



IN SPITE OF all the difficulties facing the strike in Texas, no movement or issue in recent state history has had such an impact on the poor people of this state. The strike has given farm workers in Texas a new hope, and a discontent with their present situation, which no amount of grower propaganda can eradicate. They want to be masters of their destinies.

The shabby buildings, the pot holes in the gravel streets, . . . so much of Rio Grande City, Texas remains unchanged. And yet Rio Grande City has become the symbol of change, of revolution, for 20,000 Mexican-Americans in the Rio Grande Valley and for several million others in Texas and the Southwest. After being on strike for one year, members of the United Farm Workers Organizing Committee (AFL-CIO) in Rio Grande City and Starr County. But the farm workers' strike has broadened into a social movement which is sweeping throughout South Texas, affecting workers in every industry, affecting the political, economic, and social structure of the entire lower third of the state.

There have been rumblings before in South Texas. There have been small but significant political and economic victories. The Teamsters Union led a limited and partially successful organizing drive around Crystal City, north of Laredo. Franklin Garcia of the Amalgamated Meatcutters Union has organized workers in the lower Rio Grande Valley in canneries, shrimp plants and dehydrating plants. The Meatcutters Union and the Teamsters both realized that to win union-representation elections, strikes, and contracts in South Texas, they would have to organize the communities as well as the workers directly involved.

The power structure in these counties and towns is almost always the same—one-party (Democratic) politics, with a small Anglo community of businessmen and growers in control. Judges, police, county officials, and newspapers are all extremely hostile to unions, to "agitators," to "liberals" (and Lyndon Johnson is a liberal in Texas) and to "uppity Meskins." For any kind of democratic organization to survive and become successful in South Texas, it must fight all of these anti-democratic forces. Even if the organization is directed at a single issue or objective, the status quo forces will rally together to defeat the movement.

Further setting the stage for the farm workers' strike in Texas was the rapid expansion of the National Farm Workers Association in California. Over 2,000 workers from Starr County, Texas go to California every year to work in the harvests. Over 50,000 workers from the lower Rio Grande Valley (Cameron and Hidalgo counties) leave the area to harvest much of the nation's crops west of the Mississippi. So news of the Delano strike spread throughout Texas as the migrants returned in late 1965 and early 1966.

This was the setting when Eugene Nelson, a novelist and writer, moved to Mission, Texas in May, 1966. Nelson had lived in Mexico for several years and had gone to Delano in mid-1965 to work for the Union. When the grape strike broke out, he became one of the most effective picket captains. When the Union launched a nation-wide boycott of Schenley products, Nelson was sent to Houston to organize the boycott in Texas. Then when the boycott ended victoriously Nelson decided that rather than return to Delano, he would go to the Rio Grande Valley and try to organize farm workers there.

The logical place to start organizing in Texas is in the lower Valley, where the main agricultural and farm-worker communities are located. So Nelson settled in Mission. But almost as soon as he arrived he heard that melon pickers in Starr County were talking about a strike for the big June harvest. Nelson went up to Rio Grande City, an oasis isolated from the rest of the Valley by about thirty miles of sage brush and mesquite. A used car dealer, Margil Sanchez, assured Nelson that the workers were "ready" and encouraged him to call a meeting. Nelson printed up some leaflets and announced a meeting to discuss forming a farm workers' union. Over sixty people showed up. Enthusiasm was so great that another meeting was called for the next day, May 23. Some two hundred came, cheered, and talked about going on strike for \$1.25 an hour. Wages at that time ranged from 40c to a high of 85c an hour.

