

# Chicano lettuce workers organize to get ahead

**"Hey, you want to work faster today and earn more money?" — and the contractors pass out the pills**

By DON HUMPHRIES  
Canadian University Press

In the coming months Canadians will be approached to again help the United Farm Workers of America (UFW) fight for fair wages and living conditions.

The UFW has called a lettuce boycott against the big growers in the south-western United States to back demands for recognition of the United Farm Workers Union as the bargaining agent for lettuce workers.

The same farm workers, led by Cesar Chavez, fought the grape with five years of continuous boycott action. The issues involved in the lettuce boycott are essentially the same as those in the grape boycott — obtaining the same basic human rights for the Mexican-American (Chicano) workers as white workers have.

The lettuce boycott started more than two years ago in Salinas County, California, which produces 74.5 per cent of all summer lettuce shipped from California and Arizona.

The owners had signed "sweetheart back-door agreements" with the International Brotherhood of Teamsters in late July. But on Aug. 11, 1970 the Teamsters and UFW reaffirmed a 1967 jurisdictional agreement giving the UFW jurisdiction over all agricultural workers.

The UFW called massive strikes against the lettuce plantation owners on Aug. 24, 1970. Some 7,000 workers walked out in Salinas and Santa Maria Valleys to back demands that the UFW be their collective bargaining representatives.

The plantation owners — mostly corporate interests — sought and obtained an injunction prohibiting all UFW strike activity in the Salinas area on Sept. 17, 1970.

The workers refused to surrender to the owners and held a vote to determine further action. They opted for the boycott. The existence of the UFW appeared on the scene, farm workers were worst off of any workers in the United States.

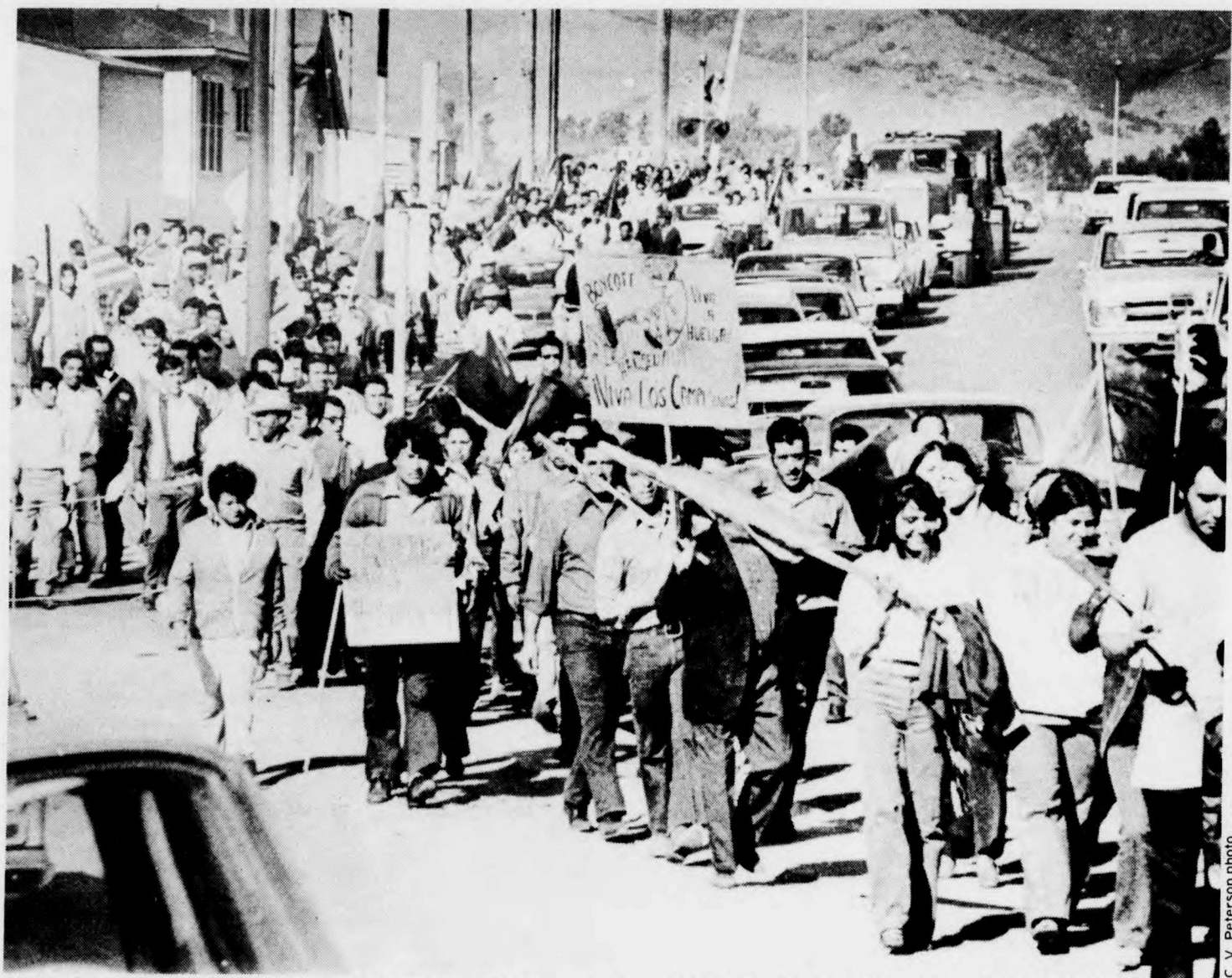
A typical example would be Jessica Govea's family. She is special assistant to Chavez and co-ordinator of the lettuce boycott. She led organizational efforts in Toronto during the grape boycott.

