

Strikers Seek Aid

Support needed for farmworkers strike

Ron Caplan

The word *huelga* means strike, and it's fast becoming a word in the American language as the strike that began in the grape fields surrounding Delano slowly radiates out across the country. But to those in the strike area, those who grew up in these fields and are now standing up for a union to protest the long years of suffering and deprivation *huelga* means a great deal more. It means the small things, it means a decent meal for their families, a chance for a decent home and a choice for them whether or not their children will work in these fields; it means a vacation that is more than a flat tire, or an illness, or rain. And it means the big things; it means that finally, as a body the farm workers are standing up together to present a bill long overdue: a bill to be paid not only with decent wages and human treatment in the fields—but a debt of enormous respect owed to these men and women, and to their parents.

It's so beautiful out there; the most gorgeous mountains and beautiful men and the voice of them on cars shouting it's all over, *patroncito*, your system is over and we're here to collect one of the oldest debts in the world—the debt our parents earned in these long fields, under that incredible sun, making a few men some of the wealthiest in the country while they themselves returned at night to shabby labor camps or tents and blankets by the roadside. They are here to collect, these farm workers; and this time the growers won't put them off. In the old ways, pitting one race against another to keep union impossible and wages low. This time it's Negroes and Mexican-Americans and Filipino-Americans and Anglos joined together, to collect the debt. Most of the parents are dead. They died young from the kind of food that fattens but does not nourish, unsanitary living conditions, automobiles in lousy shape, brutal physical treatment, constant harassment and fear of deportation—and the list could go on and on.

Every day the strike grows stronger. There are now over 5000 men out on strike, many of whom remain in the area and picket daily, going to the fields to call out the scabs the growers have brought in from as far as Texas and Arizona and from deep inside Mexico—brought in at great expense to themselves, an expense that could have been converted in the farm workers' wages if this was only a matter of wages. It is too easy to say, simply, this is a labor dispute; or to say this is a civil rights issue. The people in Delano, and the literally thousands of people from all over the country (clergy and unions and student groups and private citizens who know a just cause when they see one)—they all know that a fight like this is never a matter of a few dollars or the right to eat in a certain place. They know—and we all must never forget—that the growers are willing to spend a fortune to break this strike because they wish, above all, to maintain a system of part-time slaves in Central California. These farm workers, no matter their age or whether they are Mexican-American or Filipino-American, Negro or Anglo—are their 'boys'; they know how to handle them, have handle them—and they intend for their system to go on the way it was. The strike is the beginning of change. The farm worker is standing up as a body and demanding change, demanding it in the form of a union: asking beyond anything that for the first time in farming history the growers sit down with their workers; face them as fellow human beings and discuss the enormous problems years of neglect and utter abuse have let smolder across this country and come to flame in the Central Valley.

The strike has been dedicated to non-violence on the part of the farm worker. It has not been easy. They are a proud people, and it is difficult to peacefully walk the picket line while growers stomp on their toes and knee them and shove elbows in their bellies. calling their women the foulest of names—while the police watch. It has been almost impossible to get the police to take any action against the growers, though many farm workers have been arrested. Forty-four were arrested at one time for standing beside a field, miles from the nearest home, and shouting the single word 'huelga' to scabs in the field; these forty-four were released on \$276 bail. When a grower finally was arrested for strangling one of the pickets, the judge released him on his own recognizance, no bail.

Support for the strike has been tremendous. Truckloads of food and clothing and donations of money have been coming in from all over. Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish clergy have come to walk the picket lines (many of them have been arrested). SNCC, CORE and SDS have dedicated themselves to the success of the strike and the boycott. All the major unions have endorsed the strike; Walter Reuther came to Delano to walk the picket line and donate \$5000 a month until the strike is won, making it clear: "This is not your strike, this is our strike...You are leading history and we march here together and we will win here together," And still as the strike grows the need also grows, and those on strike are still greatly dependent on the good will and generosity of people everywhere. They started, as said, with nothing; they did not even have a strike fund. They need all the help they can get to make the victory soon, as every day this strike continues is a day of potential danger and sacrifice to all those involved. All donations of food, clothing and money should be sent immediately to: strike relief fund, box 894 Delano, California.



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