

Cause celebre



Union musters its forces for today's blitz through Watsonville

By TRACY L. BARNETT
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WATSONVILLE — Not since the grape boycott of the 1960s and '70s has a fruit received so much attention.

Today a mass of humanity will convene to celebrate the cause of the strawberry picker. The union of Cesar Chavez is doing what it does best: moving a labor battle into the realm of the social cause celebre.

Mobilizing thousands of sympathetic supporters from across the country, the United Farm Workers today will flex its political muscle in a show of support for the strawberry workers that bend over the dusty fields of the Pajaro and Salinas valleys. Jesse Jackson, actor Martin Sheen, National Organization for Women president Eleanor Smeal and a variety of other personalities will lend their weight to the effort with a push to put the drive in the public eye.

And thousands of strawberry workers themselves are expected to be on hand, the UFW says, as they organize buses and carpools from Salinas, come in from the surrounding Pajaro Valley and walk from their homes in downtown Watsonville.

Nationwide, consumers of the fruit are being enlisted in the effort to pressure growers to provide greater benefits to some of the nation's lowest-paid workers. And now, thanks to that same consumer pressure, some 1,000 supermarkets have joined the battle by signing the strawberry workers' pledge, which sends a message to growers that they want to see the industry meet the union's demands:

- Higher wages, which will be negotiated on a company-by-company basis.
- Medical plans for the workers and their families.
- Consistently clean toilets and drinking water.
- An end to sexual harassment and favoritism.

The United Farm Workers has sent up a battle cry that has echoed across the nation, amplified by a national labor movement in search of a cause that will mobilize a populace disenchanted with unions. The AFL-CIO has declared the organizing campaign a top national priority, and federation president John Sweeney told a gathering of

Please see STRAWBERRY — A6



Shmuel Thaler/Sentinel photos

Above, strawberry workers pick fruit in Watsonville. The United Farm Workers claims field workers' hard work is paid back with low wages and poor conditions.

Left, a strawberry picker works fields along Riverside Drive in Watsonville. Statewide, strawberry pickers earn an average of \$258 a week.

4-13-97

Strawberry

Continued from Page A1

strawberry workers at last year's convention that the union would do "whatever it takes" to make the drive a success.

Critics say that has meant a distortion of the facts — countered by similar hyperbole from the growers.

"It's pretty phenomenal what they're doing now," said Miles Reiter of Reiter Berry Farms, reflecting on the UFW's nationwide media campaign. "What they're doing is try to intimidate workers into supporting them. If they can create a lot of market disruption and create enough damage in the industry, they may be able to scare the people into voting for them to get the union out of their hair."

The union has leafletted consumers at supermarkets, sent mailers to millions of readers, attracted the attention of virtually every major national media outlet and even gotten its message delivered from sympathetic pulpits. But what most consumers receive is a greatly simplified version of reality.

"Most strawberry workers are not well treated or well paid; they deserve a raise and better conditions," said Don Villarejo, director of the California Institute of Rural Studies at UC Davis. "On the other hand, some of the claims being made on their behalf are seriously in error, and are more rhetoric than substance."

Watsonville at the epicenter

The Central Coast provides half of California's strawberry crop, and California produces 80 percent of the nation's supply. Hence the union's decision to locate its industrywide campaign in the strawberry-rich Pajaro Valley.

Watsonville has found itself at the epicenter of an emotionally wrenching labor struggle for the second time in a decade. In 1986-87, Watsonville was home of the longest labor strike in history, the 18-month cannery strike. This summer, the town will play host to more than 100 UFW organizers, several dozen of whom are recruited from other unions around the country.

The city's dire economic straits sets the perfect backdrop for a union campaign: 26-percent unemployment, rampant overcrowding, a severe level of teen pregnancy, diabetes and other health problems. Chiropractors with Spanish-language signs — *Quiropractica* — dot the downtown area, a testament to the high rate of back injuries.

But loyalty to growers is high, and last year's march of 5,000 pro-union strawberry workers was matched by a workers march of equal size and passion opposing the organizing effort.

The bottom rung

There's no doubt the berry picker is among the lowest-paid segments of society. Berry pickers rank second from the bottom of the already low-paying field of agricultural work, according to the state Department of Economic Development: an average of \$258 a week, compared to \$327 for vegetable workers. Only tree-crop pickers make less.

Even a shop clerk is paid better, and works under far less grueling conditions: The same agency reports that retail workers average \$9.56 an hour, compared to \$6.29 for berry pickers.

Making matters worse, agricultural workers in general have seen a significant drop in their wages over the past 20 years — a 20 percent drop once inflation is taken into account, according to surveys by the California Institute of Rural Studies at UC Davis.

