

THE CHURCH  
AND THE DELANO GRAPE STRIKE - A PARTIAL REPORT

Introduction

This paper is written for churchmen who need a summary of the facts and issues surrounding the grape strike. It is written from the perspective of those churchmen who have sought to assist the workers in their struggle to be strong and to bargain with their employers. Several things are assumed:

- 1) There is real human suffering among farm workers that results from superior attitudes (even contempt) on the part of many established citizens and from basic injustice for which we are all responsible.
- 2) Mainline Protestant churches in general have failed to include farm workers in their life and work. They are thus isolated from farm worker suffering and have tended in the natural course of institutional life to affirm the unjust status quo.
- 3) Growers and workers like other men have a capacity for both good and evil. Too much power by one group coupled with basic economic self-interest will result in injustice, i.e., the powerful group will take advantage of the less powerful.\* At present growers have enormous power compared to their workers. Justice demands a countervailing power that will come as workers are organized and have the right to bargain on issues that directly affect their lives. For decades our denominations have supported the right of workers to so organize. Both the Northern and Southern California Councils of Churches have called for the extension of collective bargaining rights under the National Labor Relations Act to agricultural workers.

Beginning of the Strike

Filipino workers who have lived and worked in the Delano area for years were dissatisfied with wages in the 1965 Delano area grape harvest. While working in the Coachella Valley they received \$1.40 per hour plus an incentive piece rate. Upon returning to Delano for the harvest there they discovered that wages were \$1.25 per hour plus a small incentive. With the help of the Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee (AWOC), they organized for bargaining. Letters were sent to the employers asking for an opportunity to discuss wages, working conditions and a union contract. The letters were not answered. The workers then publicly announced that they would strike if employers refused to enter into bargaining. The employers did not respond. On September 8, 1965, somewhere in the neighborhood of 600-800 farm workers (mostly Filipino) went on strike in an attempt to force bargaining.

The issue of supporting the strike was now raised for other workers in the Delano harvest. On September 16, 1965, approximately 1,100 Mexican-American farm workers met in Delano under the leadership of the National Farm Workers Association (NFWA).

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\*Simone Weil in Waiting for God states it this way: "When two human beings have to settle something and neither has the power to impose anything on the other, they have to come to an understanding. Then justice is consulted, for justice alone has the power to make two wills coincide....But when there is a strong and a weak, there is no need to unite their wills. There is only one will, that of the strong. The weak obeys." Group relations are even more likely to be controlled by power and self-interest at the expense of compassion and justice.

They voted to join the strike. On September 19th, AWOC and NFWA agreed to work together and set up a joint strike committee. On September 20, 1965, more than 1,200 Mexican American farm workers joined the strike. Nearly half of the 5,000 harvest hands were on strike on this date.

Instead of bargaining with their workers, many of whom have worked faithfully for them for two decades or more, the struck employers began a systematic effort to recruit replacements (strikebreakers).

The pattern of the strike from that day on has been picketing and community organization work by the unions to get strikebreakers to join the strike and recruitment by employers to continue the harvest and most recently to get pruning done in preparation for the 1966 harvest.

### The Leaders of the Strike

The director of AWOC is Al Green. His offices are in Stockton. The local organizer in Delano is Larry Itliong. He has lived in Delano for six (6) years, is Filipino and has a close relationship with the workers that extends over a number of years.

The director of the NFWA is Cesar Chavez. As a member of a migrant family he spent much time in Delano. Four (4) years ago this spring he resigned as national organizer for the Community Service Organization (CSO) and moved (with his wife and eight (8) children) to Delano to build a grass roots farm worker organization that would be completely supported by its members.

### Some Important Events in the Strike

- 1) Harrassment against strikers in the early weeks included: one picket deliberately knocked down by a car, shooting at a picket sign, physical assault on several picketers by growers or their employees, "dusting" of pickets with sulphur spray, dust storm created next to pickets by fast moving tractors and cultivators, hundreds of photographs taken of picketers by police, filthy insults directed at women on the picket line, contemptuous and bigoted remarks directed at Mexican-Americans on the picket lines, stopping of cars of strikers and their friends by police with questioning, searching and photographing. The police have resisted most efforts to press charges against employers and their managerial personnel.
  - 2) It is known that three growers were deliberately run down by a car driven by a Filipino worker. He has been tried and convicted. Workers have been accused of burning grape boxes and stakes and of using violence and threats to harrass strikebreakers. As a matter of fact violence by workers has been minimal thanks to training and leadership in non-violence provided by the strike leaders, churchmen and volunteers from CORE and SNCC. On December 16 the mayor of Delano publicly thanked the strikers for their non-violent methods.
- September 22-23, 1965 - Visit by observation team from the California Church Council. They saw strikebreakers leaving the fields as a result of picketing and were "dusted" by fast moving tractors. They talked to all sides and issued a statement calling for negotiations.

