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Build support for farm workers' strike!

Selected articles from *UNITY* newspaper



(UNITY photo)

Boycott iceberg lettuce!
Boycott Chiquita Bananas!
Defend the United Farm Workers

25¢

Published by: *UNITY* Newspaper, P.O. Box 26229, San Francisco, California 94126

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Table of Contents

Build Support for farm workers' strike!	1
3,500 farm workers strike in Imperial Valley	2
California farm workers are determined to win lettuce strike	4
Boycott Chiquita Bananas!	8
Mexicans and Chicanos unite in Rio Grande onion strike	10
Boycott iceberg lettuce!	12

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Build support for farm workers' strike!

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(reprinted from UNITY, Vol. II, No. 5)

A great class struggle is now taking place in the lettuce and asparagus fields of California.

The heroism, sacrifice and determination of the 5,000 Chicano and Mexicano striking workers of the UFW is reminiscent of the farm workers' long and difficult fight for the right to unionize in the 1960's and early 70's. That struggle was a powerful example to the working class, and a major source of inspiration for the Chicano people's struggle against national oppression.

Now, once again, Chicano and all other oppressed people need to unite together and build a broad support movement for the striking farm workers. Once again, the people can defeat the big agricultural capitalists if they unite as one.

The whole Chicano national movement should unite around the issue of support for the farm workers. Chicano workers, student organizations and community groups should join in a united and coordinated effort of sup-



People and groups from all over California and the Southwest are coming together to support striking farm workers. Here, supporters arrived in a car caravan from San Jose, California. (UNITY photo)

port work. They should build the boycott of Chiquita bananas and iceberg lettuce that the union has called; help raise money and food for the strikers; and educate as many people as possible about the importance of the struggle.

By building broad support coalitions of various groups, the strike support work can be linked up with local struggles that the groups are involved with. Such coalitions are already being formed in different parts of California and the Southwest.

The working class should also support the

farm workers' strike. Workers and progressive people of all nationalities should join in the support efforts. They should unite with the support coalitions, and also take up the issue of support in their trade unions, schools and communities.

UNITY encourages all its readers to help the farm workers to defend their union and win a decent contract, and to fight national oppression, and better their living and working conditions.

VIVA LA HUELGA!

3,500 farm workers strike in Imperial Valley

(reprinted from *UNITY*, Vol. II, No. 3)

Imperial Valley, CA — The lettuce fields of this area in Southern California are once again the scene of a major farm worker strike. More than 3,000 farm workers, mainly Chicano and Mexican, have been on strike against Sun Harvest Corporation, one of the country's largest iceberg lettuce growers, since January 22. Workers at 28 farms have walked off the job and the strike has spread north to Oxnard and Salinas.

The strike hit the growers at the height of the harvest. With a \$1 million crop ripe in the fields, the growers have brought in scabs. Most of the scabs are white high school students and housewives, many of them relatives of the growers.

On January 29, the growers organized a "Volunteer Harvest Day" to "restore the integrity of the valley," and brought in 300 scabs. This scheme backfired when the inexperienced scabs ruined more of the crop than they picked.

The desperate growers resorted to violent attacks against the strikers. On January 29, growers made "citizen's arrests" of 62 strikers who defied a back-to-work court order. On January 31, police and company goons beat seven strikers at the Vessey Company lettuce ranch in El Centro, and two more strikers were hit by shotgun fire from county sheriffs and company guards. The workers were all hospitalized.

This is the first big strike since the last major United Farm Workers of America (UFW) union contacts were signed in 1976. The workers are now demanding an increase in piece rates and wages. They want a raise in the rate for each box of lettuce picked, from 57¢ to 68¢ per box. Because of inflation, workers on piece rate are earning less in actual buying power than they were in 1970, when the rate was 40¢ per box.

The UFW is also demanding a raise in wages for drivers and other hourly workers, from \$3.70 to \$5.25 an hour. The growers refuse to meet these demands, which would bring the farm workers a 40% total wage increase. They use Carter's 7% wage guidelines as an excuse, even though the guidelines are not supposed to apply to workers who earn less than \$4 an hour.

In addition, workers are demanding a 20 minute paid rest break for every two hours of work, because of the grueling nature of farm labor. The farm workers must stand and stoop all day, picking each head of lettuce by hand. They are also demanding a prohibition of machinery which eliminates jobs. It is estimated that over the next ten years, farm mechanization will cost 120,000 farm workers their jobs. Mechanization has been one of the major means that the growers have used to try to destroy the UFW.