Every member of her family had to work in the cotton fields in order to survive on the low piece-rate they were paid. (Piece-rate involved payment by the pound instead of by the hour.)

The family would get up at 4 a.m., pack a lunch, and drive one hour to get to the fields. They worked without a break until 6 p.m.

Babies were put in boxes and left either in the car or at the end of the row of crops their parents were picking.

There were no toilets or drinking water in the fields although California law requires them.



Farm workers in Salinas demonstrate to the growers their demands for a resumption of the lettuce boycott, September, 1971.

If the foremen didn't like a worker or if the worker complained about the conditions, he was fired. The worker's name would go on a blacklist and he couldn't get a job with any of the surrounding plantations.

To be a farmworker meant to be continually on the move from one job to another. The children could not receive proper schooling, if indeed they got any.

Jessica Govea needed four years to learn English and she was lucky. The children attend school for six out of nine months. They either fail or pass on to another grade without really learning anything.

No minimum wage for men exists in California. The minimum wage for women and children is \$1.65 per hour, but is not enforced.

The housing provided to farmworkers usually consists of shacks without sanitary plumbing.

The Sunset Labor Camp in the movie *The Grapes of Wrath* is still in use. It was originally built in the 1930's by the federal government and was later sold to the county. People are still living in those original corrugated steel shacks and paying rent for them.

Cesar Chavez came to the grape fields in 1962 with his family. He had obtained a grade eight education after attending 38 different schools. With his family beside him, Chavez worked in the fields alongside other workers who were organizing a union.

Farm workers have been attempting to organize for more than 70 years. Every time they have tried, they have been thwarted by land owners and government.

American Indians were the first to toil as farmworkers in the fields of California. They were followed by Chinese (who comprised 90% of the farmworkers in the 1870's), Japanese, Philipinos, and today Chicano.

Farmworkers are the least protected of all American workers under federal and state laws. They have no protected organizing rights and cannot legally insist on union representation elections or collective bargaining.

Chavez organized in the fields for three years. Workers paid dues of \$3.50 into their organization and slowly the union began to grow and to serve its members.

People in the Chicano communities were being exploited by educated Chicanos who operated outlets called "service

centres". The centres essentially provided a liaison service while the white authorities because most Chicanos spoke only Spanish or were unacquainted with the laws.

This liaison service was provided — for a fee. Typical charges were \$5 to make a phone call, \$10 to write a letter or \$25 to get a motor license.

To end this exploitation, the union set up its own liaison centres, but the union centre does not charge fees, and teaches people to solve their problems without the assistance of others.

To counter the lack of medical care, the union set up free clinics in trailers. None of the local doctors would help, so doctors from Los Angeles and San Francisco came to treat the farmworkers and other poor people.

The union also set up credit unions to help eliminate loan shark companies from bleeding people with outrageous interest rates.

## From grapes to lettuce

After these programs were implemented, people realized they weren't changing the social and economic conditions under which they lived. The workers were still being treated by the farm owners as possessions to be held in utmost contempt. It smacked of 18th century wage slavery.

