



*David B. Castro, secretary-treasurer of the Teamsters' Farm Workers Union Local*

# *The Teamster Raid:* Stalled in the Vineyards

by George Baker

The setting was more appropriate for a coming out party than a farmworkers' meeting. For a backdrop at the plush Del Monte Hyatt House in Monterey there were lush green fairways lapping at the reception room. On this day, when farmworkers were officially welcomed into the Teamster fold, the fairways were a measure of the gulf between the union and farmworkers. But there they were, Teamsters Union President Frank E. Fitzsimmons, William Grami, and other union dignitaries rubbing elbows with farmworkers who had been specially bused in to celebrate the chartering of Teamsters' Farm Workers Local 1973.

It was a well-staged event, calculated to impress the public and media with the Teamsters' commitment to organizing farmworkers. Henceforth, it was grandly announced, Local 1973, based in nearby Salinas, would be the vehicle used by the Western Conference of Teamsters to represent farmworkers. It was going to put Cesar Chavez' United Farm Workers of America, AFL-CIO, out of business. And David B. Castro, hand-picked to be the new local's secretary-treasurer, would be the equivalent of Chavez.

But down the road a few miles, another event was taking place that June 1974 day that could hardly please the Teamsters. The UFW called a one-day walkout against lettuce growers, most of whom have Teamster contracts. The results were not reassuring for David Castro; the daily harvest was slashed in half as more than 1,000 workers joined in the strike.

You may not have heard of Castro, but then he has only been organizing farmworkers since that installation ceremony. And given the inept performance turned in by his local in dealing with farmworker problems, it is understandable that he speaks with so little confidence of his place in the organization.

Since January 1973 the Teamsters have been representing farmworkers in dealings with growers, but Castro doesn't know when workers will be allowed to elect their local's executive board. Nor is he sure when the first membership meetings will be held. And the election of local officers? Well, that is a special matter to Castro who feels supremely threatened by, of

all things, the workers.

"Suppose we held an election and it was stacked and I lost," he told me quite earnestly one day over a cup of coffee. "To be very honest, I have to make sure the local is going to make it," explaining that only if he heads it can things go smoothly. "I have to be better known among the workers," he continued, and if the men serving below him "can't sell me, I'll lose the election." Thus, he concluded, workers will be able to have union elections only when he is assured of winning, which will be about two years.

Yet it is unlikely any such elections will ever be held, for as Castro was speaking out another group of Teamsters was plotting to take over the farmworkers local. The coup, executed in early November, will insure that farmworkers never have a voice in their union affairs.

Ralph Cotner, described by fellow Teamsters as virulently anti-Mexican-American, was named to head a newly-created farmworkers division within the Western Conference, replacing Grami, who apparently had crossed conference director M. E. ("Andy") Anderson. In addition to Grami being booted upstairs, about 30 local employees, organizers, and officials who were loyal to him were also given their walking papers. It was not immediately clear what the upheaval portended, but to one of the Teamsters who was fired the future of Local 1973 is in doubt.

Cono Macias, who was responsible for most of the grape contracts, said he believes the Teamsters will eventually disband the local and shift its contracts to existing Teamster locals throughout the state. "They are going to disband, that's what I think," Macias said. "They are afraid of it; it's grown too much, it will get bigger and they are afraid of its power. They fear the power of the workers."

He called Cotner a "racist" and noted that most of those persons removed were Mexican-American. Instead of having a single local union, embracing all Teamster farmworkers, Cotner plans to dismember the local giving locals in Salinas, Fresno and other cities the opportunity to take over the contracts and, of course, the collection of \$8 a month dues, Macias said.

It would be a clean sweep. Farmworkers would be swallowed up into local unions dominated by truckdrivers, wiping out any chance of electing their own leaders or representatives.

Anderson denied there were any plans to break up the local, calling such statements "ridiculous." But he conceded the Teamsters have had problems in enforcing contracts with growers. "What we realize we've got to do is to do a job for the members," a spokesman for Anderson said. "We are going to continue to organize, but right now we've got to pull the unit together and service contracts to the best of our ability to retain the support of the farmworkers."

