however, they are so poisonous that many of the workers have acquired lung cancer and skin diseases. The growers have not yet responded to our letters. We feel that this is a critical issue. It demands immediate attention even if other labor demands have to wait. Cesar Chavez has said, "We will be damned, and we should be, if we will permit human beings to sustain permanent damage to their health from economic poisoning." We have tried for the last three months to look into the public records that the growers have to file, showing what kinds of poisons they use on their produce. The judge issued an injunction prohibiting the public records from being scrutinized. What do the growers have to hide if they have to get injunctions to keep us from seeing those records? If they will not negotiate on this our only alternative is to increase the boycott.

How successful is the grape boycott?

Very successful. The last estimate of money lost by the growers amounted to about \$17,000,000. Delano reports that as of late January, the growers had over 2½ million boxes of grapes still left in cold storage. Last year at the same time they had 800,000 boxes. Last December they dumped 130 carloads of grapes into wine because they couldn't sell them. This is 130,000 boxes of table grapes that have gone into wine. Four wineries have had to reopen so they could crush all the table grapes that have not been sold.

Do they lose much when they convert table grapes to wine?

Yes. A very low price for table grapes would be \$2.25 for a box of 24 pounds. The average price for a box of table grapes is \$3.50 or about \$290 a ton. Normally the price of wine grapes is only \$40 a ton. Because of the boycott there has been such a surplus of available grapes for wine that the price for these grapes has been cut in half to \$20 a ton. Where it used to take around a hundred pounds of low priced grapes to bring in \$20 for the growers, they now must sell 2,000 pounds for the same \$20!

Where do the strikers get their financial support?

The real weight is carried by the labor unions of this country. For instance, here in Chicago, we get ours from labor unions. Locals make donations to keep us going. They make pledges to send us so much per month until the strike is ended. Those that are poorer just send us a check once in awhile, but it adds up to the money we need. There is never quite enough, but it keeps the strike going. Besides the major contributions by the unions, there are also church groups, civic groups, and individuals who have donated a lot of time and money.

How many major chains do you have under agreement not to sell grapes now?

Eleven chains in the city and I would estimate about 100 to 150 independent stores. The chains include National Tea, Jewel, Kroger, A&P, Hi-Low, Dominicks, Hillman, Pick and Save, Wieboldt and Red Rooster.

The entire struggle appears to be centered on the grape strikers. What about other agricultural workers?

Wherever there are farm workers being exploited our union will be there. At this point we are organizing in Texas where there are cantaloupes and bell peppers. We are organizing in Wisconsin where there are cucumbers and tomatoes. We're organizing in upstate New York where there are also grapes. We're going to start organizing in Michigan where there are cherries and many different kinds of crops. We're organizing in Washington and the state of Oregon. There is another union organizing in the state of Ohio where they have tomato pickers. They are not affiliated with us at this point, but they are a bona fide union, they use our same symbols. Everywhere throughout the nation there are farm groups affiliated with us or other unions. Wherever farm workers are exploited we will be there.

Roth . . . Thank you for the interview, Elsie. Viva la Causa. Viva la Huelga.

Medina . . . Thank you. Don't buy grapes!