

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 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

which found no truth in the published charges.

#4. It is stated that farm workers' lives are drastically shortened because of the nature of their work. --It is also stated that the death rates from accidents is very much higher. One church paper went so far as to say the death rate from accidents was 300% higher.

The Riverside Press Enterprise says, "No reliable information exists to support the contention that farm workers don't live as long as others. The actuarial tables of insurance companies identify farm work as non-hazardous."

#5. It is stated that a large percentage of farm workers are migratory.

The American Farm Bureau Federation says, "Most people mistakenly think that all farm workers are migrants. Actually less than one in ten U.S. farm workers is a migrant... latest figures show that of the total of 2,571,000 farm workers, only 257,000 are migrants."

#6. It is charged that California agriculture is dominated by inhuman and cruel corporations and conglomerates. The American Farm Bureau Federation says, "Only 2.9% of California's commercial farms are corporation owned"--and many of these are family corporations.

#7. It is said that selfish greedy farmers are getting rich at the expense of the workers. The latest statistics for the State of California show that farmers receive only 2-3% on their overall investment. At the same time, they are paying the highest wages in the United States for farm labor.

#8. It is stated that up to 800,000 children under the age of 16 are working in the fields. The fact is that there are strict laws regulating child labor in all states. In California, a child under 16 cannot work even part time without a permit. They are not permitted to be out of school.

#9. It is stated that all or most farm workers live in poverty. One church paper printed in Long Island went so far as to say that "The average income of a farmworker family of four is \$3,170."

Both the Teamster and U.F.W. contracts bring workers in the grape vinyards of California over \$3.00 an hour. There is a base pay of \$2.51 in the U.F.W. contract and \$2.41 in the Teamster contract. In addition, workers receive pay for considerable piece work that brings the total to over \$3.00 an hour. In addition, workers receive 10¢ an hour on a health plan, 10¢ an hour on a pension plan (in the Teamsters). U.F.W. receives 2¢ a box or about 1.5 cents an hour), and Unemployment Insurance (in the Teamsters), social security, workingmen's compensation etc.--The grower is paying the maximum amount he can at this time and stay in business.

All the above charges have appeared in recent church publications. Such mis-statements and distortion of fact can only damage the church's prestige. Many thousands of farmers have been alienated from their respective congregations. It is my personal experience and that of many pastors I have talked to both Protestant and Catholic that they find it almost impossible to get these people to church. They do not even have their children attend religious instruction, because anti-farmer and pro boycott statements are made a part of class matter. Can we afford to lose so many good people from the church? Are we applying the principles of justice and charity to the farmer as well as to the worker? The farmer sincerely feels that the churches have not said a kind word about him in the past ten years and he has not had a chance to explain his side of the story. I believe that churches have a duty to present a more balanced analysis of the farm picture by:

- #1. Do not generalize. Don't say that all or even most farmers do this or that injustice. Be specific.
- #2. Do not print any charges against farmers without giving farm groups a chance to reply to the charges. Print those replies side by side with the charges made.
- #4. Print the good that farmers do: Say for example, "The vast majority of farmers are

honest men who are hard pressed by the price wage squeeze to remain in business." #5. We should not unduly mention abuses of 20 to 30 years ago as if these abuses were still existing and were the rule rather than the exception.

Summation: The presentation of the farm labor problem in church publications has been very prejudicial to the farmer. We have exaggerated the abuses on the part of the farmer and said nothing about the many good things he has done. This is not a balanced church position. This can and should be corrected. We must remember that farmers constitute a large number of people. It is not just the farmer himself. The term farmer includes the farmer, his family, his friends, his suppliers, the whole business community, and many people of fair mind who feel that churches are not fairly presenting the farmer's side of the issue. Christian charity demands that we do not let our zeal to obtain rights for workers to get so out of hand that we defame unjustly and alienate him from the church.

IIA. What should be the attitude of churchmen with regard to the two unions, the U.F.W. and the Teamsters?

