



Global Nonviolent Action Database

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U.S. farmworkers in California campaign for economic justice (Grape Strike), 1965-70

September

1965

to: July 29,

1970

Country: United States

Location City/State/Province: Delano, CA

Location Description: Centered in Delano, CA, but the grape boycott spread both nationally and internationally.

Goals:

To get grape growers to sign union contracts, increase wages, and improve working conditions.

Methods

Methods in 1st segment:

- 005. Declarations of indictment and intention
- 016. Picketing
- 038. Marches
- 041. Pilgrimages
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 071. Consumers' boycott
- 080. Suppliers' and handlers' boycott
- 100. Farm workers' strike

Methods in 2nd segment:

- 016. Picketing
- 100. Farm workers' strike

Methods in 3rd segment:

- 016. Picketing
- 071. Consumers' boycott
- 100. Farm workers' strike
- 159. The fast (fast of moral pressure, hunger strike, satyagrahic fast)

Methods in 4th segment:

- 016. Picketing
- 071. Consumers' boycott
- 100. Farm workers' strike

Methods in 5th segment:

- 016. Picketing
- 071. Consumers' boycott
- 100. Farm workers' strike

Methods in 6th segment:

- 016. Picketing
- 071. Consumers' boycott
- 100. Farm workers' strike

Additional methods (Timing Unknown):

- 001. Public speeches
- 015. Group lobbying
- 072. Nonconsumption of boycotted goods

Classifications

Classification:

Change

Cluster:

Economic Justice

Group characterization:

- American and Canadian consumers
- Chicano and Filipino farmworkers
- antiwar activists
- civil rights organizations members
- clergy
- longshoremen from Oakland
- student activists
- union members

Leaders, partners, allies, elites

Leaders:

Cesar Chavez, assisted by Dolores Huerta, led the National Farmworkers Association, which ran the campaign. Sometime between 1968 and 1969, the organization became the United Farmworkers of America (UFWA), also led by Chavez. Cesar Chavez has become iconic, both as the leader of the farmworkers' movement and as an advocate for nonviolent methods.

Partners:

A group of Filipino grape workers in CA's Coachella Valley who began the first strike and asked for the National Farmworkers Association's assistance, and the AFL-CIO.

External allies:

National unions, International Longshoremen's and Warehousemen's Union,

National Council of Churches, United Auto Workers Union, consumers in US and Canada, civil rights organizations, trade

unions, student activists, antiwar groups, religious bodies, supermarket owners, restaurant owners, AFL-CIO.

Involvement of social elites:

Activist Dorothy Day and Senator Robert F. Kennedy.

Joining/exiting order of social groups

Groups in 1st Segment:

- AWOOC
- Chicano and Filipino workers
- Filipino grapeworkers in Coachella Valley
- International Longshoremen's and Warehousemen's Union
- National Farmworkers' Association

Groups in 2nd Segment:

- AFL-CIO
- Robert F. Kennedy
- UAW

Groups in 3rd Segment:

Groups in 4th Segment:

- American and Canadian consumers

Groups in 5th Segment:

Groups in 6th Segment:

Additional notes on joining/exiting order:

Civil rights organizations, other trade unions, student activists, antiwar groups, religious bodies, and Dorothy Day: Not known.

Segment Length: 10 months

Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

Opponents:

California grape growers

Nonviolent responses of opponent:

Not known

Campaigner violence:

There were some instances of intended campaigner violence, which led Chavez to do a hunger strike calling for pledges of nonviolence. This hunger strike, or satyagrahic fast, was successful in limiting the campaigner violence.

Repressive Violence:

The protesters met with repressive violence from farm foremen, security guards, the police, and the Teamster union. They were also often arrested, sometimes preemptively. Additionally, protesters were attacked by dogs and sprayed with pesticides.

Success Outcome

Success in achieving specific demands/goals:

5 points out of 6 points

Survival:

1 point out of 1 points

Growth:

3 points out of 3 points

Notes on outcomes:

UFWA signed contracts with 85% of California's grape industry that affected 20,000 grape workers and which resulted in higher wages and better conditions. Not 6 because some companies renege on their agreements soon after.

Before the grape strike in 1965, the average annual income of a California farmworker was less than \$1,400. In addition, variations in weather or market patterns could lessen this amount. Working conditions were also poor, as many workers did not have access to a sufficient amount of food or sanitary facilities.

In 1965, the National Farmworkers Association in Delano, CA, was in its early stages with only 200 dues-paying members. At the time, the organization, which was led by Cesar Chavez, did not intend to undertake any sort of mass action. Instead, the Farmworkers Association intended to increase membership and resources before beginning anything major.