Other strike demands include time and a half overtime pay, a nighttime bonus of 75¢, and pay for time lost by union representatives handling grievances.

These demands reflect the intense exploitation and terrible working conditions that Chicano and Mexican farm workers face. The farm workers fought a long and bitter struggle to win their basic right to union representation

in the 1960's and early 1970's. The grape and lettuce boycotts, organized by the UFW, took these struggles nationwide.

Even with unionization, the farm workers have had to fight the combined forces of the growers, police, courts and the leadership of the



Farm work is among the hardest in the U.S. Here, farm workers must work stooped over all day clearing a field.

Teamsters, which collaborated with the growers to try and drive the UFW out of the fields.

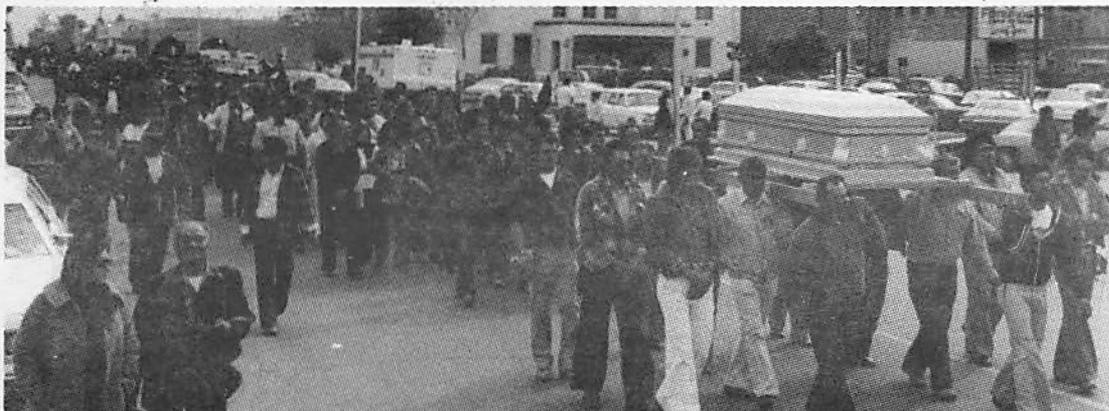
The growers still refuse to grant the workers a decent wage. Their superexploitation of Chicano, Mexican and Pilipino labor brings

them a fabulous \$20 billion income a year. Now the growers are trying to say that the workers' demands for a 40% increase is "unreason-

able." The workers responded with the strike, and the UFW leadership is considering another national boycott against iceberg lettuce.

California farm workers are determined to win lettuce strike

(reprinted from UNITY, Vol. II, No. 4)



Over 10,000 Mexican and Chicano farm workers marched in a funeral procession for Rufino Contreras. (UNITY photo)

On February 10, Rufino Contreras — a 28 year old Mexican farm worker — was shot to death by a ranch foreman in a lettuce field in California's Imperial Valley. His murder sent a wave of anger through the nearly 5,000 striking members of the United Farm Workers of America (UFW) union. The strikers have halted the harvest of the multi-million dollar winter lettuce crop since they walked out of the

fields on January 22. Police arrested three suspects in Contreras' murder, but released them on just \$7,000 bail the next day.

The day after Contreras' murder, only 25 scabs dared to go into the fields. Meanwhile, 4,000 people marched in the border town of Calexico to honor Contreras' memory. Cesar Chavez, president of the UFW, called on the strikers to turn their grief and anger into greater

efforts to win the strike.

On February 12, the entire Imperial Valley was shut down when 10,000 farm workers staged a one-day work stoppage in the carrot, broccoli and lettuce fields. Members of the Teamsters union from the Bud Antle Company also supported the work stoppage.

On February 14, over 10,000 Mexican and Chicano farm workers, their families and supporters, carried UFW funeral flags and signs with Contreras' name along the three and a half mile funeral route. Workers from California, Arizona, Texas, and the Mexican border town of Mexicali (where Contreras and many Mexican farm workers live) marched in the militant procession.

Contreras' murder is part of a mounting wave of violence by growers, hired thugs and police. The farm workers have been attacked by dogs, shot at and insulted repeatedly. A number

of strikers have been wounded in confrontations with the goons, and one young striker may lose his leg after being hit by the landing gear of a police helicopter, which was being used to try to intimidate the strikers.

