

Huelga!

The grapes of wrath

Chris Singer

1969

“A serious error is being made in Latin America: Where the inhabitants depend almost exclusively on the products of the soil for their livelihood, the educational stress, contradictorily, is on urban rather than farm life; and the happiest people are the ones whose children are well-educated and instructed in philosophy; whose sentiments are directed into noble channels.”

— José Martí

The sun has not yet risen over the lush, green hills of California’s San Joaquin Valley. Yet, there is movement in those hills.

Cars filled with the dark faces of simple people, people of another culture, another history, other experience, began to move down the highway leading out of Delano. Indeed, there is movement in those hills.

The cars are painted with the legend: “Huelga,” which means strike.

It is the morning of September 8, 1965, and a soft-spoken, slightly-built man named Chavez has persuaded 3,000 Chicanos (Mexican-Americans) to stay away from Delano’s fields. The grapes grown there will rot until and unless the growers admit that farm laborers are free men too. The cars carrying pickets, not pickers, will go to the fields.

That’s how it was when Cesar Chavez decided the tranquillity of Delano (“We take good care of our ‘spies’”) needed shaking. That was also more than three years ago.

The National Farm Workers Association, which Chavez founded in 1962, still haven’t organized the Delano fields. They have won union representation votes, and have successfully negotiated contracts with eight companies.

And they have organized a national boycott of California table grapes.

The Michigan boycott office is, as liberation struggle quarters usually are, a rather simple affair, housed in what must have been a grocery store at one time, at 2500 Howard, at 17th, which is, appropriately enough, in the heart of Detroit’s Chicano community.

Unlike most movement offices, however, this one has a unique air- of quiet dignity about it. On one wall is a giant schedule for the month, listing the duties of the workers. The name “Lupe” appears again and again, noting that Lupe will walk a picket line in the cold one day, appear on a TV debate another, or be at some meeting on still another.

“Lupe” is 39-year old Guadalupe Anguiano, a paid (\$5 a week) volunteer for the boycott. She is the daughter of Chicano immigrants who picked fruit in California. She went to college.

She went to college because the Victory Knoll Sisters sent her there when she joined their order. Most Chicanos don’t attend college. Less than half of them even graduate from high school.

After 15 years as a Catholic nun she left the convent because she felt she could not do all she would like to with her people, within the restrictions of clerical life. After brief stints at other positions, she became a worker for the boycott.

The pretty, animated Lupe, who keeps a poster of Che tacked over her desk, came to Detroit in June, 1968, to organize the boycott here. She has received help from State Senator Roger Craig (D-Dearborn), and representatives of the AFL-CIO and the UAW. They've been backed by Mayor Cavanagh, Archbishop John F. Dearden, the Inter-Faith Action Council, Frank Ditto and the East Side Voice of Independent Detroit, Congressman John Conyers, and others.

They've also been denounced, along with their supporters, by both Detroit daily newspapers, the Greater Detroit Board of Commerce, the Associated Food Dealers of Greater Detroit, and, according to — the Detroit Free Press, Jim-Jim, the Detroit zoo's prize gorilla.

Jim-Jim likes grapes, and the zoo is a city of Detroit run park. Mayor Cavanagh has ordered the city not to buy grapes, leaving Jim-Jim grapeless. So, Jim-Jim has joined Councilwoman Mary Beck, Detroit Police Officers Association president Carl Parsell, and American Donald Lobsinger, in opposing the mayor.

Almost all Detroit supermarket chains have agreed to stop selling the grapes. But, they're still available to independent grocers through wholesalers. The wholesalers and individual grocers are on the boycott's list of targets for picketing and informational activities.

The boycott is a tool designed to focus national attention on the rural poor.

And the union is an organizational tool for the rural poor to use to climb out of poverty.

Grape pickers earn an average wage of about \$1.60 an hour. Their work is seasonal. They pay the same prices as everyone else for the necessities of life. Their children are dehumanized in the public schools, told that their language is a liability, their culture insignificant.

They face, in other words, racism and poverty.

Rural poverty is one of the chief causes of urban poverty. The poor have flocked to the cities, only to find few jobs, inadequate educational opportunities, and more racism and poverty.

Chavez and his brothers are determined to help farm workers free themselves from this bitter cycle. He is aware of the institutional nature of the forces that bind the rural poor. He has recently taken on: the Southern Pacific Railway; Standard Oil; and the Bank of America.

These corporate structures own much of the land on which grapes are raised.

He has also seen to the development of power among the people in that the farm workers are required to assume the major responsibilities for sustaining the movement.

It is a long, uphill struggle against formidable opposition. Says President-elect Richard M. Nixon: "I will eat California grapes and drink the product whenever I can."

fifth Estate

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Fifth Estate #70, January 9-22, 1969

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