Yet in September 1965, Filipino workers from a farm in the Coachella Valley of California went on strike because of a decrease in wages. The workers wanted their wages to be raised to equal the federal minimum wage, and asked the Farmworkers Association for help. Chavez and the Association felt they had no choice but to assist the protesters and soon strikes had begun at other major grape farms, along with picket lines, both of which lasted the length of the campaign. This was the beginning of the great grape strike or *la huelga*.

In the time that followed, the picket lines were routinely attacked. Picketers were roughed up, attacked by dogs, threatened by cars, and even sprayed with pesticides. Apart from being disrupted physically, picket lines were also halted by court-imposed injunctions. Judges routinely sided with the farm owners rather than the minority farmers.

Still, the picket lines were visited and joined by activist Dorothy Day (a friend of Chavez's), Walter Reuther (the president of the United Auto Workers' Union), and Senator Robert F. Kennedy. Senator Kennedy mocked the local sheriff, who was illegally placing people he believed might picket in jail before they had committed any crime. Kennedy said, "I suggest that [...] in the luncheon period [...] the sheriff and the district attorney read the Constitution of the United States" (Cortright 80-81). Meanwhile, Chavez traveled across the nation giving speeches and raising support, particularly from members of the civil rights movement, free speech movement, other unions, and the AFL-CIO.

In November 1965, longshoremens in Oakland agreed to let a thousand ten-ton crates of grape rot rather than handle the delivery from Delano. This was the first of many boycotts. Next, the Farmworkers Association began consumer boycotts targeting specific major companies.

In March 1966, the Farmworkers Alliance went on a march to the capitol of California in Sacramento. Chavez called it a pilgrimage or *peregrinación*, and fashioned it after Gandhi's march to the sea. The march, which was intended to publicize the boycott and remonstrate the spraying of pesticides on protesters, was also the longest march in U.S. history up to that point, totaling 250 miles from Delano to Sacramento. Nightly, rallies were held and the union's declaration read. By the time the march reached Sacramento, it had transformed from a hundred people to thousands.

Following the march, Schenley and a few other grape companies signed a contract with the Farmworkers Association that included a wage increase of 35 cents an hour. Unfortunately, the contracts only covered 5000 workers, which was merely two percent of the total number of California's farmworkers.

At that time, the boycotts were having trouble because the boycotted companies had only to switch their labels in order to confuse the consumers attempting to boycott their goods. Therefore, the Farmworkers Association began a total boycott of

California table grapes in January 1968.

In February, 1968, Chavez mimicked Gandhi again when he went on a 25 day hunger fast due to intended violence on the part of protesting farmworkers. Chavez announced at a union meeting that he had begun to fast and would not eat again until everyone had pledged nonviolence. Thousands of supporters arrived in Delano to make the pledge. This was a significant moment for the campaign, as it marked the official adoption of a nonviolent ideology.

Meanwhile, the boycott began to spread across the nation. By this point, the National Farmworkers Association had transitioned into the United Farmworkers of America (UFWA), and UFWA offices were set up in a Detroit, Chicago, Boston and other cities across the nation. The campaign gained the support of student activists, clergy, and antiwar activists, and participation in the boycott became part of the counter culture of the 1960s and 70s.

As of 1969, 17 million Americans and many Canadians were participating in the boycott, not buying table grapes or Gallo wine. Grape shipments in North America decreased by a total of one third and grape owners suffered significant losses in sales.

At this point, UFWA began to see results. Initially, 40 companies in Coachella, CA signed contracts that increased wages and added benefits. Then in July 1970 Giurma, which was California's largest grape company, also signed a contract with UFWA. After that, the rest of the grape companies signed contracts too and the campaign was won. The strikes, pickets and boycotts ended.

Yet almost immediately after the grape campaign ended, UFWA became involved in a new campaign in the lettuce fields of the Salinas Valley in California. The lettuce workers were angry because the lettuce growers had made "sweetheart deals" with the Teamster unions. New strikes and boycotts were launched with Chavez again leading the campaign.

Soon after, major grape growers reneged on their contracts and entered into similar sweetheart deals with the Teamster unions, so UFWA recommenced the grape boycott. Yet the novelty of the boycott tactic had worn off and lost its initial effectiveness. In 1980, after UFWA reached a membership of 100 thousand people, the organization began to decline in members, influence, and power.

Research Notes

Influences:

Chavez was influenced by Gandhi's march to the sea and hunger strikes. (1)

The grape strike campaign influenced the lettuce boycott that began in August 1970. (2)

Sources:

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Sharp, Gene. *Politics of Nonviolent Action*. Boston: Porter Sargent Publisher, 1973.

Additional Notes:

The campaign embodied a nonviolent ideology, had a strong leader, and was part of the United Farmworkers movement.

This case was originally written by Maurice Weeks (14/8/2008), then researched again and added by Lindsay Carpenter (3/8/2011).

Name of researcher, and date dd/mm/yyyy:

Lindsay Carpenter, 3/8/2011 and Maurice Weeks, 14/8/2008

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