

IN THESE TIMES

UFW wins Salinas contract



By Sam Kushner

LOS ANGELES

THE CELEBRATION THAT accompanied the Labor Day weekend at Salinas, Calif., was one of the most joyous in the nation after the Aug. 31 announcement that the largest lettuce producer in the United States had reached an agreement with the United Farm Workers (UFW).

The settlement ended the nationwide boycott of United Brands products, of which Sun Harvest brands is a subsidiary, and marked a major breakthrough in the nine month old lettuce pickers strike.

Sun Harvest, which employs between 1,000 and 1,400 workers, has fields throughout California, including Calexico, Huerfano, Brantwood, Oxnard and Salinas.

In addition, the company has lettuce fields at two locations in Arizona.

The UFW is fast becoming known as the "Five Dollar Union" among California vegetable workers. The Sun Harvest agreement was the fourth in recent weeks where the UFW has signed a contract guaranteeing a minimum common labor rate of \$5 per hour. When the workers went out on strike in mid January, the labor rate in the fields was \$3.70 per hour.

In the third year of the agreement, the field labor rate, without piece work, will be \$5.70 per hour.

"This is a victory for all workers in this state, not just for those at Sun Harvest," said Jerry Conon, the UFW's chief negotiator in the Salinas area. "It was really sweet," he added, agreeing with other union officials that farm workers have proven in this strike and in the victories achieved elsewhere that they will no longer remain at the bottom of the economic ladder.

From the UFW's national headquarters at Keene, Calif., UFW president Cesar Chavez said the agreement "reflects the vision and courage of Sun Harvest in helping to bring this dispute to an end." He described the three year contract as a "victory for both the workers and the company."

But in Salinas, workers who had walked the picket lines were less magnanimous. "We beat them, we won. We forced them to their knees," said workers, many of whom suffered beatings at the hands of strikebreakers imported into the area.

Trade unionists throughout the state hailed the UFW victory over the Labor Day weekend. In the labor movement it has become axiomatic that the longer the strike, the less chance there is of winning one's major demands. The Sun Harvest strike proved to be an exception to that rule. When the strike began, the company, in concert with others in the vegetable fields, offered a seven percent increase in line with President Carter's wage guidelines.

In addition, Sun Harvest and more than two dozen other growers demanded major contract changes that would have weakened the UFW. So far the growers have accomplished none of their goals, and have conceded major contract language changes that will strengthen the union's ability to enforce the agreements.

Breaking the log jam.

The log jam in the Salinas negotiations burst on Aug. 12 when the Meyer Tomato Company broke away from the industry wide bargaining group and signed the \$5 per hour minimum labor rate agreement with the UFW. Just a few days later another tomato grower, Gonzales Packing, followed suit and signed a contract that duplicated the wage, fringe benefit and contract language features of the initial agreement signed with Meyer.

At that time growers' representatives

UFW celebrated Labor Day with a Sun Harvest lettuce contract. The UFW is becoming known as a \$5 hr. union.

publicly denigrated these settlements and claimed that the conditions in the short season tomato fields being different from the lettuce, broccoli and other vegetable fields, did not set a pattern for the lettuce fields.

Meanwhile, an unusual development took place at the one Salinas area ranch still under contract with the Teamsters Union. The Bud Antle Company, which has been involved in a bitter internal struggle among past and present officers of Teamster Local 890, reached a tentative agreement of less than \$5 per hour, but rank and file resentment and militant action forced Antle to raise its offer to \$5 per hour. The Antle agreement however provides none of the contractual safeguards that are contained in the UFW agreements.

Along with the boycott against Sun Harvest, the UFW concentrated on another lettuce grower, West Coast Farms. During the early morning hours of Aug. 26 the UFW concluded its first settlement with a lettuce firm when West Coast Farms signed up. This agreement cut the ground from under the feet of many of the other growers. The West Coast agreement featured the following terms:

- A three year contract that would provide \$6.20 per hour for common labor by July 15, 1981. This new rate will be effective if the rate of inflation continues at the present level. Otherwise the common labor rate will be no less than \$5.70 per hour.
- In the event that workers are displaced

by machines the number of jobs would be subject to negotiation, with the union having the right to strike if no agreement is reached.