These two rallies were crucial in getting the Union started—perhaps on the wrong foot. The conditions in Starr County are appalling, with average income at \$534 a year, and schooling well below the 6.7 years average for Mexican-Americans in the rest of Texas. Over twenty percent of the adult population is illiter-

ate in English and Spanish. Starr County is the poorest county in Texas and ranks seventeenth poorest in the nation. Over ninety percent of the population is Mexican-American. The people of Starr County desperately needed a union. But one cannot build a union simply on the need for one. The growing militancy of Mexican-Americans, and the fiery speeches of the rallies, built up tremendous enthusiasm for the strike. No one bothered to consider obstacles, such as an unlimited reservoir of Mexican labor across the river, with which the growers could break the strike; or the problem of sustaining a strike for more than a few days or weeks when there was no strike fund and workers had no money at all in reserve, and no credit available; or the fact that isolated Starr County was run as a feudal estate, with the local machine ("New Party") willing to use anything at its disposal—cops, economic pressure or outright violence—at the service of the growers to break the strike. In other words, Nelson happened to get involved in probably the worst county in the state in which to win a strike. So the strike began on a wave of enthusiasm, with no conception at all of the difficulties facing the strikers.

Three Glorious Days

When the growers refused to negotiate with Nelson or the workers, the workers went on strike, on June 1, 1966. Over four hundred quit work that first day. Every packing shed in the county was shut down. The highly perishable melons began to rot. Union melon packers (members of the United Packinghouse Workers) honored the picket lines, though they averaged \$2-\$5 an hour in the highly skilled packing operations. For three glorious days the strike, like a noose, tightened around the growers necks. And then the rope was cut.

After the first day, the growers began a massive recruitment of Mexican nationals, who cross the border each day to work in the fields and return home at night. A loophole in the Immigration laws allows this if the workers can get a "green card" immigration permit. When American workers saw Mexican nationals taking their jobs, they themselves began to return to work.

In addition, La Casita, the biggest grower in the area (over 1200 acres of melons, with profits running up to \$900 an acre) raised its wages to \$1 an hour, and other growers went up to 70c and 80c an hour.

Finally, the growers flexed their political muscles. Texas Rangers were called in, and began arrests, starting with Nelson on the first day of the strike. And a district Judge issued an injunction restricting and eventually outlawing all picketing. (Texas law says that only two people may picket a firm, and must be fifty feet apart and fifty feet from the entrance to the firm. There are many other anti-labor laws, including "Right to Work.")

The strike did gain tremendous publicity in Texas, which may be the reason why county officials and growers did not simply murder the leaders. The growers had a real scare. After the first week, Nelson and the strikers voted to affiliate their Independent Workers Association

with the N.F.W.A. (Later that summer, the N.F.W.A. merged with the Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee to form the U.F.W.O.C., AFL-CIO, led by Chavez and most of the old N.F.W.A. staff). The Union then had to decide what to do about the Starr County Local, a local with no dues-paying members, with no hope of winning a contract in the near future (there are no harvests between July and November in Starr County), and with over one hundred families expecting the Union to support them. Even the "members" in Texas were not organized in Chavez' sense of the word. Many only vaguely understood principles of the Union and the movement, and lacked the deep loyalty to the Union and to their brother strikers, the willingness to sacrifice and work hard with no immediate gain, that have made possible the victories in California.

The March Across Texas

A series of marches, which had some effect, may actually have delayed the building of the Union. The first was from Rio Grande to La Casita, a company village about eight miles away; then to the Catholic Shrine in San Juan, seventy miles from Rio Grande; and from there four hundred miles across South Texas to Austin. The march received a great deal of publicity. It focused attention on the horrible conditions of Starr County and of farm labor in general. And it provided a tremendous boost to labor organizing in the rest of the state, and to setting of a state minimum wage of \$1.25 (a special project of the State AFL-CIO, and one expected to pass in 1968). Finally, it raised some money, though much of this never reached the Union. But unlike the California march, the Texas march was not particularly oriented towards reaching and organizing farm workers.

In the fall and winter of 1966, the first real efforts to organize began, with Californians—first Tony Orendan and Bill Chandler, later Gilbert Padilla—leading the drive. The Union actually lost "members" during this period, as the impatient, the less brave, the less dedicated people quit. But the Union did begin to build a core of dedicated workers and indications were that the 1967 harvest could be stopped.

The key to the campaign in 1967 was to stop the green card Mexican nationals *first*, and then pull out the local workers. Over three thousand workers had been contacted during the winter and spring, and convinced to sign cards authorizing the Union to bargain for them. Many had agreed to leave Starr County on their yearly migrations before the melon harvest began in May. But the most common attitude on the part of the workers was the promise—"If you stop the green carders and guarantee that they won't take our jobs, we'll join the strike."