Regardless of what occurs in this Byzantine maneuvering, the farmworkers, whom the Teamsters are supposed to represent, have no say in it. All that is happening, though directly affecting them, is done without their consent or even advice. Like pawns in a giant chess game, farmworkers are moved back and forth at the whim of Teamster power brokers.

Despite the upheaval, Castro, 51, remains one of the brokers. A farmworker in his younger days, he moved up through the Teamster ranks to head a cannery local in Hayward. In September, when he was shot twice, but not seriously injured, heavy rumors of Teamster in-fighting circulated. Castro, a short, stocky man with styled black hair and heavy-rimmed glasses, is a flashy dresser, which may explain why he has a tough time relating to his brother farmworkers. Conscious of the contrast between himself and the monastically-garbed Chavez, Castro felt compelled to explain to newsmen, "Ever since I can remember, I liked to wear a tie and, when I could afford it, I liked to wear a suit. And in all my days working in the fields I was never hungry or dirty."

Indeed, Castro's pleasant recollection of his days working the fields must come as a sweet surprise to members who harbor less fond memories. Instead of cavorting on golf courses, as the Teamster officials are wont to do, real life farmworkers are more likely to be found laboring beneath the blistering California sun, picking grapes or lugging a 50-pound bag of cantaloupes. Their faces, creased by the glaring sun and bitter

experience, are the faces of people who have suffered much. Yet each spring, as the weather warms and the fruit ripens in California's farming valleys, they tramp the state, from Calexico to Yuba City. It is dirty, miserable, unrewarding work, but work they must.

Most often the struggle for power in the state's vineyards and fields is cast in terms of the Teamsters versus the UFW or Fitzsimmons versus Chavez, if you will. This is unfortunate, because the real struggle is that of the workers, seeking to better their social, economic, and political life.

The cult of Chavez being what it is, the UFW-Teamsters battle naturally takes on the aspect of the black hats against the white hats. But it is the worker who has the most to lose or gain. It is through the UFW and Chavez that farm labor has marched out of the 19th century and it is for this reason that the struggle represents one of the truly classic labor fights in America today.

#### [THE GAINS COULD BE WIPED OUT]

Not until Chavez and his followers set off the time bomb of unionism that had been ticking for years, did anyone pay much attention to farmworkers. Now the Teamsters, having connived with the growers, are loving the workers to death. In fact, it is hard to imagine a union more out of touch with its members than the Teamsters are with farmworkers. Myths die hard and one of them is that while the Teamsters may be infested by corruption and run like a Latin American dictatorship, they at least deliver militantly for their rank and file. The union may funnel some money into mob-connected front operations, but at least some of it gets to its members. So goes the myth.

The truth is that rank-and-file members—particularly farmworkers—are suffering grievously at the hands of their union. For California's growers, having the Teamsters represent their workers is easily the next best thing to having no union at all.

Oddly, the mass media, which were so quick to point out many of the real (and imagined) problems of the UFW, such as dues, hiring hall, and seniority, have taken at face value the puffery



(left to right) David B. Castro, William Grami, and Frank Fitzsimmons at charter presentation

served up by Teamster publicists. Were they to scratch the surface, they would find a far different organization than is revealed in press release portrayals.

The Teamsters give distinctly secondary consideration to the seasonal workers who make up the bulk of the state's farm labor force, while reserving most of the benefits to the small percentage of permanent workers who pay dues more often.

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

Major administrative problems have crept into at least one medical insurance plan for Teamster farmworkers, who often can't qualify for benefits under the stringent eligibility requirements. If they do qualify, they often receive late payment or none at all.

