

Delano to Sacramento

Jubilation and Triumph

Anne P. Draper

1966

Mrs. Draper, active trade unionist and secretary of California Citizens for Farm Labor, spent several days on the Delano-Sacramento pilgrimage march of the grape strikers.

A giant march and rally of some 10,000 farm workers and supporters on Easter Sunday in Sacramento, California demonstrated the enormous support which the seven-month strike of the Delano grape strikers has aroused. On Easter morning the original 67 pilgrims who had left Delano 25 days earlier were joined by thousands coming from all parts of the state and nation for the last five miles from West Sacramento to the gold-domed State Capitol.

It was a day of jubilation and triumph for the farm workers, coming shortly after the second largest grape grower on strike, Schenley Industries, had signed an agreement recognizing the independent National Farm Workers Association as the exclusive collective bargaining representative for its 450 field workers. The recognition agreement, signed by Cesar Chavez for the NFWA and Schenley's attorney, is the first major breakthrough in the strike against 33 grape growers in the Delano area.

The grape strike began on September 8, 1965, when members of the Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee (AWOC), AFL-CIO (mainly Filipino-Americans employed by growers of table grapes) struck their employers demanding union recognition and a guaranteed minimum pay of \$1.40 an hour. The NFWA, whose Mexican-American membership is largely employed in wine grapes, voted to support the strike, and has distinguished itself by its militant and dramatic tactics.

The NFWA's consumer boycott of Schenley products evoked widespread support and severely damaged Schenley's public image as a "fair employer"—"100% union." While sections of the AFL-CIO declined to aid the boycott, a handful of dedicated NFWA volunteers fanned out across the country and found enthusiastic helpers among civil rights fighters, students, clergy, concerned citizens, and union members and leaders deeply committed to organizing farm workers.

Given the hands-off attitude of the bulk of the California state AFL-CIO and the central labor bodies, the personal participation of William Kircher, director of the national AFL-CIO's Department of Organization, both in the pilgrimage march and in the Schenley recognition agreement, marks a new stage in AWOC-NFWA relations.

Kircher brought a delegation of national AFL-CIO staff members to spend several days on the march, and expressed his deep admiration for NFWA's dedicated leader, Cesar Chavez, at several rallies. AWOC Delano strike director Larry Itliong also spent many days on the march, and a group of AWOC members marched the entire route. But conspicuously absent during both the march and the final rallies were top state AFL-CIO leaders, whose attitude appears to be that if they don't recognize the NFWA, maybe it will disappear.

Kircher represented a refreshing change and indicated that talks were under way for the possible affiliation of NFWA with the national AFL-CIO. The recognition agreement was witnessed by Kircher in the office of the Los Angeles County Federation of Labor.

It calls for negotiations for a union contract to start within 30 days, to be held at the Los Angeles AFL-CIO office and to be concluded within 60 days. Both sides appear confident that a contract will be signed. The NFWA called

off its strike at the Schenley fields and suspended the boycott. Much credit was given to the longshore, teamster, and Los Angeles bartenders unions, as well as L.A. Federation Secretary William Bassett for achieving the historic agreement.

Of the 47,000 acres of struck vineyards in the Delano area, Schenley owns some 3,500 acres. The largest grower, DiGiorgio Corporation, has 4,600 acres in Delano out of a total of 20,000 acres in the state. DiGiorgio is an agribusiness goliath, with several large food divisions and interlocking directorates with major California concerns, especially the powerful Bank of America.

Two days after Schenley had capitulated, DiGiorgio called a press conference at which they announced that they would agree to an election among their 2,000 field workers on certain conditions. These included the listing of an employer-sponsored so-called "Independent Farm Workers Union," the banning of any strike during negotiations leading to a contract, and the referral of any unresolved issues during the negotiations to compulsory arbitration.

Chavez termed the proposal a "booby trap full of preconditions," pointing out that the firm had never contacted the union to discuss such an election among its workers but had unilaterally decided what those conditions should be. He stated the NFWA would refuse to take part in any election if the company union appeared on the ballot.

A strange note was sounded when the notoriously union-busting DiGiorgio firm condemned Schenley for granting the NFWA exclusive recognition without an election among its workers as an undemocratic procedure. Both firms have steadfastly denied that there was any strike on their properties, and have insisted that their workers do not wish to be unionized.

The news about the Schenley victory and the DiGiorgio about-face heartened the pilgrimage marchers during the last week of their march to the State Capitol in Sacramento. Their march, which started on March 17, combined a religious pilgrimage under the banner of the Virgin of Guadeloupe, Mexico's patron saint, with the modern protest march.

Under the triple banner of "Peregrinacion, Penitencia, y Revolucion," the NFWA had marched through some fifty towns in the long, hot and dusty Central Valley of California. Rallies had brought the grape strikers' story to the resident farm workers.

The locals had fed and housed the marchers. Strike committees for future action had been set up. Sympathizers had arranged welcoming parades and elections. Contingents of farm workers from far-off Imperial Valley, Oxnard, Salinas, San Jose and other strongholds of agribusiness had been inspired to organize and join the march.

Everywhere the marchers were augmented for a day—sometimes for several days—by friends from all walks of life—clergy, students, housewives, civil rights supporters, nuns, union members, dignitaries, State Assemblymen, candidates for political office, Mexican-American leaders. It had become a peoples' movement, and the drama of the march was captured in constant TV and newspaper coverage. The farm workers had ceased to be the forgotten people.

But the state's top official, Governor Edmund G. Brown, continued to ignore the march to the end. The strikers, both AWO and NFWA, have requested over and over that he come to Delano and use the power of his office to bring the growers and the unions to the negotiating table. Despite promises and assurances that they have no better friend in the country," Brown has yet to visit the site of the largest agricultural strike since the thirties.

In mid-March, Senators Harrison Williams, Robert Kennedy and George Murphy came 3,000 miles to conduct hearings in Sacramento, Visalia and Delano on farm labor, to gain support for several bills introduced by Williams. AFL-CIO officials, religious leaders and other friends of farm labor traveled 3,000 miles to plead for farm labor. Brown sent statements, supporting national legislation but completely evading what could be done on a state level for California's half million farm workers.

The strikers asked him to address their rally in Sacramento, but Brown declined, stating that he had to spend the day with his family at the home of Frank Sinatra in swank Palm Springs. When he offered to meet with them on another day, the reply was curt: "If he doesn't want to meet with us, we don't want to meet with him. We voted unanimously to meet him Sunday or not at all. We've been on strike seven months."

Farm workers have not forgotten Brown's aggressive leadership at the behest of the growers to re-institute the bracero program, and his reneging on his campaign promises to enact a state minimum wage to include farm workers.

While they waited for the mile-long line of marchers to reach the State Capitol, there were chants: “We Want Brown.” Brown never came, but he was bitterly criticized for his failure to put farm labor matters before the state legislature and for his cold-shouldering of farm workers.

Despite some rain sprinkles the enormous crowd waited patiently while many friends of farm workers brought greetings and pledged their support. The crowd gave Cesar Chavez a thunderous ovation. His speech was highlighted by the announcement of the boycott against DiGiorgio products and the calm confidence that they would overcome this giant power.

Fiery Delores Huerta NFWA, Vice President, reviewed the failures of Governor Brown and the Democratic Administration to enact a state minimum wage, extension of unemployment compensation or a state collective bargaining law for farm workers. She predicted a “general strike” unless farm workers were given the same rights as other workers, and the crowd roared their approval. The years of penance were over; as the plan of Delano proclaimed: “We shall pursue the Revolution we have proposed—a revolution of the poor seeking bread and justice.”

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