Strikers at Contreras' funeral noted that the police and highway patrolmen were unusually nonviolent during the procession, because Governor Jerry Brown was there. "But when their boss is not here looking for votes," said a young striker from Holtville, "they abuse us right away and help the bosses."

Strike is a battleground

This strike is the largest since the last major UFW contracts were signed in 1976. The farm workers' long and difficult fight for the right to unionize was a landmark struggle for the Chicano, Mexican and Pilipino peoples who make up a vast majority of California's farm



Police have often been used in attempts to break up the union.

workers. It was a victory for the whole working class. Now, through an array of tactics, the growers are out to break the UFW and intensify the tremendous exploitation and oppression of minority farm workers.

The farm workers' basic demands in this strike expose the harsh conditions they suffer. To begin with, they must migrate from place to place in order to obtain the seasonal harvesting work. They are never able to work year-round and the average yearly income is less than \$5,000. The work is mainly stoop labor. Coupled with the constant exposure to pesticides and poisons, the farm workers' life expectancy is only 49 years. In addition, they are harassed constantly by the immigration authorities and face discrimination at every turn.

In order to even come close to a living wage, the farm workers are demanding wage increases totaling 40% and improvements in their working conditions. To counter these just demands, the growers have taken out full-page ads in major Los Angeles newspapers attacking the UFW demands as "outrageous" and "inflationary." The ads don't mention that the growers have used the strike as an excuse to raise their wholesale prices on lettuce to \$12 a box. This gives the growers six times more than their pre-strike price.

If the farm workers win their demands, they will improve their livelihoods and also set an important precedent for the 1979 contract struggles in auto, rubber, garment, trucking and other industries by defying Carter's 7% wage limit. Though the federal wage guidelines are not supposed to affect farm workers, since they make less than \$4 an hour, the growers are using them as an excuse to keep the wages as low as possible.

A victory in the lettuce strike would also greatly inspire other Mexican and Chicano workers who have been kept from unionizing, and whose backbreaking labor literally built the Southwest. The farm workers movement of the past and the lettuce strike today set an example for the masses of people in fighting against national oppression.

"Farm workers have always paid with blood for any improvements we make; now we're more determined to win the strike."

A call for support

A veteran UFW member told *UNITY*, "Our movement has taken root. Look, the growers are running ads in the papers to recruit scabs, but none show up to work. Last week they put in a crew at one of the farms. They hadn't told them there was a strike. As soon as they saw our flags, they came off the field to support the strike!"

Support has also been growing in the cities and strike areas. Merchants have donated food, and support activities are being organized throughout California. In San Jose, 200 people attended a memorial mass for Rufino Contreras at the Holy Spirit Church. On February 17, the California state-wide MEChA conference unanimously passed a resolution supporting the farm workers. The conference was attended by 450 Chicano and Latino students, representing 56 campuses. At a union meeting on February 18, members of United Auto

Workers Local 560 from Ford's Milpitas, California, plant voted unanimously to publicly support the strike and organized a canned food drive at the plant. Students, workers and people from the many Chicano and Mexican communities are supporting the farm workers, and some have made the trip to the picket lines, in spite of threats of grower and police violence.

The murder of Rufino Contreras has not dampened the fighting spirit of the farm workers. A 51 year-old woman striker from Salinas declared to *UNITY*, "Farm workers have always paid with blood for any improvements we make; now we're more determined to win the strike."



3,500 farm workers and supporters marched militantly through Salinas on March 4, 1979. (*UNITY* photo)

Boycott Chiquita Bananas!

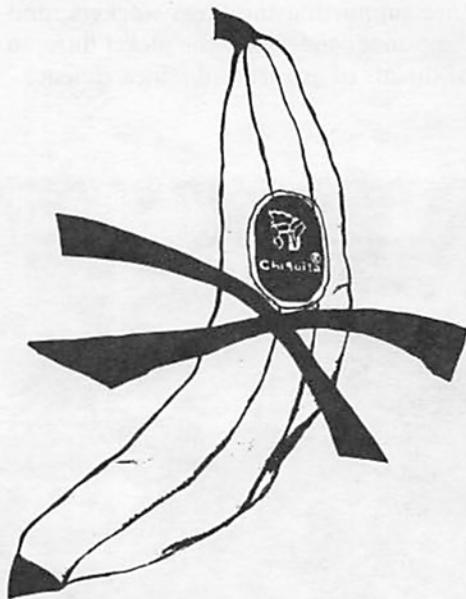
(reprinted from UNITY, Vol. II, No. 8)

Five thousand California farm workers have been on strike against several large lettuce growers since January, braving scabs, court injunctions, company goons and bullets, and police harassment. The mostly Chicano and Mexican farm workers are fighting for a major improvement in their wages, and to defend the very existence of their union. The strike has received strong support from the working class, from the Chicano movement and from progressive people from all walks of life.