In September, 1965, grape pickers at a large rally in Delano, California decided to withdraw their labour to support demands for better pay and working conditions. At that time, the union had only \$65 in the bank to serve as a strike fund.

Perhaps the most important aspect of the strike was the determination of the workers to hold out until they had won the same basic human rights that white people enjoyed.

The owners imported workers from Mexico to break the strike. Union supporters constantly had to persuade these people to quit in support of the strike. Many did leave, but for those who did, there were always more poor desperate Mexicans looking for work.

A Congressional Committee came from Washington in 1966

to investigate the situation. It hasn't been heard from since.

The grape boycott was called in response to the imported workers. Because the union did not have any money, people hitchhiked to cities all across the U.S. to set up boycott committees.

After five years, the majority of grape growers signed contracts with the union. Only days later, the UFW called the lettuce boycott.

The lettuce boycott has run into much more organized resistance than did the grape boycott.

On Oct. 6, 1970, Judge Gordon Campbell ordered the UFW to stop all boycott action. Again it was the owners using the courts to their advantage and it followed the September injunction prohibiting UFW strike activity in Salinas county. The UFW appealed the decision on the basis of the American constitutional right of free speech.

Judge Campbell ordered Cesar Chavez to jail for refusing to call off the boycott. The incident attracted American attention with such public figures as Ethel Kennedy and Coretta King coming to join a 24-hour vigil set up by workers outside the jail.

The California Supreme Court ordered Chavez released on Dec. 23, 1970 pending a final decision on the case.

On March 26, 1971, the Teamsters and UFW extended their jurisdictional agreement for three years and reaffirmed UFW's right to represent all agricultural workers. At this time a moratorium on the lettuce boycott began.

The California Supreme Court then finally ruled unanimously that a substantial portion of Judge Campbell's boycott injunction violated basic guarantees of free speech.

On May 7, 1971, the first in a series of meetings between the UFW and a growers' committee was held to discuss farmworkers' contracts. The meetings dragged on through the summer and fall with the growers' committee rejecting every compromise attempt put forward by the union.

The purpose of the meetings became clear. They gave the growers the time they needed to harvest the summer lettuce crop without union interference. In November the growers again rejected a union offer and made it clear they intended to fight rather than settle with the union.

It was also in November that the Western Growers Association Convention was held in Las Vegas, Nevada. Mike Schultz, Imperial Valley lettuce grower and California governor Ronald Reagan's campaign manager, was elected president.

It was these patriotic gentlemen who sold lettuce emblazoned with stars and stripes and labelled "Re-elect the President Lettuce". Money from the sales of this scab lettuce was used to help re-elect Nixon.

The Free Marketing Council (FMC), the public relations arm of the lettuce industry, began filing charges against the UFW boycott with the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) in December 1971. Charges were filed in 13 cities across the U.S. in an effort to head off the lettuce boycott.

In response to the FMC, NLRB General Counsel Peter Nash, appointed by Nixon in August 1971, filed a complaint in Fresno, California Federal District Court against the boycott on March 9, 1972. Judge Crocker set the hearing for April 6.

As the UFW mounted a campaign to pressure Republican officials, Nash sought negotiations with UFW lawyers and a postponement of the April 6th hearing.

On May 3, 1972 Cesar Chavez announced the UFW had reached agreement with the NLRB reaffirming the UFW's right to boycott. More than 1,000,000 letters had been written to Republican national chairman Senator Robert Dole protesting the efforts to quash UFW actions. At the same time, Chavez announced resumption of the boycott.

While this little battle was taking place, two important events occurred.

The AFL-CIO granted the UFW a charter, clearing the way to organize a national union of farm workers.

And in Florida, the UFW signed a contract with Coca-Cola Company covering more than 1,300 mostly black citrus workers. It represented the first contract ever won by Florida farm workers.

The threat the UFW now faces is the biggest it has ever had. It is the threat of government anti-farmworkers laws.

The Arizona legislature passed a law on May 9, 1972 designed to take away the workers' right to boycott. It outlawed all agricultural strikes and boycotts.

Cesar Chavez began a 24-day fast to "remove the Growers Fear" by organized farm workers and for the "spirit of justice" in Arizona.

The UFW began circulating a petition to recall Arizona governor Jack Williams, who supported the bill. More than 90,000 signatures have been obtained.

During his fast, Chavez was visited by George McGovern. McGovern announced his support of the lettuce boycott and urged his supporters not to eat scab lettuce.