The attitude of church groups should be fair and impartial toward BOTH unions. As it is, church papers and statements contend that the U.F.W. is the only union that could possibly represent farm workers. They present all the virtues of the U.F.W. but none of the abuses. They print all the abuses of the Teamsters but none of their good points. This is not objective reporting and could bring undesirable results. The question must be asked: "What is to be gained by speaking so prejudicially about the Teamsters? 90% of Mexican American farm workers are in the Teamsters. All the abuses of the Teamsters have been given full coverage in our church papers. It is alleged that they are bullies, that they got all their California contracts in the grape fields by back room deals, that they signed "sweetheart contracts" with growers, that they are an impersonal union with no interest in the workers, that workers do not have much say in running the union, etc., etc. All these things can be seen in print, but we never hear that #1. Teamster contracts cost growers more than U.F.W. contracts; #2. The most recent Teamster contract (with the K.K. Larson ranch of the Coachella area costs growers 5% more than any table grape contract in California; #3. The Teamsters have unemployment insurance whereas the U.F.W. does not. This costs the growers 3.9% of gross wages and is one of the benefits farm workers need most; #4. The Teamster contract pays 10¢ an hour on a pension plan whereas the U.F.W. contract pays 2¢ a box or 1.5 cents an hour; #5. The health plan of the Teamsters, at least from an administrative standpoint is superior to that of the U.F.W. (Read Time Magazine's April issue on this) #6. The Teamsters are superior in administration, that is, in their know how as regards the day by day operation of a union. (Read Time Magazine's April issue on this).

On the other hand, while it is perfectly proper for church papers and leaders to present the achievements of the U.F.W.--the fact that Mr. Chavez was a pioneer in the field of farm labor, the fact that the U.F.W. has done much to improve wages and working conditions of farm workers, they should also admit the five main abuses of the union:

#1. Family splitting: sending members of one family to 2-3 different ranches, a practice that made it difficult for one car families to get their members to and from work, and they resented the fact they could not work on ranches they had worked at for many years.

#2. A \$25.00 fine for missing a union meeting; #3. Harassment of workers by union hiring hall officials in the office and in the field. #4. Having to be re-hired (dispatched) about six times each season.--Each time an operation on the ranch was completed, the worker in effect lost his job and had to go 5-20 miles to the union hiring hall, wait up to four hours in line, and be sent back to do the next operation on the vines. Often the number of hours on the picket line determined whether a man was hired rather than his seniority.

#5. Willing recently, workers were forced to pay back dues before they could be re-hired. In the interest of objective reporting, these abuses should be mentioned side by side with those of the Teamsters. Pressure should be equally placed on both unions to reform. We can be for a union and still insist that reforms be made. We can and should, however, let both the Teamsters and U.F.W. answer charges made against them.

Summation: From a churchman's standpoint, I think it is very unwise to defame and alienate a union that is doing as much for its members as the Teamsters. We should #1. point out

the good that they do along with their abuses--and give them a chance to answer charges made against them. #2. In fair play, we should point out the abuses of the U.F.W. along with their many good points. They too should be given the chance to reply to charges made against them. #3. Support both unions but do so fairly and impartially. Churchmen should not load the deck in favor of one union over the other. -- If defamation and mis-statement continue to be the order of the day with regard to the Teamsters, it is hard to see how churchmen will have any constructive influence on that union in the future. They will be alienated from the church and church leaders. As stated before, 90% of Mexican Americans in the vinyards are in that union. Many are very loyal to it...and resent the fact that their union is being maligned. --Churchmen must realize that there has been a drastic change in worker loyalties in the past four years. Whereas in 1970, most workers were loyal to the U.F.W., the same cannot be taken for granted at this time. In 1973, overwhelming numbers of workers signed petitions on almost all ranches of the Coachella Valley saying, "We do not want to be represented by the U.F.W.. We do want to be represented by the Teamsters." Only state or federal elections can determine the issue definitively, but there is strong evidence that the abuses of the Chavez union paved the way for the Teamster takeover and that a high percentage of those under Teamster contracts are happy to be in that union.

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I am pastor of Our Lady of Soledad Church. I want it clearly understood, however, that I speak as a private individual exercising his constitutional right to express views that he considers important. I do not write as an official representative of the Church or the Diocese of San Diego. Many churchmen and others have asked me for my views on the subject and I am replying by sending them this position paper for clergymen. Any or all of it may be freely quoted or printed if so desired. If you have any questions, I will try to reply to them as my demanding schedule permits.

Sincerely in Christ,

Rev. Richard Humphrys