- 4) October 17, 1965 - Migrant Ministry staff person, the Rev. David Havens was arrested by the Kern County Sheriff for reading Jack London's definition of a strikebreaker to strikebreakers. He was standing on public property and volunteered to read in place of a worker who had been warned by the sheriff not to speak or read to the workers. The case against Mr. Havens was dismissed by a Bakersfield judge on the grounds that the arrest violated his constitutional right of free speech.
- 5) October 19, 1965 - Forty four (44) persons including nine (9) clergymen were arrested in Kern County for shouting "Huelga" to strikebreakers in the fields. The same activity was at that time legal in Tulare County and is now acceptable in both Kern and Tulare Counties. The trials are pending.
- 6) Statement by the Delano Ministerial Association criticizing visiting clergymen and stating that "such controversial matters (as the Delano strike) should be handled through proper and established channels that justice and peace might prevail." A later public statement "deplored the unethical tactics of the Migrant Ministry" (no details were supplied).
- 7) December 13-14, 1965 - The city manager of Delano recommended that the City Council call in the State Conciliation Service to mediate the strike. On December 20 the City Council refused, arguing that to call for mediation would be to take sides with the workers since the growers do not want negotiations.
- 9) December 16, 1965 - Visit to Delano by the United Auto Workers' president, Walter Reuther. Approximately 900 striking workers were on hand to greet him at a rally. The UAW pledged financial support to the strikers. Jim Drake and Dave Havens were assaulted by a local grower the day of Reuther's visit. The grower was arrested and charged.
- 10) Late December - Announcement by NFWA of a national boycott against Schenley Products and Delano grapes. Schenley owns one of the ranches being struck.
- 11) January 27, 1966 - A freak accident took the life of NFWA worker Roger Terrones. The Rev. Jim Drake led the workers in a memorial service in Delano that day.
- 12) January 38, 1966 - A Visalia court denied a permanent injunction against picketing by AWOOC and NFWA on the docks in San Francisco, Oakland and Stockton. Di-Giorgio Corporation had been granted a temporary injunction against such picketing after shipments of grapes were stopped at the docks when Longshoremen refused to cross the picket lines.
- 13) Picketing continues in Delano during the pruning season. On an average day, 80 pickets are on the line. Only rarely do non-workers appear on the picket lines at this stage in the strike. Strikebreakers are being recruited from Los Angeles, Santa Maria, Texas, Mexico, etc. In many cases they are not being told that there is a strike. This is a violation of the law. The Chamisal recruitment office in El Paso, Texas has publicly admitted recruiting 200 workers for Delano. As strikebreakers leave the fields under the pressure of picketing, there is an effort to replace them with new strikebreakers. There is no indication that employers are considering negotiations as an alternative to the present conflict.

*if NFWA  
clerk  
reads  
to  
Delano*

### The Role of the Migrant Ministry

For several years the Migrant Ministry has encouraged the denominations to support community development work among seasonal farm workers, i.e., to help farm workers organize for self-help action as an alternative to handing out special services. Too often special services (remedial education, church school, health services, recreation, etc.) were planned outside the farm worker community and imposed on the people and in general these services were targeted on symptoms of poverty and weakness rather than on underlying causes (e.g., a man with a decent income will buy health services for his family rather than go to the special "migrant clinic").

In Tulare County, the Migrant Ministry together with the United Church of Christ (UCC) launched a two year project to help farm workers organize for self-help action. The project was approved by the Board of the local Migrant Ministry (Kings-Tulare Migrant Ministry (KTMM) and accepted by the annual meeting of the KTMM. In being responsive to the needs of low income people staff members (Jim Drake, Dave Havens, Gil Padilla) worked on self-help housing, a gas and oil cooperative, voter registration, casework and counseling, illegal wages paid in sugar beets, an increase in rent in the 30 year old metal shelters in Linnell and Woodville labor camps, etc. In every case, the staff responsibility was to help the farm workers work together to solve their problems and in that way to help them build an organization of their own which would continue and become self-supporting.

