

# Eyewitness report on Delano strike

Anne Draper

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Delano is a five hour drive from Berkeley, but the farm workers who live and work in the grapes are five light-years away from the Great Society.

You drive down Highway 99 through the great San Joaquin Valley, where much of California's agricultural abundance is raised. This is the heartland of the state's agribusiness complex.

The autos speed by acre upon acre of vineyards where the grapes have been piled up alongside the vines and are drying into raisins.

But in other fields the grapes hang unpicked; they look luscious and tempting, but one risks being shot for trespassing.

Three thousand workers have vowed not to pick the grapes until their demands for union recognition and a wage of \$1.40 an hour are met.

## **VIRTUAL MONOPOLY**

California raises 92 per cent of the grapes in the United States. The growers have a virtual monopoly on the crop and cannot trot out the hoary argument that they can't pay more because of competition from other areas paying even less.

The fields around Delano, which is 75 miles south of Fresno, produce table grapes and wine grapes. Most of the table grapes have been picked by Filipino-American crews living in the labor camps on the growers' land. Many lived 10, 15 and 20 years in these camps before they were ruthlessly evicted.

When the table grapes are packed in the field, four pickers will work with one packer and divide 10 cents per box among the five workers. The strikers are now demanding \$1.40 an hour, plus 25 cents per box.

The Filipino pickers of table grapes usually earned a little better than the Mexican-American grape workers who picked for the wineries.

The workers load the grapes into the two-ton gondolas brought into the fields. They are now demanding an hourly guarantee of \$1.40, plus \$12 a gondola for the first picking, \$18 for the second and \$22 for the third.

The grape workers are local resident workers; Mexican Nationals under the bracero program, which ended last December, were not employed in the grapes.

The braceros employed during this past year under a loophole of the Immigration Act were guaranteed a minimum of \$1.40 an hour under the agreement between the U.S. government and the Mexican government. Other guarantees, at least on paper in a written contract covered their transportation, food, housing and employment period.

## **DOMESTICS EXCLUDED**

Domestic workers enjoy none of these guarantees, since they have been systematically excluded from the state and federal laws which cover other workers.

The domestic workers, spurred on by the organizing efforts of the Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee, AFL-CIO, have been demanding a \$1.40 an hour minimum wage, plus a union contract.

On Sept. 8, the Filipino workers, organized into AWOC, struck the grape fields around Delano. They set up their lines directed against some 29 grape growers in northern Kern County and Southern Tulare County.

Their strike won the sympathetic support of the Mexican field workers, many of whom belong to the independent Farm Workers Association.

On Sept. 20, the association, under the dedicated leadership of Cesar Chavez, joined the picket lines of their Filipino brothers.

For the first time, both organizations joined forces in a magnificent display of unity.

A joint statement by AWOC Director Al Green and FWA chief Cesar Chavez stated that "the two organizations are joining hands to get the job done of winning this strike."

The demands of the strikers are for union recognition and a minimum pay of \$1.40 an hour, plus 25 cents a box. The growers have refused to meet with them.

On my first trip to Delano, I joined a march of nearly 1,000 farm workers—Filipinos, Mexicans, Anglos, Negroes—united in their determination to end their cycle of poverty. We marched about the streets of Delano, with AWOC and FWA banners and picket signs, arousing sympathetic support from the community.

This is the biggest strike of farm workers in the San Joaquin Valley since the thirties. The workers feel that it may well be the turning point in the long and difficult drive to organize the half million farm workers in California.

#### **UNION CARAVAN**

My second trip to Delano was in an impressive caravan of Alameda County trade unionists and strike supporters from among students and citizens. Some three tons of food and over \$1,300 for strike relief (with \$770 coming from Central Labor Council unions) were brought by the caravan of 70 persons to demonstrate their solidarity.

Morale was high at the joint strikers' rally, as pledges of further support were given by unionists and others.

Strike leaders Larry Wong, AWOC, and Cesar Chavez, FWA, thanked the visitors and told them how necessary their continued support would be. Both expect the strike to be a long one. The workers have no savings, nor has the union any strike benefits to help them endure a long strike. The farm workers earn under \$2,000 a year.

The strikers described how they have been shot at, how armed guards threaten and intimidate them, how injunctions are quickly granted limiting their pickets, and how they have been sprayed with sulfur or blanketed with dust by disking machines.

But their morale and militancy continue to stop workers recruited from Texas and other areas from breaking the strike.

We'll hold out, they say, if only our friends outside will help us. The grape picking will be over in November, but then the more skilled work of pruning the vines will begin.

The workers feel that their strike is more than a struggle for better wages and working conditions under a union contract; they refer to it as a "protest movement"—as a struggle for equal rights for farm workers.



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