

A Position Paper for Churchmen With Regard to the Farm-Labor Issue Fr. Richard Humphrys

Introduction: Dear Friends: For the past several years, church groups of several denominations here and in Canada have backed a boycott of table grapes and lettuce not harvested by the United Farm Workers. Their motives were sincere but the results have been destructive: much of the acreage has been lost, farm workers have lost jobs, and a large segment of farmers and those affiliated with them have been alienated from their respective churches. The farmer feels that the churches have not fairly presented his side of the story. They are particularly upset by the great number of mis-statements and distortions that have appeared in church papers. It would seem that there is need for a new attitude of churchmen toward farmers and the farm community. The same can be said with regard to their attitude toward and appraisal of the two union involved, the U.F.W. and the Teamsters. All too often, church statements lack balance. They present the evils done by growers or Teamsters without presenting the good things they do. Also, they do not present the abuses of the U.F.W. along with the many good things they have accomplished. In effect, therefore, churchmen are guilty of taking sides on a highly controversial issue. The results have been decreased church attendance and the alienation of clergymen from their congregations. Much re-thinking and re-evaluation must be done. The principles of charity and justice must be equally applied not only to the U.F.W. but also to the farmers and the Teamsters. For these reasons I present the following position paper for churchmen. These points will be considered.

- I. Should churchmen continue support of the boycott?
- II. How should church papers etc. present the farm-labor issue?
 - What mis-statements have been made in various church papers?
 - II.A What should be the attitude of churchmen with regard to the two unions?

I. Should churchmen continue support of the boycott? No, for the following reasons:

#1. The boycott is harming the very workers it was supposed to help. In the Coachella Valley 120 of 150 table grape growers have been bankrupted. Acreage has been reduced by 40% (from 13,000 acres to 7,000 acres. This means that 40% of the jobs of our Mexican Americans of this area have been lost as a direct result of the boycott. The vines have been bulldozed or allowed to die. Since it takes 6 to 9 years to raise a good producing vine, it would seem that the damage already done is all but permanent. There is reason to believe that if the boycott continues much longer, almost the entire table grape industry (at least of the Coachella Valley) will be wiped out.

#2. Churchmen are supporting the boycott until free elections are held. What they do not realize is that free elections that would be legally binding, are impossible for the next three years. The reason is that the growers in the Coachella Valley signed four year contracts with the Teamsters in 1973. These legally binding contracts do not expire for three more years. Therefore, any election held before that time would have no power to invalidate the contracts now in force. If elections were held before that time, they would be no more than polls of worker preference.

#3. Cardinal Manning of Los Angeles and Bishop Donohoe of Fresno came out against the continued support of the boycott. These are two of the bishops most concerned with the California farm labor issue.

#4. The boycott (as it is supported by Mr. Meany and the A.F.L.-C.I.O.) is not for the purpose of getting a union. It is for the purpose of saying that one and only one union (U.F.W.) can validly represent farm workers. Yet, the Teamsters get equal or better benefits for farm workers. We have never been successful in forcing all people to belong to one political party. It would seem we cannot force them into one union. Is it really good to have only one farm union? If the two unions must compete for membership by providing more benefits than the other union, the worker can only benefit from the competition. We should back both unions and not try to drive either from the labor scene.

#5. Although church groups have backed the boycott for several years on the grounds that free elections must be held, they have not provided any non-partisan, fully qualified election committee that all would recognize. There have been small groups (ministers, priests etc.) that have held elections, but these elections have been the subject of much controversy. Charges were made, "the election was not a valid election", "the workers were intimidated", "many who did not work at the ranch were allowed to vote", etc. It would seem that no private (church) election committee could now bring peace to the fields. They could not enforce the results of the election. The union defeated in the election could simply ignore the results. Only the state or federal government could enforce the results of an election. Only the state or federal government could set up all the machinery needed to hold elections that all would respect.

#6. The drive for free elections must be equally applied to both unions: The purpose of the boycott is to exert pressure on the growers to have free elections. This could only take place legally (as explained in #2) three years from now at the time when their present contracts have to be renewed. In 1977, however, when two U.F.W. contracts came up for renewal (at the David Freedman ranch of the Coachella area and the Almaden vineyards of Northern California), there were no secret ballot elections. Why should a boycott be pressed against Teamster growers for not having elections when the U.F.W. did not have elections under the same circumstances--contract renewal times?

#7. It does not seem fair that a boycott should be applied against growers that DO have a union contract and pay makes and benefits that are almost double those paid in the East, the Mid-West and the South. The states doing the boycotting are the very ones guilty of paying sub-standard wages and have no union at all for farm workers.

#8. Countless growers innocent of worker exploitation have been wiped out. They, their families, relatives and friends have been estranged from the church.

Summation: Since no legally binding elections can be held for three years and since the boycott has caused 40% of farm workers in the Coachella Valley to lose their jobs, the church influence should be immediately terminated. --In its place, the full weight of that would guarantee free elections of farm workers. Hopefully, this would later be supplanted by a federal law (the N.L.R.B.)

II. How should church papers present the farm labor issue? --What are some of the mis-statements made in these papers that should be corrected?

First, let us present some of the mis-statements that have appeared recently in church statements and other publications on the farm labor issue.

#1. It is stated that farm workers do not have drinking water or toilets in the field. The fact is that strict state laws cover both drinking water and provision for toilets. Any employer that does not provide them is subject to heavy penalties.

#2. Supposedly, housing for workers is "dirty and sub-standard": The fact is that most workers now live in their own homes. The workers who live at ranches are mostly single males. Their housing is controlled by strict county and state regulations.

#3. A major issue is made of pesticides: It is said that these are being sprayed on workers while they are in the field, that many deaths have occurred, and the health of the workers has been greatly affected. The fact is that California is the strictest of all states with regard to use of pesticides. No farm worker deaths occurred in 1973 and only 10 have occurred in the past 11 years. --This information came from the Riverside Press Enterprise. The American Farm Bureau Federation adds that a 1967 study by the California Department of Health found no basis for the charges. Also, it stated that the U.F.W. refused to participate in a 1970 pesticides inquiry by the State Legislature