In the spring of 1965, the NFWA became involved in a labor dispute with the Mont Arbor Nurseries of McFarland, California. The NFWA represented over 80% of the binders and budders in Mont Arbor's rose grafting operation. The workers asked for a chance to bargain on wages and working conditions. The Company refused (with advice from lawyers and from Joe Brosmer of the Agricultural Labor Bureau) to acknowledge the existence of the organized workers and a strike resulted. Cesar Chavez asked for help from Migrant Ministry staff. Jim Drake and Gil Padilla worked briefly on the strike. The strike ended when Mont Arbor raised wages significantly and a number of the workers decided to return to their jobs without a contract.

In the summer of 1965, 67 Tulare County farm workers came to the Migrant Ministry staff and asked for help in a labor dispute. Many of the workers (men and women) lived in the Woodville labor camp and had developed close relationships with Drake, Havens and Padilla. The workers complaints were clear: they were receiving \$1.25 per hour in pre-harvest grape work, and they hoped for \$1.40 per hour; there were no toilets for the men or the women and only one drinking cup for 67 workers; the previous day, the foreman had fired the slowest worker and promised to do the same each day as an incentive to speed up work; the foreman was fond of handling the women and watching them go to the bathroom in the fields. The Migrant Ministry staff agreed to help them communicate with the employer. They asked for a chance to bargain on wages and working conditions. Their letters and telegrams were not answered. A strike resulted. It was eventually beaten down by the use of strike-breakers.

The Delano strike involves workers from Kern and Tulare Counties. The Migrant Ministry has been close to some of these workers. The NFWA asked for help in the Delano strike and the Migrant Ministry responded.

The Migrant Ministry has provided the following kinds of assistance to the striking grape workers:

- 1) Jim Drake (UCC staff person under MM supervision) has been in Delano since September 20th. He has done whatever jobs needed to be done, including picketing, administrative work, coordination of the boycott. His counsel is respected and he has helped give leadership in non-violence. When specific religious "services" are needed, Jim is present and trusted (e.g., memorial service for Roger Terrones).
- 2) Gil Padilla was in and out of Delano from September 20th to December 31st. He continued to follow through on casework in Tulare County and on the Linnell and Woodville rent dispute. On December 31, Gil left the MM staff at the termination of the special Rosenberg Foundation grant which supported his salary.
- 3) Dave Havens worked actively in Delano for a month after September 20th. From late October on he has had primary responsibility to serve the developing farm worker organization in Tulare County (now affiliated with NFWA). He has been supervising intern Hy Robinson in providing services from the Porterville office and giving staff assistance to the workers involved in the rent dispute.
- 4) The MM asked for the California Church Council visitation team which came to Delano September 22-23, 1965.
- 5) The MM has encouraged churchmen throughout the state and across the country to support the striking families with contributions of food and money.
- 6) The MM has encouraged churchmen to visit Delano to observe the situation or, when they are of such a mind, to help the strikers.
- 7) The MM assisted the Bishops Committee for the Spanish-Speaking and the National Council of Churches as they planned the December 13-14 visitation by national Church leaders.

It is clear that the MM has both a responsibility to stand with the workers in their basic struggle and a responsibility to help churchmen understand the social and theological issues involved in this struggle. The latter task is enormous since most of our churches are separated from the realities of the workers' world. It is also often a frustrating task because there is urgent need to develop concrete support for the workers who are still relatively weak in comparison to the established and extensive power of agricultural employers and their organizations (i.e., the time that is devoted to "explaining" cannot usually be used for "mobilizing").

Some people assume that the MM has stopped doing everything else but Delano. This is not true. There will be a summer program in 1966. The MM continues to provide supportive services to mission congregations, neighborhood houses and local MM committees, working in 22 areas of the state.

Many congregations in the San Joaquin Valley have expressed opposition to the Migrant Ministry's role in Delano. A number of them have withdrawn financial support from their local MM committees and are pressing their denominational bodies to do the same at the state Council of Churches level.

Some denominational bodies have already voted support for the strikers and/or the Migrant Ministry. Among them are: the San Francisco Presbytery of the UPUSA, the Board of Christian Social Concerns of the Southern California-Arizona Methodist Conference and the Board of Christian Social Concerns of the Northern California-Nevada Methodist Conference.