Above all, though, the Teamsters have stripped the farmworkers of the self-determination and power they had won through a decade of struggle and

sacrifice under Chavez. It is an intangible quality of unionism, but Castro managed to put his finger on it when he said he might lose the election. No doubt he might, and this is what the Teamsters fear most—the power of the workers. It is a fear shared by the growers who have never really quibbled about paying workers the wages they know they deserve. It is raw, unadulterated power—the right to determine what's good for oneself—that bedevils both the Teamsters and growers in their dealings with farmworkers.

This is why Chavez has been so vigorously opposed by the state's agribusiness structure, which went running to the Teamsters in 1973, looking for a way out. What Chavez built is more than just a trade union. It is a union movement and social movement (in the broadest sense), of enormous power and consequence, a fresh breeze wafting in the stultified air of stagnant labor movements. His is a movement as concerned with community organization as with sanitary working conditions, as interested in cooperative grocery stores as in medical insurance plans.

#### [DESTROYING THE MOVEMENT]

All this could be wiped out if the Teamsters should succeed in destroying the Chavez movement. And one can take little comfort in cold, hard statistics. The UFW, which once had close to 55,000 dues-paying members and nearly 200 contracts, is down to a current membership of 10,000 and a mere dozen contracts. In 1973 it collected \$600,012 in dues, compared to \$1.2 million in 1972 and this year the figure is even lower. At the end of 1973 it had \$259,983 cash on hand, compared to \$1.1 million the year before.

By contrast, the Teamsters have some 50,000 farmworker members under about 350 contracts, though about 170 of those were signed before the Teamsters moved to put the UFW out of business. Their annual income from \$8 a month dues totals some \$800,000 to \$1 million. And the international is said to be spending nearly \$200,000 a month financing the farmworkers local while it tries to get off the ground. Last year the international contributed more than \$2.4 million.

Clearly, the UFW has its work cut



out for it. Chavez is confident it can be done within the next few years, while others are not so sure. He is counting primarily on a boycott of table grapes, the tactic that brought the initial victories in the late Sixties.

And to its boycott list, the UFW has added iceberg lettuce and the various Gallo wines. While the effectiveness of boycotts is always difficult to judge, this one appears to be significantly affecting the sales, and therefore indirectly prices, of both lettuce and grapes. Key support for the boycott has come from George Meany and the AFL-CIO and various religious groups, most importantly the Catholic Church.

By all accounts, the Gallo boycott, being keyed to brand names, is the most successful. California wine sales figures show that Gallo's share of state wine production during the first six months of this year dipped seven percent from the same period in 1973. Other developments in the wine industry complicate the picture, but the *Wall Street Journal*, for one, has at least partially attributed a reported nine percent decline in Gallo's sales to the effects of the boycott. Gallo has launched an extensive anti-boycott campaign, an indication that things are not going well for the giant company.

The case of the E & J Gallo Winery Co. offers a stark example of the issues involved in the three-cornered UFW-grower-Teamster battle. The Gallo Company, headquartered in Modesto, Calif., is no small-time operation. One out of every three bottles of wine sold in the United States is produced by Gallo. Whether it's labeled Red Mountain, Ripple, Thunderbird, Spanada, Madria-Madria Sangria, Boone's Farm, or Andre Champagne, Gallo makes it. And now Gallo is reaching out with a higher-class, higher-priced wine, hoping to capture an even larger share of the market. Though Gallo buys most of its grapes from independent growers, it has 10,000 acres of its own grapes, employing 600 seasonal and permanent grapepickers.

From 1967 to 1973, the UFW represented Gallo's farmworkers and in 1970 when the initial contract expired, Gallo renewed the pact without difficulty. But last year was a different story. As the contract neared expiration in March, the Teamsters had let it

be known they were willing to sign contracts also. Knowing that the Teamsters were around, Gallo took a hard line in negotiations with the UFW. It wanted any new contract to do away with the union's hiring hall and to diminish control that the union exercised over who Gallo could hire.

These were crucial issues to the union, issues which are at the heart of the grower-UFW struggle. The hiring hall is an integral part of the UFW method of operation and one of the chief differences between it and the Teamsters. The power to allocate jobs and determine seniority, once left solely in the hands of farm supervisors or contractors, now rested in the hands of the farmworkers themselves. To get a job, a worker received a dispatch from the hiring hall, and dispatches were assigned on the basis of seniority.