In Santa Cruz County, that has meant more families crowded into small apartments, sheds and garages, more children left unattended as their parents work long hours and more of the many social ills that accompany poverty: gangs, crime, alcoholism.

And the problem isn't limited to pay. The industry has a disproportionate share of violations, predominantly wage and hour violations. In health and safety problems, the strawberry industry is comparable to other areas.

A study by the California Policy Seminar, a University of California think tank, examined notices of violation issued by the state Targeted Industry Participation Program, which does spot checks on farms, from September 1992 through the end of 1994. A quarter of all the notices went to berry growers, even though the industry only represents 1/16th of the farm labor work force.

One problem that may account for many violations is the piece rate that many strawberry growers use, speculated Mike Meuter of California Rural Legal Assistance, a farmworker advocacy group based in Salinas.

Many strawberry workers get paid a flat piece rate, which is legal as long as it's supplemented up to the minimum wage — but many times, it's not, said Meuter. "It may be that the weather's bad; it may be raining; it may be the strawberries are not producing well — there's many other reasons beyond workers' control that they're not able to pick a lot of berries, and they end up getting paid subminimum wages."

Some workers, because of experience or skill, are able to make at or above the minimum wage. Others, even though they work just as hard, fall far below the minimum wage.

Please see STRAWBERRY — A7

Continued from Page A6

But when it comes to injuries or illness from pesticide exposure, workers in the strawberry industry had a comparable rate to those in other agricultural jobs, according to an analysis of state workers' compensation data. And Mark Carleson, Deputy Director of CalOsha, said he sees about the same number of sanitation violations among strawberry growers as in other companies — an 80 to 90 percent compliance rate.

"Statistically speaking, there was no difference in Santa Cruz or Monterey counties from other areas in the state, whether it's Fresno and grapes or the Imperial Valley and lettuce," said Carleson. "Strawberries are no different from the rest of agriculture in general. Some are really good, some are not so good, some are in between."

A complicated industry

As in any industry, there are highly conscientious growers and there are scoundrels.

"It's important to see the complexity of the industry and recognize something you may say about one may not apply to others," said Villarejo of the Institute for Rural Studies. "The claim that there's a handful of strawberry barons who rule the industry, for instance, is absurd."

In fact, there are 270 growers in the Pajaro and Salinas valleys, more than 100 of whom are small growers with about 20 to 60 acres. Many are Latino growers who started out as farmworkers and were eventually able to save enough to lease land and start farming operations of their own. Others are second- or third-generation Japanese-Americans and European-Americans who have worked their way up to mid-sized farms of up to 200 acres.

On the opposite end of the pole are corporate growers like the Monsanto-controlled Gargiulo Inc., which farms more than 500 acres and employs about 1,000 people.

And there are wide disparities in the strawberry fields, as well. While big companies like Gargiulo Inc. offer an hourly wage of \$8, smaller growers sometimes struggle to pay their workers minimum wage. Not surprisingly, it's the smaller growers who are far more likely to violate state wage and hour or safety laws, according to analysts, mainly because of economic pressure that could force these growers out of business should the union succeed in its efforts.

The fragility of those businesses is evident; an Institute of Rural Studies analysis showed a two-thirds turnover rate among small growers in Monterey and Fresno counties over a five-year period.

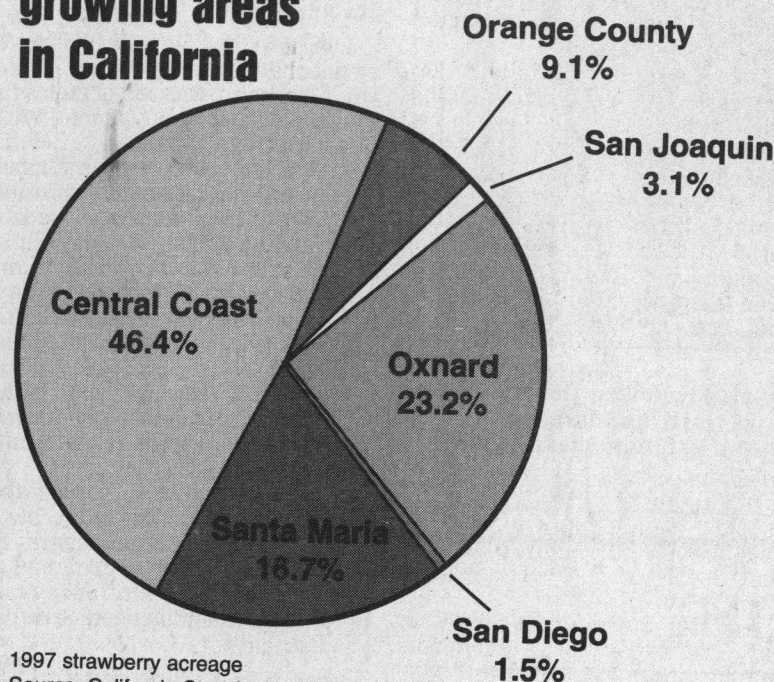
"The small farmers were just not able to make it, because they have less capital resources available," said Villarejo.

