

1,500 sympathizers rally in Toronto

Danger of pesticide poisoning in fields

Sordid conditions haunt farm labourers as union fights for grape, lettuce boycott

The daily life of the predominantly Mexican-American farmworkers in the south-western area of the United States is characterized by maximum work hours for minimum pay under inhuman conditions.

Since 1962, when farmworker Cesar Chavez began to organize grapepickers near Delano, California, and since 1965, when his small association became the United Farmworkers of America, the farmworkers have been seeking to improve their lot through peaceful strikes and active boycotts.

Toronto, whose large Italian community annually produces large quantities of home-made wine, is North America's third largest consumer of grapes; on September 14, International Grape and Lettuce Boycott Day, the ninth anniversary of the 1965 grape-pickers' strike in the U.S., about 1,500 sympathetic Torontonians showed their solidarity with the farmworkers' cause by rallying at City Hall.

The farm labour problems are not strictly American. While most Canadian farms are still "family farms", many are being pushed over the brink of bankruptcy and agglomerated into "corporate" farms by the so-called "agri-business".

In Ontario's Holland Marsh area, seasonal non-resident labourers are brought in from surrounding areas to work the harvest for \$2 an hour. In the Niagara fruit belt, Italian

women from Toronto are used to pick grapes for similar wages.

The tobacco-growing areas around Norfolk County have always used migrant French-Canadian workers from Quebec, housing entire families in tar-paper shacks for the duration of the harvest.

And in many cases, non-landed immigrants are given a work visa for the duration of the harvest only, since many Canadian farmers complain that they cannot attract local labour with the conditions they offer.

Some success has been achieved by the farm labour movement. This year in Boston, A&P, the largest American food chain, removed all non-union grapes from its shelves, thereby "cleaning out" 95 per cent of the stores in that city.

And whereas only the Filipino and Chicano grape pickers around Delano, California were involved initially with farm labour organization, the union has spread to include agricultural workers across the United States. Even the Coca-Cola company, which owns the Minute-Maid orange groves in Florida, has signed a contract with the UFW to cover their predominantly black orange pickers.

In the accompanying article, Glendon student Richard Wagman reports on the history, progress and current state of the farmworkers' struggle.

over the same period last year, a decrease of 39 per cent.

According to government statistics, total grape imports into Canada have been cut by 50 per cent from last year's number. Even back in October 1973, Toronto grape sales were reduced by 74 carlots (88,800 lbs.) from the previous month.

Canadian lettuce predominates in Toronto, Montreal and Ottawa from July to September, which means that Canadian vegetarians supporting the boycott still have a chance to savour their favorite locally-grown head lettuce. (The boycott does not apply to romaine, leaf and other brands of lettuce from the U.S.) However, 60 to 70 per cent of the American grapes are sold between August and October, most of them during this month and the next.

CROMBIE'S DEN

In September 1973, 32 farmworkers came to Toronto to organize the boycott. At a meeting held in Mayor Crombie's office, all the major chain stores sent representatives to speak with the farmworkers except Dominion Stores. At that point three other chains — Miracle Mart, Food City and IGA — agreed to remove grapes and lettuce from the shelves as soon as Dominion did.

Dominion is the largest chain store in Ontario and Canada's largest buyer of non-UFW grapes and lettuce. Thus the farmworkers decided to picket Dominion stores as a focal point of the boycott.

In accord with the union's non-violent methods, several vigils and fasts have been held to draw attention to the farmworkers' cause.

The first vigil lasted for six days in the winter as 400 supporters sat outside the Dominion store at Bloor and Roberts Streets. It ended with mid-night mass at St. Peter's Church on Christmas eve. Mass picket lines congregated at five major plazas on May 4, 1974, the culmination of Farmworker Solidarity Week.

Another week-long vigil took place at the end of June in front of Dominion headquarters at Keele and Rogers Road. The executive management of the company was sobered on several occasions as they were forced to witness "acts" while driving into the office parking lot — short skirts or acts put on by the farmworkers and their children depicting life in the vineyards under pre-1970 conditions.