On March 25, the United Farm Workers union (UFW) called for a national boycott against Chiquita bananas in order to force the lettuce growers to negotiate in good faith. The boycott is being called in the midst of one of the most bitter battles yet between growers and farm workers. The boycott, an effective tactic in past farm worker's struggles, is already getting strong support from broad sectors of the American public. The boycott will reportedly be extended to Japan and other countries in which Chiquita bananas are marketed.

Why boycott Chiquita bananas?

The largest lettuce grower in the country is Sun Harvest, Inc., a company owned by United Brands, a large U.S. transnational corporation. United Brands also owns the infamous United Fruit Company (UFCo), which grows and sells Chiquita brand bananas. The aim of the Chiquita banana boycott is to force United Brands to direct Sun Harvest to negotiate a contract with the UFW. A Sun Harvest contract would



cause a major breach in the lettuce growers united efforts to defeat the strike and destroy the UFW. The rest of the lettuce growers would then be forced to negotiate with the UFW or face a boycott of all lettuce not carrying the Sun Harvest label.

A strong boycott would also help put strikers in a better position to force major concessions from Sun Harvest. If that occurred it would set the pace for negotiations with the rest of the lettuce growers.

Chiquita bananas — stained with blood

United Fruit Company, which became a part of United Brands in 1970, has a long and bloody

history, especially in Latin America. UFCo has, since 1899, built banana plantations in Central America and other parts of Latin America. UFCo has been one of the major representatives of U.S. imperialism in Latin America. Using both the dollar and the gun, UFCo acquired hundreds of thousands of acres of Latin American lands, gained control over many of the railroads in Guatemala, El Salvador, Costa Rica, Panama and Honduras. With the backing of the U.S. government, UFCo meddled in the affairs of many different Central American governments.

UFCo also forced large numbers of Latin American peasants off their lands, and made them work on UFCo plantations for starvation wages. When these workers would attempt to unionize or struggle for better working conditions, UFCo often resorted to naked force to crush them. In one such incident in 1928, UFCo thugs machine gunned striking banana workers in Colombia.

UFCo also worked hand in hand with the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency to help overthrow the government of Jacobo Arbenz of Guatemala in 1950. Arbenz' government had

expropriated 400,000 acres of idle UFCo land. After Arbenz was overthrown, UFCo got back its 400,000 acres from the right wing government of Castillo Armas.

Because of its bloody history of exploitation and oppression the United Fruit Company became a hated symbol of U.S. imperialism in Latin America.

Build support for the boycott

What United Brands is doing to the Chicano and Mexican farm workers in California is comparable to what they have done in Latin America for decades. It is no wonder then that they have refused to negotiate a just contract with the UFW. It's also no wonder that one striker has been shot dead, and dozens more injured or jailed.

Many farm workers have said that they will continue their strike until they win. The strikers have shown their determination to defend their union no matter what the cost. A strong nationwide boycott of Chiquita bananas can also help defend the union and win victory in the strike. This victory will be a victory for working and oppressed people everywhere.



(UNITY photo)

Mexicans and Chicanos unite in Rio Grande onion strike

(reprinted from UNITY, Vol. II, No. 9)

Thousands of farm workers have walked out of the fields in the Rio Grande Valley in the southernmost part of Texas, one of the richest agricultural regions in the U.S. Chicanos and Mexicans are demanding toilets and fresh water in the fields, and at least 85¢ per 60 pound bag of onions they pick.

The strike, walkouts and sit-downs have spread like fire during the month of April, the peak of the onion harvest. On April 4, 500 stopped work and struck the Charles Wetegrove Company in Raymondville. Two thousand more walked out in West Hidalgo county on April 13, and were followed by 1,600 farm workers from Mercedes and Weslaco. Inspired by the struggles in the towns around them, 2,500 more walked out on April 17 and 19, in La Jolla and San Juan. Now in Pharr, in the Pharr-McAllen areas, over 1,900 more have walked out.

Fighting national oppression

Both the United Farm Workers and the Texas Farm Workers unions are cooperating in the strike and walkouts. In addition, workers at two local packing sheds walked out in solidarity

with the job actions, and local truck drivers are showing their support. People know it will take great unity and struggle to fight the severe national oppression in the valley, where the wealth of Texas has been built on the backs of the Chicano and Mexican people.

