

# Teamsters - UFW: Lopsided Battle

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Backed by a multimillion dollar war chest the International Brotherhood of Teamsters has committed its full resources to taking over the organization of California's 300,000 farmworkers.

In its quest to unionize the workers the Teamsters have nearly dislodged the Cesar Chavez-led United Farm Workers of America, AFL-CIO, which once was the sole bargaining representative of farmworkers.

To a large degree the Teamsters have succeeded. The UFW is clearly the underdog in this battle, pitting a well-heeled union, the largest in the nation, against the almost rag-tag UFW, one of the nation's smallest unions.

Faced with a dwindling dues-paying membership and a shrunken treasury, the UFW has fallen back on a grape and lettuce boycott which brought it initial victories in the late 1960s.

But what of the Teamsters Union? Is it engaged in a cozy, sweetheart arrangement with growers, as Chavez alleges? Is Teamsters Farmworker Local 1973 the polished, professional operation that Teamster publicists and growers paint it? Are the Teamsters really representing the farmworkers?

A Bee survey of the Teamsters' operation, involving interviews with Teamster officials, farmworkers and UFW officials, growers and court records, has found that:

—Permanent workers are given first consideration by the Teamsters while seasonal workers, who make



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up the bulk of the state's farm labor force, are secondary recipients of highly touted fringe benefits such as pensions and health insurance.

—A basic reason the 2.2-million member Teamsters have organized field workers is to increase the union's bargaining muscle with other agribusiness employers and not to extend union benefits to an unorganized industry, according to chief farmworker organizer William Grami.

—The Teamsters have encountered numerous problems in administering contracts and collecting dues, both because of its approach in organizing workers from the top down and because of the seasonal nature of farm work.

—Major administrative snags have crept into at least one medical insurance plan for Teamster farmworkers. The Western Growers Association, which funds the plan, says these problems will soon be corrected.

—Since 1970, growers have been so anxious to sign contracts with the Teamsters instead of the UFW that they have agreed to terms with little, if any, evidence that the union represented the workers. In at least one instance there are allegations forgery may have been involved in the collection of farm-worker signatures on Teamster authorization cards.

—The Teamsters and International and two Teamsters cannery locals have been accused of racism directed against Americans of Mexican descent and women, according to two suits filed by the federal Equal Employment Opportunity Commission.

—At least one Teamsters operation, its social services department, appears to be working well. The department involves itself in nonunion problems of farmworkers such as immigration or social security.

David B. Castro, secretary-treasurer of Farmworkers Local 1973, generally denied the Teamsters are not representing farmworkers adequately.

But he did say the organization of the local has been restructured for greater efficiency.

"The name of the game is to represent the farmworkers and we're doing that," said Castro. "The thing I tell everyone is that we have to represent them or we'll be out."

Castro said several steps, such as the institution of shop stewards, have been taken to encourage members to participate in union affairs.

Without secret ballot elections

there is no way to determine which union is favored among farmworkers. Yet, it is clear there are vocal loyalists for each union.

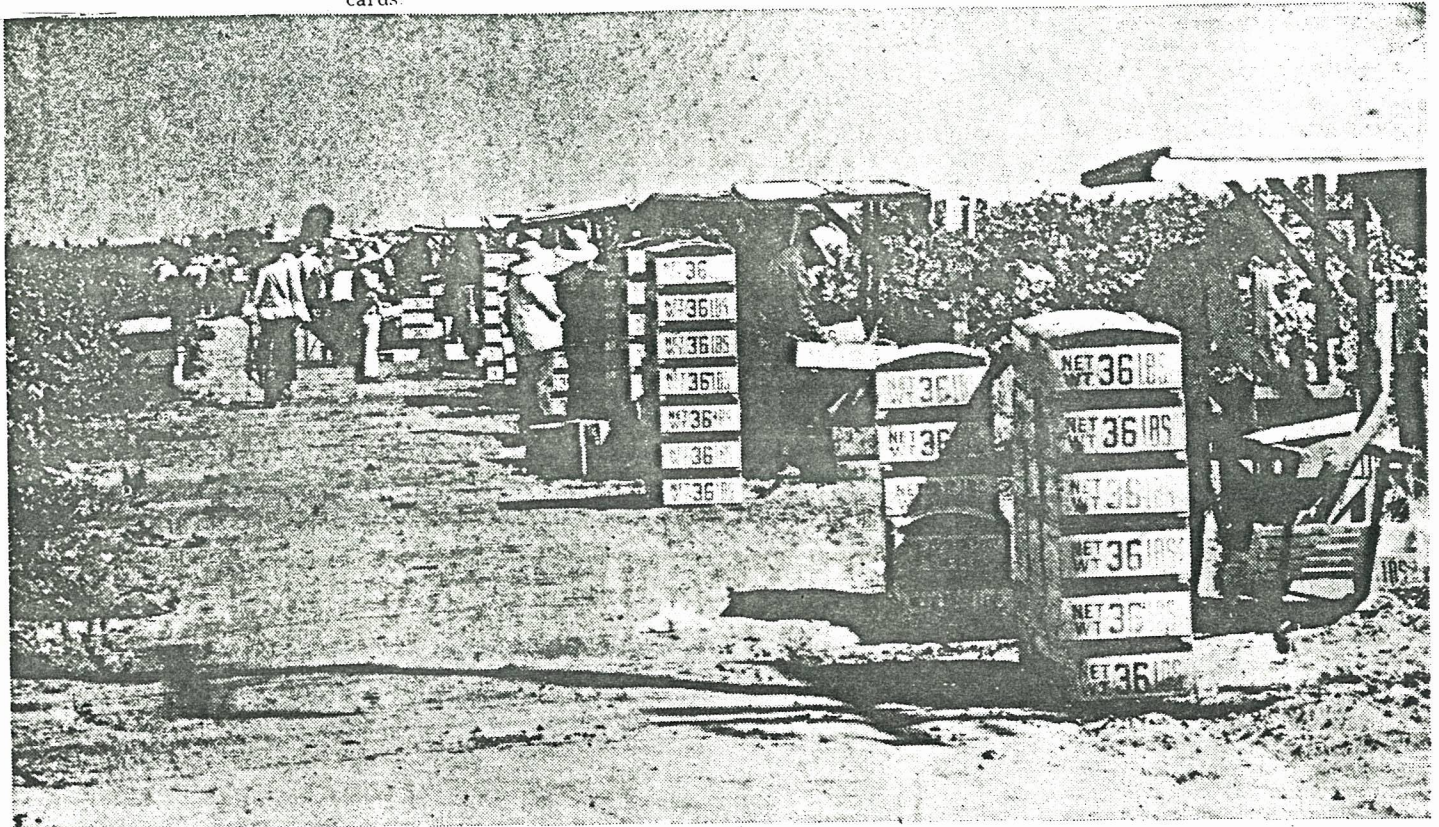
State legislation intended to provide for secret ballot elections died in the Senate this year when the Teamsters opposed a bill supported by the UFW which had passed the Assembly.

In the decade Chavez has organized farmworkers, there has been only one supervised election. That occurred in 1966 at the Di Giorgio Ranch in Kern County when workers voted for the UFW over the Teamsters, 530-331. Indeed the grape contracts signed by the UFW in 1970 were more the result of the boycott than elections.

Today, the Teamsters have more than 300 contracts covering a maximum of 50,000 workers while the UFW has 14 contracts covering 10,000 people, a dramatic drop from its one-time membership of about 45,000.

Since 1966, the Teamsters and UFW have sparred over organizing.

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Farmworkers on a ranch near Delano pack table grapes for shipment to Canada.

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