TEAMSTERS HOSTILE

The Western Conference of Teamsters has been the most hostile group aimed at destroying the advances made by the efforts of the United Farmworkers. The Teamsters, the largest single union in the world with a notorious reputation for corruption, has claimed to be the bargaining agent for the farmworkers in order to collect their dues, while offering them none of the benefits provided by the UFW.

As early as 1965 the Teamsters signed their first sweetheart agreement with the growers — a labour contract signed without consulting the workers and without representing their interests. Due to farmworker pressure, this contract was later renounced.

When the growers en masse refused to renegotiate with the UFW in April 1973, it was not just by coincidence. Frank Fitzimmons,

president of the Western Conference of Teamsters, appeared as the guest speaker at the annual convention of the American Farm Bureau and proposed that the growers sign contracts with the Teamsters with no representation vote among the workers and no farmworker representation in the Teamsters union.

The offer was too good to refuse, and on April 15, 1973 the growers signed hundreds of sweetheart agreements with the Teamsters throughout the south-west, refusing to recognize the UFW any longer.

HALF A CENT

One such contract was "awarded" to lettuce pickers. Whereas the workers were previously paid 32 cents per box of lettuce piecework, the Teamsters awarded them 32 1/2 cents over five years.

During the strike in the summer of 1973, Teamster goons were hired at \$67.50 per day to physically beat farmworkers on the picket lines.

The striking farmworkers not only had to face troops of police officers, Hell's Angels and Teamster goons, but the court themselves. Restrictive injunctions prohibited the farmworkers from standing closer than 100 feet apart, and from using loudspeakers for more than an hour each day or for more than five minutes at any one time.

On 20,000 acre ranches with grape vines growing higher than a man, the picket lines could not be seen or heard.

When the strikers engaged in peaceful civil disobedience by standing closer than 100 feet, 6,000 farmworkers, some entire families, were jailed! Altogether there occurred about 400 severe beatings.

On August 14, 1973, Nagi Daifullah, 24, was clubbed to death by a policeman, and on August 16, Juan de la Cruz, 60, was shot to death by a strikebreaker while trying to protect his wife.

At this point the farmworkers decided to call off last year's strike and come out to the cities to organize the boycott.

The labour movement's full support of the farmworkers, especially in the United States, cuts the ground from underneath those critics who denounce the strike as a mere jurisdictional labour dispute between the UFW and the Teamsters.

OVATION FOR CESAR

At the convention of the Canadian Labour Congress in Vancouver in May, Cesar Chavez received a standing ovation and \$3,500 in cash — the largest amount ever collected on the convention floor.

The teachers' federations and many national unions have officially endorsed the boycott, including local 414 of the Retail Wholesale and Department Store Union (Dominion employees).

The farmworkers are organizing the boycott from office space mostly donated by local unions. Last year, the United Auto Workers (UAW) gave the farmworkers a concession at the CNE to advertise the boycott and sponsored a raffle for a new car in that connection for publicity.

And at the Labour Day parade on September 2, the UFW had a large contingent of over 100 supporters marching with Toronto's organized labour.

In British Columbia, the BC Federation of Labour notified importers that it was placing a "hot cargo" order on all non-UFW produce in government institutions, so that no union worker would unload or ship scab produce. These actions have cut over half the supply of non-union grapes and lettuce in the province. Before the boycott, Vancouver was Canada's third largest market for grapes and lettuce.

In Europe, the combined labour movement has effectively stopped all non-UFW grapes and lettuce from reaching European markets through a strict hot cargo policy.

DOMINION PRESSURED

Even here in Ontario, the boycott has succeeded in smaller centres. Through initial pressure on local Dominion stores, grapes and lettuce were removed entirely from all stores (including those independently owned) last year in Oshawa, Windsor, London, Chatham and other south-western Ontario towns. Only a few weeks ago did this situation change.

The main reason that strikes have been rendered ineffective on the ranches is the deliberate and illegal importation of hundreds of thousands of poverty-stricken Mexicans, without their knowing that they are being brought in to act as scabs.

The American Immigration Service, particularly the border patrol, has been strongly criticized for and accused of corruption in its failure to stop this immigration.

Illegals are recruited and brought in through a network of "coyotes" or labour contractors who each assume responsibility for bringing in a certain quota of illegals, of immense profit.

