

Do You Eat California Grapes? THE FOUR YEAR FAST

By STEPHEN KIMBER

Four years is a long time to fight for something you believe in when there is nothing but a longer time in sight. Dalhousie University Graduate Martin Jankowski, at this university for the first time this year, has been working non-violently with the grape pickers of California for that long, waging just that sort of a never ending battle.

Jankowski compares the situation of the Mexican grape pickers to the struggle of blacks for equality in the United States. "They marched peacefully for a long time, and were not heard", he says adding that the grape pickers can only maintain their non-violent protest for so long before frustration forces them to engage in violent actions.



There is a tinge of regret in his voice when he talks about the necessity for violence, but it is a regret coupled with resignation. Jankowski, who himself has been a worker in the fields and is a Mexican (adopted by Polish parents) puts it another way; "If you treat us like animals in our living conditions, if you refrain from giving us help, if there are deaf ears out there, like animals we will lash out, and lash out in a form of violence."

He emphasizes that violence is not what he wants but time is running out. After four years of attempting to institute a world wide boycott of California grapes, profits are only down ten per cent (the profit to the grower on grapes is between 120 and 140%) and he knows, as do the grape pickers themselves, that the growers will not negotiate out of good will and humanity.

The whole question of the California grape pickers and their struggle to be allowed to unionize began in 1965 when the pickers, mostly Mexicans, went on strike. In the

thirties, most other classifications of workers won the right to organize through the Taft-Hartley Act in the United States, but the right has never been extended to farm workers. When you think that a picker working 40 hours a week fifty-two weeks of the year earns only about half of the average wage in the state, the omission of farm workers becomes a glaring one. In addition most of the pickers are migrants who have difficulty qualifying for welfare - at the current cost of living, it becomes impossible for them to break the poverty cycle or even to exist in decent living conditions.

Working conditions on the big farms of California are, to say the least, not conducive to working efficiently. During harvest season temperatures can reach 115 degrees in the fields, while they can plummet to freezing in the winter months when the worker is pruning the vines.

There are two possible ways of getting the right to unionize-violent and non-violent. For the moment they have adopted the non-violent tactic of a grape boycott.

"We're asking people all over the world to refrain from buying California grapes," Jankowski says, adding "I like grapes as much as anyone else does. I have not had a grape in two and a half years and I'm dying for one too, but I cannot eat a grape because I know what it does to each worker."

Jankowski has been in the fields almost all his life and he feels an attachment to the field and to the people who work them. He is not your nice liberal stooping to help the poor Mexican farm worker. He has lived with them and worked with them in their efforts to get unionization.

He also spent some time in Washington lobbying with Congressmen trying to get a better deal for farm workers. There is an amendment currently (under study) in a Congressional Committee in the United States that would amend the Taft-Hartley Act so that farm workers would be included under it.

But Jankowski, who has been there, despairs of success for the proposed amendment. The United Farm Workers are only beginning to get the kind of finances that would make them viable. They are in no position to challenge the powerful Growers in the dark closets of Washington lobbying. Money talks and at the moment, all the money is in the hands of the growers.

And, laments Jankowski, even if it did manage to get passed by Congress, that would be another year or two in the future. When you've been waiting for four years, two years can seem an eternity for recognition as a human being.

The Growers have the money and they've been using it to publicize their side in the protracted dispute over the grapes. Stories in newspapers from coast to coast explain that the Growers have asked the farm workers if they want to organize. The workers say no. Jankowski tells it differently. "Suppose you're the worker and I'm the employer. I come up to you and ask you if you like to be unionized. What would you say. You'd tell him "no" because he has the power to fire you if you say yes. You don't have an organization to protect you. If you say yes, and he says you're fired you're out of a job. The point is that you have no official organization, no fair Labor Relations Board, you have nothing if you're a migrant worker to fall back on, so if he asks me something, I'm going to tell him what he wants to hear, not because I like it so much, but because I have no other choice."

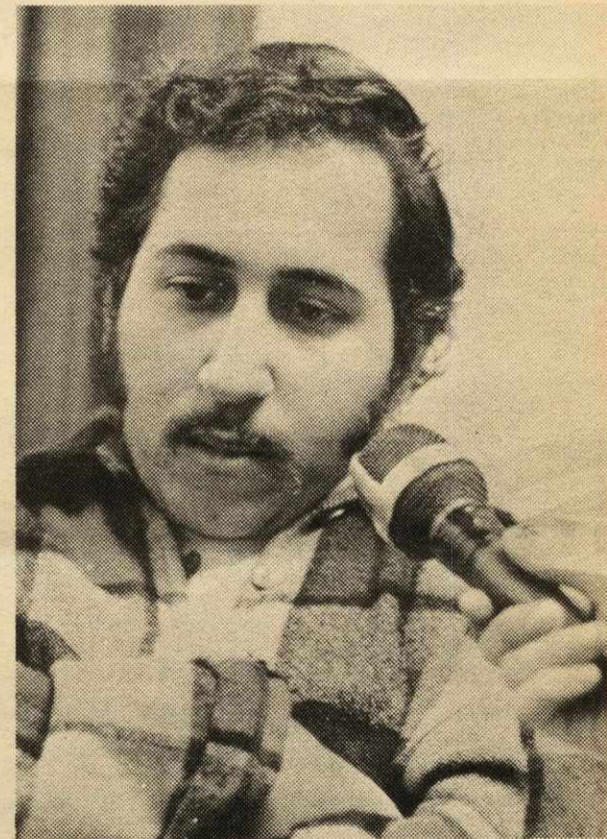
So the problem eventually must come down to the crunch. Will the solution be violent or non-violent? For the grape pickers who are living and working in such miserable conditions, the question must soon be resolved.

As Jankowski tells it, the Growers will only negotiate out of necessity or fear. They will not permit the workers to organize if they can help it - it's more profitable for them to keep the workers in a position of subjection. Legislatively, there is little hope. Few expect the changes in the Taft Hartley Act to be adopted without a long and protracted fight - a fight that would take too long to be of any real benefit to the people in the fields.

The only hope for a non-violent solution is if the boycott of California grapes succeeds; for the boycott will force the growers to recognize the farm laborers' right to organize and to unionize.

"We are asking you to boycott grapes," Jankowski explains "in the same way that the blacks in the United States marched. Both were peaceful; both ways could have achieved an objective, but unfortunately they fell on deaf ears... I want to emphasize that we do not want violence, the black people did not want violence. We want to be first class citizens in the United States and first class citizens of the world. Please refrain from buying grapes and don't force us to use violence."

It leaves you a choice, when you think about. You can buy California grapes and implicitly accept part of the responsibility for what might occur or you can boycott the grapes and force a peaceful solution...




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