### Questions and Comments

Certain questions are asked again and again as churchmen engage in dialogue around the Delano grape strike:

- 1) Why is the Church involved in something like the Delano labor dispute? Because people are involved and some of those people have suffered over a period of years because of an unjust farm labor system that needs to be changed. The farm workers' struggle to be organized, like the Negro struggle, is a basic attempt to establish a measure of justice and thus to carve out a place of dignity for farm workers and their children. Where human worth and the alleviation of human suffering are at stake, the churches should be present and active. Of course, the Church is already involved as we minister in agricultural communities. The question is not whether we are involved but rather the nature of our involvement.
- 2) Why is the MM taking such a one-sided position in an economic dispute? First, let's face the fact that our denominations have for many years given one-sided institutional support to the managerial side of the tracks in agricultural communities. Our churches have been and are part and parcel of the strength of the established community and its traditional way of doing things. That way of doing things has worked untold hardships on low income people. Unless we stand up for change that traditional way will continue to hurt people.

The MM is a small part of the whole Church with a limited responsibility. Our task is to be with farm workers in their joy, their pain and their struggles. It is natural for our staff to be with farm workers in the Delano struggle.

Farm workers are not better people than their employers, but their cause is just. They are weak and oppressed and they should have the right to stand like men and deal as equals in the society that shapes their lives and the lives of their children. Christians who care about justice and human dignity should be on the side of the workers in this struggle. The alternative is to support an established farm labor system that is unfair.

- 3) Why is the MM against growers? The MM is not against growers as persons. Growers are people, like workers and ministers. In this particular situation they are people with too much power over their workers.\* Like other employers before them that unchecked power coupled with economic self-interest have worked to the disadvantage of farm workers. It is an all too typical human situation and does not prove that growers are bad. But people get hurt by this typical human situation. It is not a friendly act to employers to allow that situation

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\*This power imbalance is radical and should not be understated. Farm workers have very little going for them other than: the strength of their numbers, their rights under the law (when they are honored), and the moral rightness of their cause.

to continue. The way we treat farm workers on and off the job is an important moral issue. Who will communicate the urgency of that moral issue if the Church is silent?

The MM expects the Church to continue to be with agricultural employers; hopefully, the shape of that ministry will change to meet the challenges of our times (e.g., small farmers need help as they confront an unjustly structured commodity market).

- 4) Why does the MM create conflict? Wouldn't mediation and reconciliation be more appropriate to the Church's role?

The MM has not created conflict any more than Martin Luther King creates conflict in the South. The conflict exists in the life of the community. Low income people feel kept down and discriminated against. They are separated from the established institutions, including the churches. Their situation is painful and they worry about opportunity for their children. This situation, this cleavage exists. Farm workers feel it keenly. Middle class people do not feel it because they are participating in the fruits of community life and everything seems fine to them. When someone or some group says things are not fine, it comes as a shock to most church people, but low income people nod their heads.

Facing that cleavage, that conflict in the life of the community is painful but necessary and healthful. Many will refuse to face the truth. Christians are called to be free from illusions and to face the real world as it is.

The MM is enthusiastically in favor of equal communication between growers and workers. That is what the workers are asking for. The growers are against it except on terms that leave them in charge of final decisions. Workers are insisting upon having their own organization with their own representatives so that their true feelings and their collective strength can be part of any negotiation process. Communication between individual workers or crews of workers or labor contractors and employers can have the stamp of equality and genuineness but in the main it is clear to everyone involved who has the power and communication is limited by fear, unexpressed hostility, and paternalism.

Those who hope for genuine communication and reconciliation should encourage growers to meet with their organized workers and in the meantime help workers gain in strength so that what employers may not grant (equal negotiations) will still take place as the result of a power struggle (hopefully, a non-violent one).

What many churchmen now ask for is that the workers give up their collective strength and communicate with their employers on the employers' terms. This is that kind of reconciliation that asks the oppressed man to reconcile himself and his family to continued weakness and poverty.

- 5) How can Christians participate in a power struggle with all this means for the breakdown of human relations, the possibility of violence, the exaggeration on both sides, public notoriety, etc.?

Power is being exercised everyday in community life. Most of it is the quiet power of established institutions carrying on their daily tasks in the usual

Way. The "usual way" is not always just. Some people exercise influence to change the "usual way" in covert ways, e.g., a luncheon conversation or a telephone call with a member of the city council. Low income people have no such access to the seats of power. They also own little if any land and do not have large sums of money for campaign contributions; the editorial policy of local papers is normally more responsive to established interests than to low income outsiders. So when low income people want to make their voices felt they generally have to resort to visible means: large scale voter registration, picketing, delegations to city hall, etc.