- Piece work rates were raised to 75 cents per carton (24 heads of lettuce). This contrasts with the old contract rate of 58 cents per carton. It is estimated that on a normal field, under fair conditions, lettuce cutters will earn \$13.50 per hour the first year, \$14.22 the second year and \$14.76 in the final contract year.

- The company will pay for union representatives to police the contract.

- Striking workers will receive an average of \$700 back pay, retroactive to Dec. 2, 1978.

- Substantial increases in company contributions to the union run health and welfare plan, which is called the Robert F. Kennedy Plan.

Unionization sweeps the fields.

This settlement encouraged pro-union sentiment in the fields. The workers at Frudden Produce, a tomato producing firm, walked off the job demanding the same kind of contract that the UFW had won at the West Coast, Meyer, and Gonzales companies. Under the California Labor Relations Act striking workers can demand representation elections within three working days and election was scheduled for Aug. 29.

When the ballots were counted 201 voted for the UFW and only four against. There were 10 challenged votes.

On the day that Sun Harvest settled with the UFW the workers at Mission Packing walked off the job. In an attempt to prevent the unionization of its workers, Mission announced that it was paying 77 cents a carton of lettuce picked. Despite this higher rate 80 percent of the workers left the fields and signed up with the union. An election was scheduled at Mission for the day after Labor Day.

In an attempt to avoid union organization Hansen Farms raised its labor rate to \$5.06 an hour and 76 cents per box for lettuce picked.

After the Sun Harvest agreement was signed Marshall Ganz, a union organizer and member of the UFW's Executive

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Farm workers win suit

Five years ago 19 farm workers were killed and 28 injured in a bus accident near Blythe, Calif., while being driven to the High and Mighty farm from the Mexican border.

On Aug. 28 survivor and relatives reached an out of court settlement for \$1.2 million. The defendants were Riverside County and the Palos Verde Irrigation District, General Motors and the Ward Bus Co. of Arkansas and Texas and High and Mighty farms of Blythe.

The disaster took place about dawn on Jan. 15, 1974 while the bus was enroute to the lush fields of the Palos Verde Valley near the Colorado River. Most of the workers were Mexican nationals.

The bus turned over into a drainage ditch while taking a curve. Survivors contended that the bus was being driven too fast and that the seats were not properly fastened to the floor. The bus landed in the ditch on its side and 19 workers trapped beneath the seats drowned in water 10 feet deep.

David B. Epstein, the lawyer representing the workers, said that the High and Mighty company had been named in the suit because it was aware that the bus was unsafe, and that the driver Pablo Navarro Arellanos, 54, was overworked and exhausted at the time of the accident. Arellanos was em-

ployed as a company foreman in addition to being the bus driver. The claimants contended that he received only three to four hours sleep each night because of his multiple company responsibilities.

Because some of the dead farm workers had no living relatives and some of the injuries were relatively minor, the settlement covered only 13 of those drowned and 22 of the injured.

In commenting on the settlement Epstein said this case puts the legal responsibility on the growers for the welfare of their employees. In the past the growers have used farm labor contractors, thinly disguised employees of the growers, to insulate themselves from such responsibility.

At the time of the tragedy the United Farm Workers (UFW) had warned that many school buses used in California were in bad shape. The UFW also charged that the state safety inspectors failed to keep the buses up to legal safety standards.

Those with lesser injuries were awarded between \$3,000 and \$4,000 each. The largest award was to Esther Villa de Mendoza. She was awarded approximately \$250,000. She lost her husband Manuel, 43, and three children—Lucia, 19, Maria, 18 and Javier, 16.

—Sam Kushner



UAW targets General Motors

At press time, a spokesperson for the 1.8 million member National Education Association (NEA) said elementary, high schools and colleges in 13 states were still being struck. The striking teachers

Anti-labor, Mormon-controlled justice prevailed, however, despite pleas for

—David Moberg

There was a time when Federal agents harassed mountain people for brewing corn "likker" in illicit stills. If Commoner's program takes hold, it would appear that the agents will now be looking for the mountain people to encourage them to use their stills for gasohol.

(. . . and how yours can join the list).

James Ridgeway

At an interesting dinner meeting last week I found myself with Raleigh Warner, Chairman of the Board of Mobil Oil Company and Professor Barry Commoner, who has long been the leader in urging greater use of solar energy and

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