Instead of the grower controlling the farm labor force through his hiring and firing power, the union controlled it, supplying workers through the hiring hall and protecting them via the local ranch committee. While this tended to stabilize the work force, it also removed the growers from the daily control of workers' lives and lessened their power to intimidate and dominate. Growers found this most unpalatable.

Additionally, each ranch, including Gallo, had ranch committees elected by workers to deal with problems such as working conditions, levels of pay and day-to-day grievances.

These are the cornerstones of the UFW, elements seen by Chavez and others as necessary not only to give workers the power of self-determination, but also to give them the experience and confidence of ministering to their own affairs. But for Ernest Gallo, the company chairman who runs the \$250 million business, dealing with untrained, worker-selected committees and hiring halls was not his idea of corporate efficiency.

"There was never enough supervision (from Chavez) and leaving it up to the ranch committee was entirely impractical," the normally reticent Gallo said in a rare interview, granted in an effort to minimize the effect of the boycott. "There seemed to be nobody above the ranch committee who gave a damn. When you leave it up to

the worker, how energetic are they going to be."

#### [WHO THE TEAMSTERS REPRESENT]

It was clear that Gallo did not understand the union brand of democracy and that he preferred dealing man-to-man with Chavez rather than a bunch of unlettered workers. Not only did Gallo dislike the way the hiring hall and ranch committees were run, citing cronyism and favoritism as two failings, but he says the workers also rejected them. It was for these reasons, he says, that he signed a contract with the Teamsters.

Gallo's account did not include the firing of workers, loyal to the UFW, who protested when the company allowed Teamster organizers to come into his vineyards. Nor does it take account of the company's unwillingness to bargain over the issue of the hiring hall. Bargaining with the Teamsters on this point was simplified because the Teamsters don't have hiring halls.

If the Teamsters genuinely represented the workers as Gallo claims, offering as proof the 158-1 contract ratification vote, a funny thing happened when the UFW called a strike on June 27, 1973. Most of the Gallo workers joined the strike. In fact, 71 families living in shabby, unsanitary Gallo-provided housing refused to go to work, preferring instead to join the picket line. (Gallo claims there were only 31 families.) But regardless of numbers, Gallo fired all those workers who went on strike, and the contract was ratified by a vote of the strikebreakers.

How are Gallo workers being represented by the Teamsters these days? Not too well. One day this summer, two reporters walked through Gallo's 10,000-acre vineyard in the San Joaquin Valley and asked workers about the labor struggle. Several of them thought the reporters were Teamster representatives, since they are seldom in evidence. A family from Mexico thought a company farm supervisor, who is there every day, was the chief Teamsters' spokesman. Just the day before, Gallo workers told us grape pickers at another Gallo ranch, incensed over low wages, had staged a day-long walkout without the benefit of the assistance from their new union.



*Lamont (California) grape fields*

#### [THE RAID]

The Teamsters were able to take over Gallo's and other contracts in 1973, partly through an organized campaign of terror that began with the unleashing of goon squads on priests and pickets in the Coachella Valley and ended with the shooting death of UFW member Juan de la Cruz on a picket line near Bakersfield. It was a brutal summer, the state's most violent farm labor battle since the cotton strikes of the Thirties. More than 3,000 UFW members were arrested for violating restrictive court injunctions sharply limiting picket activities at the many strike sites.

Throughout that summer of discontent and continuing into this year, the Teamster rationale for what amounts to union-busting on a scale nearly unmatched in American labor history, was that they would use their

power to improve the lot of the farmworker. The Teamsters want "to better wages and working conditions," Fitzsimmons says.

But the falsity of this position was demonstrated earlier this year by no less than William Grami, the architect of the farmworker raiding drive and one-time director of organizing for the Western Conference of Teamsters.

