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*Trade-unions - Agricultural
Laborers*

The Farm Workers' Lettuce Boycott

A Statement by the
Committee on Social Development
of the
United States Catholic Conference

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Following the successful completion of the Delano table grape dispute, the United Farm Workers advised the lettuce growers in the Salinas Valley and in the Santa Maria area of California that UFW represented a majority of the farm workers. The United Farm Workers sought to initiate an agreement for a recognition procedure. In addition to other negative responses, the growers refused the request of the Farm Workers. Accordingly, the workers struck and a boycott was conducted. After eight months of controversy a committee of growers agreed to meet with UFW. At that point the boycott was terminated. After another eight months of practically fruitless discussion, the United Farm Workers broke off negotiations, charging that the growers were not bargaining in good faith. Several growers did sign contracts, but the majority of the industry refused to do so and, after two years, still refuse to deal with the United Farm Workers. In the present situation, members of UFW have seen no alternative but to resume the lettuce boycott. Further complicating the problem is the fact that severe and repressive anti-labor legislation has already been enacted in Arizona and similar legislation is being sponsored in several other States.

As the Bishops of the United States said in their November 13, 1968, Statement on Farm Labor:

We are aware that the small grower is often the victim of circumstances beyond his control, and that his sincere willingness to pay higher wages meets with obstacles which he cannot overcome without a realistic coordination of all his strengths. We urge him to examine his situation carefully in order to see that his so-called independence is unreal and could result in his vanishing from the American economy. We believe that this would be tragic for our country. To protect himself, his interests, and the interests of the farm workers, we plead with him to unite with his fellow farmers and growers in associations proper to themselves. This is their natural right and perhaps even their duty at the present moment of our history. At the same time we wish to note that throughout this century, our state and federal governments have done much to assist growers and farmers with their difficulties. The same, unfortunately, cannot be said for the men working in the fields.

Without strong, honest representation such as can be provided by the United Farm Workers, the plight of

agricultural workers and their families will remain desperate. A fundamental issue of social justice is presented.

In these circumstances, the Committee on Social Development of the United States Catholic Conference recommends endorsement and support of the lettuce boycott and strongly urges that only "iceberg" lettuce clearly marked with the official United Farm Workers' label, the black Aztec eagle, be purchased. Our purpose in this is to bring about collective bargaining and a just settlement of the dispute.

In the name of justice, church agencies such as the USCC Committee on Social Development must speak out on controversial issues such as this one even with the knowledge that they might be misunderstood. Sensitive to the needs and the problems of both sides, these agencies must encourage dialogue by helping to create an atmosphere of charity and justice. It was in this spirit and for this purpose that the Second Vatican Council reaffirmed the traditional teaching of the Church with regard to the right of workers to organize and bargain collectively and, under certain conditions, to resort to the strike. These matters were treated by the Council in its Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, which reads, in part, as follows:

Among the basic rights of the human person must be counted the right of freely founding labor unions. These unions should be truly able to represent the workers and to contribute to the proper arrangement of economic life. Another such right is that of taking part freely in the activity of these unions without risk of reprisal. Through this sort of orderly participation, joined with an ongoing formation in economic and social matters, all will grow day by day in the awareness of their own function and responsibility. Thus they will be brought to feel that according to their own proper capacities and aptitudes they are associates in the whole task of economic and social development and in the attainment of the universal common good.

When, however, socio-economic disputes arise, efforts must be made to come to a peaceful settlement. Recourse must always be had above all to sincere discussion between the parties. Even in present-day circumstances, however, the strike can still be a necessary, though ultimate, means for the defense of the workers' own rights, and the fulfill-

ment of their just demands. As soon as possible, however, ways should be sought to resume negotiations and the discussion of reconciliation.

In supporting the efforts of the United Farm Workers to implement their right to organize and bargain collectively, we stress the fact that we are doing so in the spirit of the Council document referred to above and with sympathetic awareness of the problem faced by both parties. It is our earnest hope that ways can be found at the earliest possible date "to resume negotiations" and to bring about a "reconciliation" between the parties to the current dispute. We pledge our wholehearted efforts to achieve this objective.

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