The conditions of the campesinos are testimony to the super-profits the big growers make from their labor. For one 60 pound sack of onions, a worker has been getting just 35¢. At this rate, a family of four earns only about \$15 a day, enough to buy gas to get to and from the fields, and little else. They are still forced to use "el cortito," the short hoe, which has been banned in other states because of the damage it does to a worker's back. And although the workers belong to a farm workers union, they are all still forced to work without any contract.

Over 100,000 people — nearly half the population of the Rio Grande Valley — work in the fields. Most are Chicanos and Mexicans. The state of Texas has a booming economy, but the McAllen-Pharr-Edinburg area has an annual per capita income of only \$3,338 per family — the lowest income in the entire U.S. Eighty-six percent of the children never graduate from

high school in the valley. Most of them are forced to quit school and work in the fields in order for their families to survive.

**Mexican/Chicano unity:
key to victory**

Mexicans and Chicanos have shown great unity during the activities this month. Side-by-side, they have shut down the fields. Workers from Reynosa (across the border in Mexico) have spread the word not to scab and to support the strike and walkouts. Ten *colonias* (community formed groups from Mexico) have

joined the United Farm Workers, and cars from Mexico joined the recent car caravan to rally support for the demands throughout the valley.

In a desperate attempt to stop the struggle of the campesinos, the companies and agribusinesses are pushing a bill through the state legislature to altogether outlaw picket lines, boycotts and strikes. But the farm workers are feeling their strength, and their movement for equality and justice cannot be stopped.

Que Viva la Raza!



Boycott iceberg lettuce!

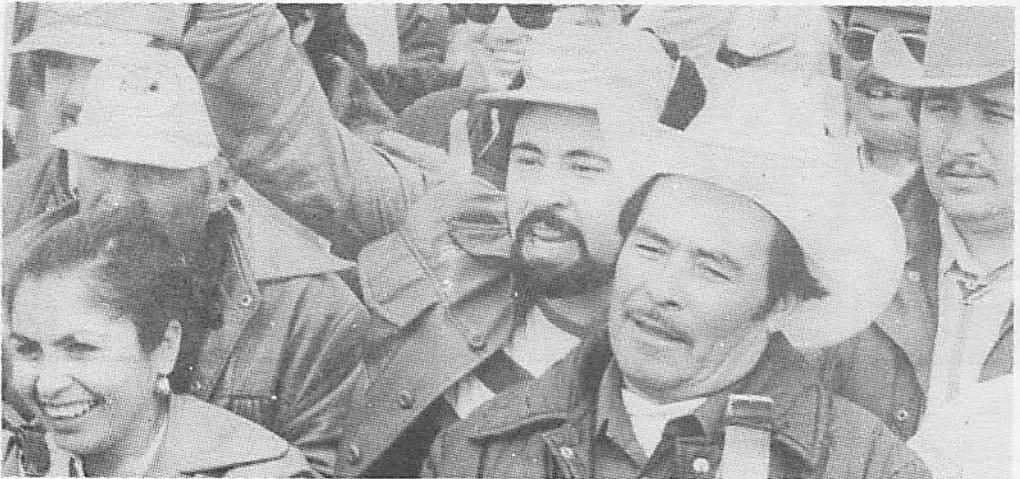
Now in its fourth month, the California UFW lettuce strike has moved to the Salinas Valley, the largest lettuce producing area in the country. The union recently called for a national boycott of iceberg lettuce to go along with the boycott of Chiquita bananas.

The growers have spent a fortune in their attempt to crush the strike. They are spending hundreds of thousands of dollars to bring in scab labor, and to hire thugs to protect the scabs and attack union picket lines. Since the strike began, one striker has been killed and many others injured by company goons and police. Hundreds have been arrested.

In spite of these vicious tactics, the strikers are stronger and even more determined to win. They successfully halted the lettuce harvest in Imperial Valley, and they are confident they can do the same in Salinas.

The growing support movement is helping to sustain the strike. Some May Day and Cinco De Mayo activities were geared to help raise support, and on April 28, the California Labor Federation sent enough food to feed the strikers' families for two weeks. Financial support has enabled the UFW to increase strike pay from \$25 to \$50 a week.

The strike, boycott and mass support for the farm workers has forced the growers back to the negotiating table after three weeks of refusing to deal. The strikers view this as a positive development, but expect the struggle to be a long one.



(UNITY photo)