Padilla began concentrating on this problem in March, and by April had gotten state AFL-CIO officials to meet with state officials of the C.T.M. (Confederation of Mexican Workers) in Mexico to discuss cooperation. The officials issued promises about cooperation and the need to work together. Taking this as a go-ahead signal, Padilla organized the local C.T.M. members, brickwork-

ers, construction workers, and others, and worked out details for joint international picketing of the two bridges which cross into Starr County. On May 11, the picket lines went up at 4 A.M. with about thirty Mexicans at the south entrance to the bridge and about seventy Mexican-Americans at the north end of the bridge at Roma. The Mexicans put up their red and black flag, stretched across the road. It is illegal to break a strike in Mexico, or pass through a picket line. Every car was stopped. The only people allowed through were those who could prove that they did not work at the struck fields. The picket line was one hundred percent effective. La Casita Farms lost over thirty percent of their work force. La Casita, always the leader among the growers, raised its wages to \$1.15 an hour and other growers began paying \$1 an hour. There is little doubt that the growers would have had to sign contracts if the C.T.M. picket line had remained up for as much as a week or more.

The growers, reportedly with the personal aid of Texas Governor John Connally's office, called the Governor of the State of Tamaulipas in Mexico, and demanded that he disperse the C.T.M. workers. The Mexican governor got in touch with state and local C.T.M. leaders and threatened to call out state troops to disperse the picket line. The local workers, in a beautiful display of solidarity, were willing to stand firm. But the state and national leaders of the C.T.M. were not willing to clash with the government authorities, and in fact, joined the Mexican government in pressuring the local workers to quit. The C.T.M. picket line came down on May 13, and has not been up since. The relationship between the Mexican labor unions and the government is very complex, and it is hard to know just where to place the blame for this "sell-out," but the workers themselves were willing to stand by their American brothers.

And so the green carders returned. Driven by poverty and actual starvation Mexican workers crossed to find Starr County wages as much as eight to ten times what they could get in Mexico. The Union has never opposed legitimate immigration from Mexico, or even alien residents' working in this country. But the green-card com-muters are used by the growers and border area employ-ers to depress wages and break strikes. (The U.S. De-partment of Immigration has at last been aroused to action, largely because of the Rio Grande strike. In July, the Department, in cooperation with the Depart-ment of Labor, certified the five major strikes in Starr County and said that foreign workers caught working at the struck ranches would have their green cards re-vo-ked. But the ruling is full of loopholes and there is no indication so far that the government has any intention of pushing for meaningful enforcement. The ruling was timed to come after the melon harvest was safely over.)

The rest of May and June, 1967 saw an all-out counter-attack by the growers and county officials. To supple-ment the County Sheriff's Department and over forty special deputies appointed since the strike began (many of them growers or part-time "security guards" em-ployed at the struck ranches), the county officials and growers invited in the Texas Rangers, and there were

sometimes as many as twelve or fourteen in town. The Rangers have a long history of racism, and their main function over the last one hundred years has been to "pacify" the Indians (none left in Texas) and the Mexi-cans. The techniques used are similar to those used by the Klan in the South, and especially in the first three decades of this century, lynchings and even massacres of Mexican-Americans in South Texas (always described as "bandits") were fairly common.

Enter the Rangers

For six weeks in 1967, the Rangers had a chance to prove that they could still act just as brutally as they had in times past. Their first arrests of the melon season began on May 11, the first day of the C.T.M. picket line. In addition to arrests, they pushed and shoved strikers, and tried to prevent legal picketing. Then they began mass arrests of the whole picket line—thirteen strikers on May 18, another nineteen on May 26, and finally twelve people on the night of May 31. The arrests were coupled with beatings, kickings, threats and curses. In addition, the Rangers threatened workers who stopped at the picket line to talk to strikers; and they "guarded" workers in the fields to make sure that none would leave.

The culmination of Ranger terrorism was the brutal beating of Magdalena Dimas on the night of June 1. He was accused of shouting "Viva la Huelga," which disturbed the peace of a La Casita foreman. Dimas and a friend did not resist arrest. Captain A. Y. Allee of the Texas Rangers admits clubbing Dimas with a sawed-off shotgun, which resulted in a brain concussion. When Dimas fell to the floor unconscious, he was kicked and beaten in the head and body.