According to the UFW legal department, Antonio Vasquez, one such "coyote" in Fresno county makes a yearly income of \$35,000 by overseeing at least 20 illegals. About \$61 is collected weekly from each illegal for meals, housing (in cardboard lean-tos) and transportation to and from work and the local store.

In addition, he receives \$400 from the growers for each illegal he brings into the U.S., and a bonus for providing scabs during a strike. When Channel 47 Television filmed him for a feature story on the problem of illegals, Vasquez pulled a gun on the news crew.

CHAPMAN REPORT

L.F. Chapman Jr., commissioner of the U.S. Immigration Service, said 670,000 illegals were caught in 1973, but "this figure may amount to as little as 10 to 20 per cent of those actually in this country illegally."

In July 1974, at least 50 per cent of the scabs in the Coachella Valley were illegals. According to current government estimates, there are now approximately two million illegals in the south-western United States.

One of the most interesting events in Toronto this summer was the annual shareholders meeting of Dominion Stores Ltd. on August 15. It coincided with the two deaths on August 14 and 16 1973 in California during last summer's bloody strike.

Before the meeting, the farmworkers received a favourable response from about 100 shareholders, who expressed by mail some sympathy with their cause.

Outside the meeting at the O'Keefe Centre about 150 supporters stood in silent vigil to commemorate the deaths last summer with black flags and candles.

Inside the meeting itself, over 60 supporters attended, each holding one share in the company which had been purchased on the stock market for that purpose the previous week. Among those supporters were several farmworkers; Toronto alderman Dan Heap; Canon Maurice Wilkinson, associate secretary of the Canadian Council of Churches; Sam Fox, president of the Toronto Labour Council and Rabbi Michael Sirov, representing the Toronto Board of Rabbis.

In a moral appeal to the company, Canon Wilkinson urged the management to "make the ethical corporate decision that other North American chains have made".

Fox stressed that the farmworkers' struggle was not a jurisdictional labour dispute, as it had the backing "of the entire labour movement".

When Rabbi Sirov rose to speak, he was immediately gavelled down by the president, much

to the visible anger of several Jewish shareholders present.

CONTEMPT

In a show of contempt for the farmworkers, many shareholders left the meeting when questioning began. So many, in fact, that the UFW supporters almost commanded a majority.

When a vote of confidence in the president was proposed (an annual corporate ritual customarily passed with unanimous consent) the vote was split; and in declaring the motion carried, president T.G. Bolton refused to take a revote.

Bolton said Dominion did not wish to be "used as a tool in a jurisdictional labour dispute 3,000 miles away in a foreign country", thereby absolving his actions of any moral responsibility — even though Dominion complied with the boycott by removing grapes in 1970, and last year in many smaller Ontario cities.

Bolton also announced that Dominion is "the only chain identifying grapes picked by non-members of the United Farm Workers union." Not only, in fact, was Miracle Mart the first chain to do so, but it was also the first chain to agree to remove grapes and lettuce altogether as soon as Dominion, their largest competitor, did so.

Finally, Bolton claimed that "the great majority of consumers... have no interest in this dispute."

In order to test Mr. Bolton's statement, the farmworkers have been collecting signatures on a petition in front of Dominion stores which declares support for the boycott and is critical of Dominion's position. The number of signatures so far collected, as well as those on an earlier petition, demonstrate a significant degree of sympathy with the farmworkers among Dominion shoppers.

BIG PROFIT

Despite complaints of "unfairness" perpetrated against the company by the farmworkers, Bolton announced a net increase in profit of over 35 per cent for the quarter ending June 22, 1974. In the last fiscal year the 400-store chain made a \$13.7 million profit, an increase of 36 per cent.

The Church is traditionally a conservative institution, slow to address itself to current secular issues, and even more reluctant to take a controversial stand in this respect. The clergy's united stand on behalf of the striking farmworkers illustrates the moral issue behind the movement, which amounts to a people's struggle for their freedom.

As well as promoting the cause from the pulpit, many clergymen have walked with the farmworkers on the picket lines.

When Cesar Chavez came to Toronto last November, Archbishop Philip Pocok of the Toronto Archdiocese lead an ecumenical service in St. Michael's Cathedral for the farmworkers at which Chavez spoke.

