

Note: This is the last in a series of articles on Cesar Chavez and the farmworkers.

The strike last summer was a strange battle fought mostly on shifting sand. Depending on your attitude, the strike could be seen as a brave fight of the underdogs (Chavez and the National Farm Workers Union against evil growers and Teamster muscle. Or, if you prefer another approach, the National Farm Workers Union was a confused and uncontrolled gaggle of idealists bent on interfering with the important business of business. In this view, the Teamsters were the good guys who just dropped in to clean up the town and drive the outlaws back across the mountains to Mexico.

But the truth of the situation, the reality, is harder to understand than the plot of a 13th-century morality play. One thing is certain, at least in California: people feel one way or another about farm labor, and there isn't much middle ground to stand on.

The easiest of the three antagonists to criticize is the growers. Although there is some national corporate ownership of ranches in the Central Valley, most of them are still in the hands of the original families. This is especially true for table grape farms.

Around Delano, which serves as a sort of halfway point between the Imperial Valley of the extreme south, and the grape farms around San Francisco and Sacramento, many of the ranches are run by Yugoslavian families who first came to California at the turn of the century.

What the Slavs found there was dry desert ground, and by their own sweat, and the sweat of many others, they turned the land into green and fertile fields. And the farm labor system, complete with wage slavery and racial oppression, was the going way of doing business in the area.

You would think that with the wages growers paid to farm workers—until only recently no more than \$1.40 an hour—fantastic profits are made. Yet the somehow unbelievable truth is just the opposite: many family concerns earn only ten, fifteen or twenty thousand a year off their land.

The growers say that agriculture is important to the California economy. They say the state provides almost half of the fruits and vegetables grown in the entire country, and when you drive through one of California's "fruit and vegetable" inspection stations, the officer will give you a handout that says pretty much the same thing.

But slave wagery has no justification, and with the recent victories for Chavez and the farm workers, the idea of trade unionism (expected for years in most other industries) has finally replaced it.

Next spring Chavez will still have to fight the growers for new contracts. Likely, the growers will half-heartedly resist signing the contracts, still insisting on demands that Chavez do something about his "inefficient" hiring halls and the strike-at-harvest threat. But in the end, they'll sign because there's no one else who will do the work, or even pretend to represent those who do.

The Teamsters have evidently had enough. In 1965, their attempt to win worker support failed miserably; this past summer's organizing drive was so superficial that the California State Supreme Court ruled that not only did the Teamsters not represent the farm workers, but that the growers knew the Teamsters didn't.

In the field to organize, the Teamster leadership represented not the Mexican-American, nor the Filipino-American, nor the Puerto-Rican, nor the poor American, but only the American. Although a few of the local Teamster officials were Mexican or Filipino, most were middle class whites with a salary and fine car to match their position.



Last summer

Still, the Teamsters had years before organized both the truck drivers (who haul the farm goods) and the cannery workers (who package it). If Chavez and his union go out on strike during the harvest season, the action automatically shuts down the canning plants and stops the trucks. Naturally, the threat of a strike-at-harvest is of concern to the Teamsters.

Yet, the harvest strike weapon is really the only weapon the farm workers have. When the grapes are picked and shipped and the ground gets cold in winter, the growers can afford to laugh at the NFWU,

next summer, Chavez and his people will hopefully be working under contracts which will pay them about \$2.40 an hour. Not, perhaps, a decent wage for the work, but at least a better wage.

Some people think that what really lies behind Chavez is social revolution, and they're probably not too far off the mark in saying so. The increased wages and benefits that are being paid farm workers today does, indeed, represent social revolution. And the new life that presents itself to farm workers might be long overdue and grudgingly-given, but that life is

## Analysis

By GEORGE BUDDY  
Of the Emerald

but when the season is ending and the grapes are ready for picking, there'll be no jokes for the growers to tell.

Someday, and not too far in the future, mechanization will end the farm labor system. Already mechanized is most of the picking for California's agricultural industry—only the fragility of the table grape still requires hand care.

In the meantime, however, the farm workers will continue to pick the grapes. Unlike past years, their wages will be enough to live on without being slaves to an industry that until now has been unable to operate in a semblance of decency. By

growing and filling in the blanks and spaces of poor people facing hard times. Hopefully, the hard times are really finished for the farm workers, and maybe they'll become American citizens and human beings, instead of despised "Okies" or "greasers" or "flips." Maybe even their white neighbors will finally accept and respect them, as they have with the Jews, the Italians and the Irish. Maybe, but while the grapes of wrath have all been picked, and the harvest of shame has come to an end, the sad and patient cry for social justice still haunts the silent California vineyards.



A BEGINNING

And now

There's  
no  
middle  
ground  
when  
you  
talk  
about  
California  
farm  
labor