The Ranger attacks exhausted the Union physically and financially. Cash bonds of \$500 or more per person were demanded in many of the arrests. This money is simply frozen, since the county officials refused to bring the cases to trial. Over one hundred cases are still pend-ing, many over a year old. The attacks again got pub-licity and sympathy for the strikers, but they were effective in intimidating the workers and harassing the Union. The strikers have been completely committed to the policy of nonviolence in the face of almost con-tinuous provocations. The Union has constantly stressed nonviolence, and members renewed their nonviolent pledge at the height of Ranger terrorism. Violence is traditionally the major weapon of farm workers against growers in a strike. While this commitment to non-violence greatly strengthens the Union in the long run, it left the Union in a relatively weak position to fight back against the Rangers. The tremendous expense of bail bonds, of lawyers, and the slow and tortuous course of going through the courts in Texas for relief, made the Union leaders hesitant about continuing the con-frontation, and picketing was ended at the end of June, shortly before the harvest ended. The Union hopes to have some kind of protection from the Federal courts by the time the winter vegetable harvest resumes in November. Picketing is expected to resume then, in spite of county and district court injunctions

The Union had one final fling in the headlines, when the U.S. Senate Subcommittee on Migratory Labor came to Texas for public hearings. Again, the bare facts of poverty in Starr County are so appalling that anyone from the outside is at the same time incensed and indignant and horrified. The complacency, hypocrisy, arrogance, and cynicism of the farm operators and local officials also had a tremendous effect on the Senators. Harrison Williams (D-N.J.), for years a one-man crusade for migrant workers, was joined by Ted Kennedy (D-Mass.) and Ralph Yarborough (D-Tex.) in his statement that the hearings in Texas offered the strongest testimony ever heard for the need to expand coverage of the National Labor Relations Act to farm workers. With N.L.R.A. coverage, the Federal Government would supervise elections in which farm workers could vote for or against the union. With such a law, the Union could probably sweep through the lower Valley, winning elections on all the major ranches, in all the major crops, and call a general strike within a year, if growers did not sign contracts.

After a year on strike, the Starr County farm workers have made a tremendous impact on the state and nation. They have won an important decision dealing with foreign strike-breakers. And the effect on the Senators who came to the Valley has greatly improved chances for passage of N.L.R.A. coverage for farm workers. The Union movement in Texas has gotten a great boost from the farm workers' strike, and workers all over the state are demanding better wages, are organizing. And finally, farm workers in the lower Valley are ready; ready for organizing and ready for the Union.

But the United Farm Workers Organizing Committee is stuck with a strike in a situation where farm workers' strikes are almost impossible to win. And the Union is stuck with its own publicity and propaganda about the strike. In spite of financial help from many unions and individual contributors, the United Farm Workers remain a pitifully poor union, fighting on a dozen fronts in California where contracts are being won. And the Union leaders see the drain of money, month after month, into Texas, with no breakthrough in sight. (*The U.F.W.O.C. is desperately in need of funds to carry on the Texas strike and the organizing drives in California and Texas. Contributions should be sent to U.F.W.O.C., Box 54, Rio Grande City, Texas, or to Farm Worker Service Center (tax deductible), Box 130, Delano, Cal.*)

Some people have advised "pulling out" of Texas, until the time is "right," until conditions are more favorable for winning. The Union is still too small, it simply doesn't have the resources to take on Texas at this time, when there is still so much unfinished work in California, they argue. But when the need for the Union is as great as it is in Texas, one cannot wait for an "ideal situation" or the "right time." Though prospects are dim for winning the strike in the near future, and the Union will definitely not want to get involved in any more premature strikes, it must stay in Texas and continue organizing and building, and doing everything it can, short of striking, to improve conditions. One simply cannot turn his back on these people and tell them, "You are not ready." As Cesar Chavez said, "We are here because of the need. And we will stay here. . . . We will stay here until we win."



Strike meeting in Rio Grande City, Texas.