

Excerpt from *The Rise of the United Farm Workers*

By Inga Kim

1 For more than a century, farmworkers had been denied a decent life in the fields and communities of California's agricultural valleys. Essential to the state's biggest industry, but only so long as they remained **exploited** and **submissive**.

2 Farmworkers had tried but failed so many times to organize the giant agricultural business farms that most people considered it a hopeless task. And yet by the early 1960's, things were beginning to change beneath the surface. Within another fifteen years more than 50,000 farmworkers were protected by union contracts.



CONDITIONS OF FARM WORKERS & THEIR WORK

3 Grape pickers in 1965 were making an average of \$0.90 per hour, plus ten cents per "lug" (basket) picked. State laws regarding working standards were simply ignored by growers. At one farm the boss made the workers all drink from the same cup "a can" in the field. At another ranch, workers were forced to pay a quarter per cup. No ranches had portable field toilets. Workers' temporary housing was strictly segregated by race, and they paid two dollars or more per day for unheated metal shacks, which were often infested with mosquitoes, had no indoor plumbing, nor cooking facilities.

4 Farm labor contractors played favorites with workers, selecting their friends first, sometimes accepting bribes. **Child labor** was **rampant**. Many workers were injured or died in easily preventable accidents. The average life expectancy of a farmworker was 49 years.

NEW ORGANIZATIONS, NEW POSSIBILITIES

5 Two organizations attempted to represent and organize the farmworkers. One had been formed in 1959 called the Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee (AWOC). The AWOC was mostly composed of Filipinos, Chicanos, White and Black workers. The Filipino workers in particular had experience organizing unions in the fields and with strikes.

6 The second organization called the National Farm Workers Association (NFWA) was started by a young **Chicano** named Cesar Chavez in 1962. Chavez, the son of a family of extremely poor farmworkers, had risen through the ranks of the **grassroots** Community Service Organization (CSO) to become its national director.

7 The CSO worked with communities to solve problems through organizing and direct action. But the CSO refused to concentrate its efforts on organizing farmworkers. This made Chavez leave to instead form the NFWA. From his base in Delano, Chavez traveled for three years from town to town in the central valleys of California, meeting with groups of farmworkers in their homes. He tirelessly built an organization that he hoped would one day become an effective union.

THE STRIKING BEGINS

8 At the end of the summer of 1965 the grapes were ripening in the fields around Delano, California. Farmworkers demanded \$1.25 per hour, and when they didn't receive it, on September 8, the workers at nine farms went on strike.

9 AWOOC approached Chavez and asked him to join the mostly Filipino strike. At a meeting on September 16, packed with hundreds of workers, at Our Lady of Guadalupe Catholic Church in Delano, the NFWA voted unanimously, to shouts of “Viva la Huelga!”, to join the strike too. Chavez was apprehensive.

10 NFWA and AWOOC set up a system of roving pickets, with different fields picketed each day. Fifteen or twenty cars full of pickets would go to a field where a grower was attempting to use strikebreakers. Striking workers were often harassed by the growers and police, sometimes violently. Remarkably, their appeals were successful much of the time in persuading workers to join the strike.

11 The growers made a mistake almost immediately. They had always been able to end strikes with small wage increases. Soon after the strike began, they raised wages to \$1.25 per hour. This time they were shocked to discover it wasn't enough. The raise merely encouraged the strikers to believe they were being effective. Now there had to be a union, too.

BOYCOTT!!

12 Shortly after the strike erupted, Chavez called upon the public to boycott (meaning to stop buying) grapes without a union label. Union volunteers were sent out to big cities, where they established boycott centers that organized friendly groups, unions, churches, community organizations to not buy grapes, and instead to join in publicizing the boycott.

13 The strikers' cause was boosted by other events in the nation at the same time. The Civil Rights movement had increased public awareness of the effects of racism, including lowered standards of living for the victims of prejudice in housing, employment, schools, voting, and other areas of daily life. The Civil Rights movement focused attention on the treatment of Blacks in the south. But the situation in the fields of California proved similar enough that the largely Chicano and Filipino farmworkers benefited by the new public understanding of racism. As a result, millions of consumers stopped buying table grapes.

ORGANIZED MARCHES AND PROTESTS

14 The two biggest growers in the Delano area, Schenley and DiGiorgio, were the most vulnerable to the boycott. Schenley was the first to crack. Soon after the strike began Schenley had sprayed striking workers with agricultural poisons. In protest the NFWA organized a march to Sacramento. Seventy strikers left Delano on foot on March 17, 1966, led by Chavez. They walked nearly 340 miles in 25 days. Along the way they picked up hundreds of friends and rallied with thousands of people.

15 A Chicano theater group, El Teatro Campesino, staged skits about the struggle from the back of a flatbed truck every night. The march attracted media attention and public support. Arriving in Sacramento on Easter morning, Chavez announced to a cheering demonstration of 10,000 supporters in front of the Capitol building that Schenley had bowed before the pressure and signed an agreement with the NFWA. Within weeks, DiGiorgio agreed to hold a representation election.

LA HUELGA CONTINUES

16 However, the strike dragged on at dozens of grape farms throughout the Delano area. In the past a farmworkers' union would have been unable to survive such a long conflict. But there was strength in worker solidarity. NFWA and AWOOC merged during the following summer. On August 22, the two organizations became the **United Farm Workers Organizing Committee** (UFW).

- 17 By 1970 the UFW got grape growers to accept union contracts and effectively organized most of that industry, claiming 50,000 dues paying members – the most ever represented by a union in California agriculture. Gains included a union-run hiring hall, a health clinic and health plan, credit union, community center and cooperative gas station, as well as higher wages. The hiring hall meant an end to discrimination and favoritism by labor contractors.

- 18 The UFW, as Chavez had envisioned, had become both a union and a civil rights movement, and this was the key to its success. The dual character of the farmworkers organization gave it a depth of moral pressure and sense of mission felt by members and supporters alike. It seemed as if the farmworkers of California had finally created a union that would last.