In August of this year, the United Church and the Anglican Church of Canada officially endorsed the boycott at their national conventions.

Endorsement has also come from the non-denominational Canadian Council of Churches and the Jewish Toronto Board of Rabbis. The Inter-Faith Committee, an ad hoc committee formed by Toronto's religious leaders in support of the boycott, held a service at Holy Blossom Temple on September 12, Inter-Faith Solidarity Day.

The service, attended by about 100 priests, ministers and rabbis, was followed by a successful march and a mass demonstration at Yorkdale plaza.

OFF DUTY COPS

A series of events took place in Toronto this past year related to the boycott which could prove to have a much wider significance.

In the latter part of 1973 Dominion hired off-duty policemen to patrol their stores while farmworkers supporters picketed, informing customers of the boycott.

Several arrests were made and eventually the practice was discontinued because of bad public relations.

Then, in May 1974, three clergymen were arrested when they refused to leave the Domi-



nion store at Yonge and Eglinton, as the store had fraudulently placed a union label (the YFW "black eagle") over scab lettuce. Father Van Mather, Father Vince McGrath and Dr. Howard Mills were convicted in court and fined for petty trespassing.

At a later trial, following the arrest of nine people at Yorkdale, not only were all charges dropped, but the Yorkdale plaza management gave permission to the farmworkers to picket in the parking lot (but not inside the mall).

When, in a third incident, Father Leo Riley and Charles Webster were arrested at Yonge and Eglinton, Greenwin Development Co. called the farmworker's office to say they would drop the charges and grant permission to distribute leaflets inside the plaza and the mall.

NO PROTECTION

In several states, particularly in California, restrictive anti-labour legislation has been introduced in reaction to farmworkers efforts. In the first place, migrant farmworkers are exempt from all protection under labour codes, including minimum wage laws.

The long march to Sacramento to appeal to the state legislature in 1966 was met with no positive response from the government.

Then in late 1972 a public referendum, Proposition 22, was presented. A multi-million dollar publicity campaign, financed by the growers and Teamsters, promoted the bill in the name of farmworker interests, as it granted union certification and secret ballot elections to determine the bargaining agent.

But what they didn't mention is that this was conditional on the denial of the right to strike during harvests and the right to organize a boycott. In order to overcome the Teamsters' millions, it was decided to advocate the defeat of the referendum by a campaign of "human billboards". For the next few weeks, UFW supporters placed themselves in rows along the ramps to Los Angeles freeways holding 10-foot signs saying "Vote No on 22".

After a while, the radio traffic reports reported on the movement of the human billboards. In November 1972, the referendum was defeated by a 58 per cent majority vote.

SECRET BALLOTS

Finally, in August 1974, the Burton-Allatore Bill was introduced in the California legislature to

provide secret ballot elections on any ranch where over 50 per cent of the farmworkers so desired.

On August 19, the Bill passed the State Assembly with 41 votes and had the 21 votes needed for passage in the state Senate; but it was killed in committee by grower-Teamster pressure. (It is doubtful in any event whether it would have escaped Governor Reagan's veto.)

State elections are coming up in California in November. The Republican government has been placed in bad public standing because of the Watergate affair. Joseph Alioto, a favoured candidate for the Democratic primary, has come out in favour of Chavez' United Farmworkers, and has said that he will not tolerate "Teamster raiding" against the UFW. The farmworkers are looking anxiously towards the election as a potential breakthrough in their struggle.

But the Democrats' election would not solve all the problems in itself. The growers, as adversaries in a labour dispute, would still have to be contended with on the level of collective bargaining.

TURN TO VIOLENCE

In response to the persecution suffered by the Chicano community, some farmworkers were roused beyond the point of tolerance to defend themselves on the level of their oppressors — that is, by violence.

Cesar Chavez, spiritually wounded by what he saw as the degradation of his people, reacted by saying that the only way to overcome suffering is by rising above the level of one's tormentors.

In penance, Chavez erected a tent and remained inside for a self-imposed 28-day fast. The fast was not only a penance, but a gesture as well to teach his people that non-violent struggle was a better way — a tactic as well as a philosophy of the United Farmworkers union.