Speaking candidly, as he seldom does, Grami was asked under oath at a deposition what the greatest benefit of organizing farmworkers was. Of the Western Conference's 400,000 members, he replied, 100,000 of them are employed in some aspect of agribusiness—driving a truck out of a field, working in a cannery or frozen food plant or operating farm equipment.

"The organization of field workers tremendously enhances our bargaining power for the rest of those workers," Grami declared. "That's one benefit I

can see, an immediate benefit." Then, almost as an afterthought, he added, "And also it's our purpose to extend those benefits we've established for all industries to conform to any unorganized industry."

If Grami spoke candidly of the Teamsters' real motive for unionizing farmworkers, his one-time boss, Einar C. Mohn, director of the Teamsters Western Conference, went him one better in describing the role farmworkers would play in running their own union. His conclusion: none. One need only quote Mohn's remarks, which stand as a monument to both racism and indifference.

"It will be several years before they can start having membership meetings, before we can use the farmworkers' ideas in the union," Mohn told an interviewer last year before he retired. "I'm not sure how effective a union can be when it is composed of Mexican-Americans and Mexican nationals with temporary visas. Maybe as agriculture becomes more sophisticated and more mechanized, with fewer transients, fewer green-carders and as jobs become more attractive to whites, then we can build a union that can have a structure and that can negotiate from strength and have union participation."

The Teamster philosophy of labor relations is not likely to keep growers awake at night. In fact, the union discourages farmworker strikes for obvious reasons—Teamster workers in related agribusiness occupations might be affected.

As Castro put it, "All the Chavistas do is strike. That's not using their talents. That's why we talk to growers so that we can iron out situations before grievances are filed. They (the UFW) just tell people to stick it and that's that."

Apparently Castro has not been able to impress this gentle brand of union militancy on his members. This year there have been numerous walk-outs at ranches working under Teamster pacts, similar to the one at Gallo.

Last February, for example, in the Imperial Valley, hard by the Mexican border, several thousand asparagus cutters walked off their jobs in the middle of the harvest. Upset because they had not received a raise in two years under the Teamsters and because growers re-

fused to pay on a piece-rate basis, the workers shut down the harvest completely.

The growers reacted swiftly. The night of the walkout, February 18, three of them, along with a labor contractor, decided to meet the workers' demands which were being pressed by UFW organizers. Oddly, the Teamsters, who supposedly represented the workers, were neither told of the meeting nor participated in it. The growers, out of hand, simply changed the rate of pay written in contracts.

One of the growers, John Jackson Jr., summed up the situation. "There had been a lack of effort on the part of the Teamsters to communicate to the worker what the [pay] rate was. There was an education process that needed to be involved that wasn't."

#### [A POLICY OF NON-INVOLVEMENT]

This generally follows the philosophy that Castro and his cohorts are implementing, taking care to insure workers don't get too involved in their own affairs. "The membership's primary responsibility is to familiarize itself with the local office and to ask questions about the local. We want workers to completely read

contracts and if they have any questions about the union to ask their representatives."

That might work out better if there were actually representatives around, but there often aren't. Workers complain that the only time they see the representatives, (called, variously, organizers or business agents) is when they collect dues. There are no ranch committees, no hiring halls to maintain a direct link between the membership and the union.

Said Dora Sanchez, a lettuce cutter from Mexicali, "Since we signed we have been pushed harder by the foreman. We told a Teamster we needed somebody else on the [lettuce cutting] machine. They promised to get somebody but never did. The Teamsters only come to the fields one time a month to sign up people. They never talk to the people or try to help them out."

Leonides C. de Rodriguez, a woman who was refused work at one Teamster ranch by a labor contractor, said more of the companies and contractors are refusing to hire women "because they cannot be pushed to do as much work as men."

The Teamsters' system is one of traditional trade union practices, but in

California's vast expanse of land, where the workers move with the harvest, the system is fraught with problems. Chavez knew that when he first began organizing and the Teamsters are slow to learn it.