Churchmen seem to accept without question the "usual ways" that power is exercised. Why should there be so much reaction to new forms of power exercised by farm workers and other low income people on behalf of a just cause?

Obviously there are ambiguities related to all of our actions in this world. Silence, neutrality, triviality are enormously ambiguous in a world when men lose self-respect and hope because of "things as they are." Christians are not called to withdraw from dangerous situations or to shun confused college kids; rather we should be present with our Lord and the more difficult the situation the more powerful the presence should be. As a matter of fact violence has been reduced because of the "Christian presence" with farm workers in Delano. I only wish that the Church were as relevantly present with agricultural employers.

- 6) What does a labor dispute have to do with the Gospel and the mission of the Church?

Farm workers are important people in the sight of God. But they are not treated that way by men and by the structures that men create. The way we treat farm workers (on and off the job) tends therefore to deny the truth of the Gospel we preach. Jesus' words are important and lasting because his life embodies the words. Farm workers and other men cannot hear and respond to the Gospel until our words take on flesh in the life of the world. The Church must be willing to risk its life to live out the urgent message we proclaim.

The hour is late for farm workers and for the Negroes of Watts, Oakland, etc. There are many years of hypocrisy and irrelevance to overcome if the power of God's caring is to penetrate to the places where men live their lives.

In Delano some churchmen are trying to say by deed that farm workers are important people who should be dealt with as men among men. God cares and our presence is a demonstration of that caring. If the Church were united in that presence, if we would put our institutional strength on the line in Delano (and Watts, etc.) then the message would be heard loud and clear. As a matter of fact, Jesus had to put his body on the line and that sacrifice bears the weight of his word to us.

This is not to say that the Church should be "present" with employers. But the form of our presence may be different with growers and workers. Among other needs the workers need our help in a morally just cause. Employers may need our help to confront a painful social situation that needs changing for everyone's sake. Both need the chastisement and the challenge of the Gospel as well as the comfort and strength of a message of faithfulness and a community of faith.



- 7) But isn't this dispute out of bounds for churchmen because it involves labor unions and economics?

I am hard put to understand the qualitative distinction between injustice in the life of the community and injustice in employment. People get hurt by both kinds of injustice and Christians should be concerned and involved.

A good labor organization is nothing but people working together with the help of paid and volunteer leaders. The unions in Delano are composed of workers. The NFWA was built from the ground up and is carefully democratic in its proceedings. These are people working together to change a bad situation just as the Southern Negro is working in organizations to change established patterns of racial discrimination. When people working together have justice on their side they deserve support.

- 8) Why "pick on" California farmers when wages are the highest in this state?

Wages for farm workers are higher in California than in all other states (excluding Hawaii). But even if farm workers made \$1.40 per hour (and they make more sometimes and less at other times) every week for 52 weeks of the year that would still only amount to \$2,912 as an annual income -- and farm workers do not work that regularly.

In addition, seasonal farm workers lack many other standard benefits such as time and a half for over-time, vacation and sick leave with pay, health insurance, unemployment insurance, grievance procedures, contract guarantees, etc. Too often toilets and sanitary drinking facilities are not provided.

The best answer is: we happen to be in California and that is the place where we are called to responsibility. Those who live in Texas are called to responsibility there. Should we ignore Oakland because Negroes suffer so much more dramatically in the Mississippi Delta?

- 9) What is so important about the National Labor Relations Act?

Farm workers are specifically excluded from the NLRA. If farm workers were covered under the NLRA then the following situation would pertain: a labor organization would have to demonstrate to the National Labor Relations Board that it represents 30% of the farm workers of a particular employer. If that is demonstrated then elections would be held under the supervision of the NLRB. In some situations workers might have to choose between several competing unions or vote for no organization. If 51% of the workers select a particular labor organization then the employer is required to bargain with the workers as they are represented by that union. Neither side is required to sign a contract. The NLRA also protects employers in matters such as secondary boycotts, etc.

The Migrant Ministry's efforts must be seen in the context of the Church's historical failure to serve low income people and in the context of deep cleavages in the life of the community. Being with farm workers would not be controversial if there were not a festering wound in the life of the community that results in suspicion and hostility on the part of farm workers and guilt and fear in the part

of established citizens. Somehow that wound must be confronted and healed. If will only happen as men who are used to humiliation learn to stand and take their place in community life and as those who are used to a superior place learn to share power and treat their brothers with respect. That day of healing seems to be a long way off. But the Church by its relevant presence in the Delanos of this Valley can announce its coming.

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