On June 4, 1972, 6,000 people, including Joan Baez, joined with Chavez to end his fast at Phoenix, Arizona. Chavez announced the launching of a campaign to obtain 1,000,000 pledges supporting the boycott. Some 200,000 signatures have been obtained so far.

In California, lettuce growers attempted to get a law similar to Arizona's passed by way of referendum. It would also outlaw all agricultural strikes and boycotts.

The UFW won a victory in the California Supreme Court Dec. 29, 1972 when, by a 6-1 decision, the judges upheld Cesar Chavez's charge that the Teamsters Union and California lettuce growers were in collusion against the UFW.

The Supreme Court ruling lifted an injunction issued by the Monterey County Superior Court which would have prohibited

farm workers from striking or picketing growers who have signed contracts with the Teamsters.

California law prohibits strikes that "trap" employers in the middle of battles between two competing unions. Growers asked for an injunction against UFW strikes on these grounds.

In 1970, just as the UFW began to organize lettuce pickers, about 45 growers suddenly signed five-year contracts with the Teamsters Union, giving them exclusive right to represent 90% of the farm workers. They had never before tried to bring them into their union and no farm workers had the opportunity to vote on whether they wanted the Teamsters to represent them.

The court said it was clear "at least a substantial number, and probably a majority of field-workers desired to be represented by the UFW and expressed no desire to have the Teamsters represent them."

Teamsters officials have admitted their sudden move to impose themselves on the field workers was dictated by fear that UFW strikes would harm Teamster workers in the related packing and shipping industry. The UFW contract contains provisions to improve the quality of agricultural workers' lives. The Teamsters' contract, favoured by the growers, is simply an economic agreement providing for a wage-increase and little else. Even in wages, the UFW contract is superior, calling for a \$2.20 minimum hourly wage as opposed to \$1.85.

## Fighting for survival

"It's not so much a wage question as a question of job security, protection from pesticides and other things," Andrea O'Malley of the New York UFW office says.

"Lettuce harvesting is one of the most difficult jobs because it has to be done bent over. Lettuce pickers make some of the



Survey results show that 32% of farm workers using the short handle hoe incur permanent back injuries.

highest salaries among agricultural workers, but after five or so years of this work the person is really physically debilitated. The UFW contract provides for job security and hiring according to seniority. It makes it difficult for growers to fire arbitrarily.

"It also prohibits the use of hard pesticides and controls the use of soft pesticides."

The Teamster contract provides medical benefits only after a worker has worked 2,000 hours for a single grower. Because farm workers migrate from farm to farm, according to season, no worker ever spends the time in the employ of any one grower.

In contrast, the UFW contract provides medical coverage for the workers and family after 50 hours of work.

The farm workers contract also does away with the labour contractor — the middle-man of the agriculture industry — and establishes a union-run hiring hall instead. Currently, labour contractors receive a fee from growers for delivering a specified number of hands to the fields each day. They also charge the workers for acting as their agents. They jack up prices at their exclusive refreshment concessions in the field and they make available, at a cost, the only buses to and from work.

"The labour contractors also use the piece-work wage system as a way to drive the workers harder," Linda Brown of the UFW explains. "In the lettuce fields, the contractors even give the workers amphetamines. They say, 'Hey, you want to work faster today and earn more money?', and they pass out pills."

The UFW wants to do away with piece work and to substitute a fixed hourly wage. At the moment, both the UFW and the Teamsters contracts call for a fixed minimum wage, but the scale is still based on piece work and it's possible to earn more than the minimum.

To some people the reasons for the stiff opposition to the UFW in the south-western U.S. are obscure. But one has merely to examine the ownership of the kind of farms the UFW wants to organize.

The lettuce boycott is not being carried out against the small family farmer. It is a direct challenge to the power of the corporate farm and agribusiness.

An outstanding example of agribusiness in the U.S. is Tencoco corporation. Tencoco owns or controls 1.8 million acres of land in the western U.S. Its farming and land development profits hit \$22 million in 1970. It also received \$1.1 million in farm subsidies from governments that year.

Tencoco is the 34th largest corporation in the United States. It is involved in manufacturing, oil and gas, packaging, shipbuilding, life insurance and banking.

Tencoco became involved in farming in 1967 when it gobbled up an old-style corporate farm, the Kern County Land Company. Kern County is California's third largest land owner and has reportedly been buying land in Saskatchewan.