As far as Castro can tell, everything is fine. "There's always room for improvement and I think we have improved the overall picture of the Teamsters' farmworkers union," he said.

But he hasn't improved it to the satisfaction of Mrs. Esther Mendoza of Mexicali. Last January 15, Mrs. Mendoza's husband, Manuel and three of their children, were riding a labor contractor's bus on a two-hour drive from Mexicali to a lettuce ranch near Blythe which had a Teamsters' contract. Just outside Blythe, the bus careened around a corner and crashed into a ditch. Nineteen of the 58 farmworkers on the bus were killed, including Manuel Mendoza and his teenage sons.

(The incident pointed up the pernicious role contractors play in farm labor. The Teamsters have tried to explain away the fact that they permit them to operate. No amount of rationalizing can justify their continued existence.)

Since Mendoza was a Teamsters'

*UFW pickets and police, Lamont (California), 1973*





member, his widow was eligible for \$2,000 in life insurance benefits. For more than nine months, she waited for her check, finally getting it after the repeated intercession of an attorney. The treatment accorded Mrs. Mendoza, who finally had to call on the UFW for help, is not an isolated example. Numerous farmworkers have complained of shabby treatment at the hands of the Teamsters when they try to collect on promised benefits.

The situation deteriorated to the point that the Western Growers Association, whose Teamster members fund one of the major medical insurance plans, had to change administrators because of the continual complaints of workers.

One worker, Ramon Gallo of El Centro, said he developed a sore on his leg which had to be treated by a Mexicali doctor. Though the Teamsters helped him fill out his insurance forms, there was a snag after that. "In June 1973 I received \$5 from the Teamsters. I am still paying the doctor bill of \$80 because \$18 is still owing."

Another Imperial Valley worker, Humberto Flores, working under a Teamster contract, tried to get the union to pay \$60 of his wife's medical bills that he understood was due him. The bills weren't paid because the Teamsters said he didn't qualify for benefits after all.

This is not unusual, however, because the eligibility requirements are so restrictive that many workers, especially seasonal and migratory, can't qualify.

To be eligible, a Teamster member must have worked 80 hours during the previous month. This is fine during the peak harvest season when a worker might work six days a week, eight hours a day. But when work slows down in the fall and winter the benefits lapse, leaving the worker unprotected just when he may be most needy. For permanent workers, who work more or less year-round, it is not so bad.

By contrast, the UFW's Robert F. Kennedy Medical Plan permits workers to accumulate up to 250 hours so that their coverage can extend up to nine months of the year.

The second-class treatment of seasonal workers extends to another fringe benefit—pensions. The Team-

sters have loudly trumpeted the fact that early next year farmworkers will be eligible to retire on a pension of \$150 a month at age 65, something not available to members of the UFW.

But the requirement of hours accumulation helps permanent workers and hinders seasonal employees. The pension administrator, Michael Thomacello, said the plan "was designed for permanent employees, not seasonal workers. The short-term guy pays for the long-term guy. You've got enough turnover, enough people coming in and going out without collecting [benefits] so you can pay the benefits."

#### [A LONG WINTER]

Cesar Chavez faces another long winter, waiting for the pieces to fall into place. The boycott must take its toll on the growers' pocketbook; legislation for secret-ballot representation elections will hopefully be enacted in the California legislature next year; and perhaps, the workers will be more able to assert themselves against Teamster misrepresentation.

But Chavez has faced these kinds of long odds before and there has been a tendency by the growers, the Teamsters, and the public to count him out prematurely.

The union's greatest strength, he says, is the workers. "What it is really all about is who has the workers," he said in an interview. As a practical matter, he concedes there are workers who prefer the Teamsters to the UFW, and there are others who simply want to work, owing allegiance to no union. But given their choice in an election, workers would vote for the UFW over the Teamsters, Chavez said. Already this year, workers have voted with their feet numerous times, expressing their dissatisfaction with the Teamsters.