Perhaps one reason for solid support among the churches has been this approach, seemingly a manifestation of Christian teaching on human conduct. Bertrand Russell once said, "Nothing can withstand the force of an idea whose time has come."

If the farmworkers' cause is a just one, and if it thereby wins support by activating people's sense of justice, the farmworkers cannot be defeated by the physical attacks of deputy sheriffs or Teamster goons.

By RICHARD WAGMAN

If you were a farmworker in the south-western area of the United States, you would probably be a migrant laborer of Mexican-American origin.

There's a good chance you'd be between eight and 16 years of age, since 25 per cent of all farmworkers are children. You would receive an average wage of 80 cents per hour. Your entire family would earn an average annual income of \$2,700.

You would probably live in an overcrowded bunk house in one of the ranch work camps. Each day you would have to pay a dollar to the labour contractor for the privilege of working — this is over and above the rent which you would pay for the accommodation.

You might have to work a 12-hour day in 120 degree weather without any breaks. If you wanted a glass of water, you'd have to pay the labour contractor for it, even though it would be served to all workers in a single tin can, a carrier for disease. You'd probably want an ice cube with it, since it would be lukewarm — but you'd have to pay the labour contractor extra for this.

If you did contract disease, you would have to suffer at home, since poverty-stricken Chicanos aren't allowed into the city hospitals without a \$100 deposit. Some time in your life you would likely suffer from symptoms of pesticide poisoning (frequent nosebleeds, headaches, sore lungs, painful breathing, nausea, skin eruptions).

If you escaped death from TB as a child, you would probably not live more than 49 years — the average farmworker's lifespan.

And if you were a farmworker this very day, you'd be on strike.

EXPLOITED MINORITIES

The plight of the farmworker almost defies belief in the midst of North American affluence. But the history of farm labour's attempts to organize goes back 100 years.

Ethnic minorities have consistently been exploited by California's large landowners as a source of cheap labour: Chinese, Japanese, Sikhs, Mexicans, Filipinos, and "Okies" (bankrupt mid-western dirt farmers during the depression).

The history of recent farmworker organization goes back to 1962 when Cesar Chavez, a young farmworker from Yuma, Arizona, started to organize grape pickers near Delano, California, using his own life savings while his wife worked in the fields.

Even then Chavez' small National Farm Workers Association, organized by personal visits to people's homes, provided its members with a credit union, death benefits and other personal services. In only three years the NFWA had a substantially increased membership and in 1965 it decided to join a strike of Filipino grape pickers in Delano.

BOYCOTT EFFECTS

The boycott, lasting three years, was organized in cities across the continent with local support. In Toronto, three major supermarket chains removed California grapes from their shelves.

In 1970, the growers agreed to recognize the UFW, and union contracts were signed with agricultural workers for the first time in labour history. The contracts provided for an increased wage to \$1.75 per hour, work breaks, the abolition of child labour, the abolition of contractors through hiring halls based on seniority, controls on pesticides and free medical clinics.

For the first time, every child attended school and the farmworkers saw that a better way of life could be brought on by their own efforts.

But the three-year contracts were due to expire. On April 15, 1973, the growers refused to renegotiate the contracts, and once again cries of "Huelga" were heard in the fields — "on strike". Once again North American consumers are being asked to boycott U.S. grapes and, now that lettuce workers have joined the UFW, head lettuce as well.

GRAPE-HUNGRY

Toronto is the third largest market for U.S. grapes in North America. Canada as a whole, the world's largest importer of American grapes, accounts for 20 per cent of the total grape sales. There has been some union produce in Canada this year, as the David Freedman Co. (grapes) and Interharvest Co. (lettuce) have each signed contracts with the UFW.

Constant store checks by local supporters and the monitoring of grape lettuce imports have indicated the effectiveness of the boycott to date. In April alone 21,000 boxes of union lettuce were sold in Toronto, 11,700 of those at Dominion stores (against which the farmworkers have been concentrating their efforts).

To date there are no longer any union grapes or lettuce on the Toronto market, the union fields already having been harvested. In July and August over one and a half million pounds of grapes fewer were sold than had been sold