Tencoco can plow its own land, which is fertilized and sprayed with chemicals from its own chemical division, using its own tractors which are fueled with gas and oil from its own wells and refineries.

Tencoco does not yet have its own supermarket chain, but with the development of its distinctive brand name products (Sun Giant brand) such a step would be only logical to guarantee its brand name receives adequate distribution.

This is what agribusiness is all about: the complete control of every aspect of agriculture. The production of food, its processing and the marketing of the final products is largely controlled by agribusiness. It means that large corporate farms hire people to produce the food, just like GM hires people to make automobiles.

Five per cent of U.S. farms in 1969 recorded more than half of all sales. 1% of U.S. feed lots now handle 52% of the beef and 90% of all broiler chickens are raised by five companies.

(It is this type of agricultural society that the Task Force on Agriculture, commissioned by Canada's Liberal government, advocates. Although the minister responsible for the Wheat Board, Otto Lang, has officially claimed that the Trudeau government rejected the report as government policy, no attempt has been made to limit the growth of multi-national agribusiness.)

Other large land owners in California include Southern Pacific Railway — 2.4 million acres, about 150,000 agricultural; Standard Oil — 300,000 acres; and Kaiser Corporation — 110,000 acres.

To tackle such corporate giants, a vast supply of money would seem to be required. But it's not.

No one in the United Farm Workers Union is paid. Each member receives room and board plus \$5 a week strike pay. There are 150 full-time boycott organizers working without pay across the United States.

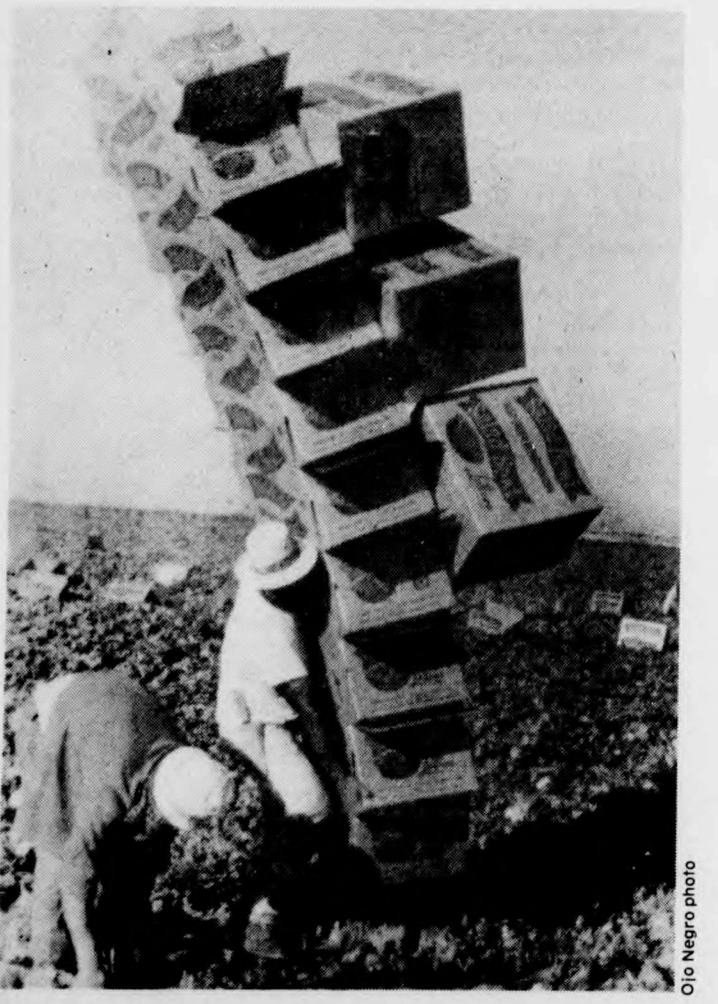
But what benefits would accrue to the workers if they could bargain through the union of their choice?

Living and working conditions would improve drastically. There is no excuse for 15% of the farm workers showing symptoms of pesticide poisoning. There is no excuse for California farm workers having an occupational disease rate twice the rate for all other industries combined. There is no excuse for the lack of proper sanitation in the fields.

The life expectancy of farm workers is 49 years. They have shown their determination to extend their lives and the life of their union.

But a union is not an accurate description. It is more a movement, or La Causa.

Viva La Causa.  
Boycott non-union lettuce.



Member of the lettuce harvesting crew distributing empty boxes to the cutters.