But the workers—it all comes back to them. "People have no understanding of the power of the workers," Chavez declared. "They look at power in terms of money, prestige, and friends. That certainly is power. But public opinion and worker solidarity give us more power in the end. If you were to write that with all the problems we have now, that farmworkers

have more power than before, people wouldn't believe you. So it's easier for people to just say that the farmworkers don't have any power."

Chavez, whose organizing schedule ends at infinity, remains supremely confident his cause will win in the end. One of his favorite expressions is, "We have more time than money."

"Normally, a small, struggling union like ours would have been destroyed by the combined opposition of the powerful union . . . and growers with great influence in their community. But it is not going to destroy us. Our boycott will be more effective than ever. We are going to beat them."

"If there were no Teamsters we'd easily have a \$3 base pay scale instead of \$2.50 and our union would have 100,000 workers organized in the state. Don't forget the Teamsters don't organize workers, they organize growers. They sign sweetheart contracts with the growers and tell the worker they now belong to the union."

For years Chavez has opposed the kinds of state and federal legislation for secret-ballot elections that have been proposed. But recently he changed his mind. Last year, with strong state AFL-CIO backing, the UFW sponsored a secret-ballot election bill which did not carry the usual riders ruling out boycotts and harvest time strikes. Ironically, the growers and Teamsters, who have made much of their desire for elections, lobbied successfully to kill the bill in the State Senate after it had won in the Assembly. Chavez has also opposed inclusion of farmworkers under the National Labor Relations Act, from which they are now excluded, because the NLRB would also restrict the use of boycotts.

There is an excellent chance that an unadulterated election bill—which would give the workers the right to choose their union—will become law, especially since UFW ally Edmund G. Brown Jr. will be the new governor. With such a bill on top of the strikes and boycotts, says UFW counsel Jerome Cohen, "We will be able to kick the Teamsters out of the fields." That is, if the workers don't do it first.

---

*George Baker is a San Joaquin Valley (California) newsman and free-lance writer.*

---



Cesar Chavez, president of United Farm Workers of America, AFL-CIO

# Can Chavez Win?

Fred Ross, San Francisco Bay Area director of the United Farm Workers Union, leads the way up a narrow, winding flight of stairs, his long legs taking two at a time. On the third floor he turns left, strides down a long, carpeted hallway peering into rooms on either side, looking for a comfortable place to light long enough for an interview. The reporter trailing him pokes inquisitively into a few of the rooms we pass. Each is little more than a cell — high ceilings, one window — and each is spartanly decorated with posters and leaflets advertising UFW activities. A bed and small dresser comprise the furniture in most rooms.

The building, now known as "Boycott House," was designed to be spartan. A former residence for seminarians, it's a four-story, slate grey con-

crete blockhouse hunched comfortably in the shadow of San Francisco's St. Paul's Church. Where once the complex echoed with Irish brogues and muted Latin, it now rings with lilting Spanish and the polyglot American-English-street dialect common to all urban cores. But the seminary spirit lingers on; the young people who live in Boycott House seem infused with the religious fervor and discipline of the seminarians who preceded them. *La Causa* is more than a union, more than a social movement; at times it is a religion of its own.

Finally settling into a squat, upholstered chair in one corner of a large common room, Ross begins an easy, flowing discourse on the United Farm Workers and the continuing boycott against table grapes, lettuce and Gallo wines. His direct brown eyes are red-

rimmed, mementoes of a sleepless night spent in Alameda County jail. Ross and 11 others were released just hours before, after sitting-in around the grape counter at an Oakland Safeway store. Ross calls it an "escalation of tactics," a symbolic gesture signifying that the UFW is again on the move, still powerful and still convinced of eventual victory.

As he speaks insistently about the "good fight" being waged in the fields and on the picket lines, about the intransigence of growers and the day-to-day scrambling to survive, there is an overwhelming sense of *deja vu*. Wait, the reporter thinks, didn't we — the collective "we" who hit the streets and the supermarkets, the picket lines, and the courtrooms, and the jails — didn't we *win* this one? Didn't our combined energies culminate in the victorious

by Rick Beban