State strawberry facts and figures, 1995

Value of production	\$576 million
Export value	\$120 million
State share of U.S. production	79.6 percent (fresh market) 86.1 percent (processing)
1995 ranking among state's commodities	11th
Number of growers	612*
Average size of strawberry farm	36.8 acres*
Number of workers	More than 50,000 involved in growing, harvesting
Average hourly wage	\$6.44*
Average work week	40.2 hours*
Leading counties (% of total state value)	Monterey (33.4%) \$192 million Ventura (25.9%) \$149 million Santa Cruz (13.7%) \$79 million Santa Barbara (13.5%) \$68 million Orange (6.5%) \$37 million

* - Grower number and farm size date from 1992 U.S. Census of Agriculture
Hourly wage and work sheet date from state Employment Development Department 1995 Agricultural Bulletin

Leading strawberry growing areas in California



1997 strawberry acreage
Source: California Strawberry Commission

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— Miles Reiter, Reiter Berry Farms

but to push for industry-wide changes that result in more money for the workers.

Hence one of the union's most prominent mottos: "Five Cents For Fairness," a phrase stamped on each piece of literature the UFW puts out. Five cents more on each basket of strawberries, if transferred straight to the workers, could mean a 50 percent increase in compensation, including benefits and wages.

Critics scoff at the notion. "The system doesn't work that way," said grower Reiter. "It's totally a fiction. Even if 5 cents were added to a basket of strawberries, I can guarantee the retailers wouldn't pass that down to the growers."

The estimate originally came from Villarejo of the Institute for Rural Studies, who estimated that a 50 percent increase in worker

ers, and the shippers and coolers, like Driscoll and Well-Pict, who handle the berries on their way to the market. That's why they're being targeted by organizing efforts, despite the fact that it's the smaller, economically marginal growers who account for a disproportionate share of the health, safety and wage violations.

About 50 growers organized under a handful of shippers control 70 percent of the Central Coast market, according to a UFW analysis of data from the state Department of Agriculture.

"Everybody knows the Driscolls are a dominant player in the strawberry industry," said Rodriguez, referring to the area's largest shipping company, headquartered in Watsonville. "If we're going to have any impact on the workers, Driscoll has to be in agreement

"What they've done is taken the worst abuses and publicized them, and they have not been targeting those growers," said Reiter. "They have implied that this is a common practice with their key targets, and that's totally false."

Reiter's workers earn, on average, \$8 to \$9 an hour, and the company pays three-fourths of the premium for a family medical plan. Complaints about supervisor fa-

voritism are dealt with harshly if they turn out to be true, and he has on more than one occasion hired an outside arbitrating service to settle such issues.

The past three years have been difficult ones as growers have struggled with floods, food scares and perhaps most difficult, a saturation of the market resulting from more growers, more acres in production and more productive ber-

ries.

"Now at this time the market is already depressed, and this is only April; the heavy part of season hasn't come in yet," said Pajaro Valley grower Peter Navarro.

Critics of the organizing effort say the union will wipe out the smaller growers, who won't be able to survive the increased cost of doing business.

Navarro is one such grower. His father crossed the border illegally at age 16, working his way through the fields to eventually buy one of his own. Thirty years later, his son has achieved a modicum of success, but he says it's harder than ever to turn a profit. Last year, he says, he didn't. And for the first time in his life, he's thinking of changing professions.

"In two bad years, you can lose it all," he said. "I love farming and I take great pride in what my father started. I would very much like to continue it, but you've also got to be a realist and say, 'Where do I draw the line? Can I keep going past this point?'"

If growers were really guilty of all the abuses that the UFW claims, Reiter said, they would be fined by the agencies responsible for doing so.

"If they know about all these abuses with toilets and drinking water, why don't they turn them in to the agencies? They seem to know all about these evil doings," Reiter said.

Rodriguez said initially his organizers did so, but were ordered to stop inspecting toilets and drinking water after growers complained to the ALRB.

Besides, he noted, with the state agencies' current staffing levels, it's impossible to conduct a meaningful enforcement effort.

"In 1995, there were 457 inspections on 77,000 farms across the state," Rodriguez said. "At that rate, it would take more than 150 years to inspect all the farms in the state just once."

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The fragility of those businesses is evident; an Institute of Rural Studies analysis showed a two-thirds turnover rate among small growers in Monterey and Fresno counties over a five-year period.

"The small farmers were just not able to make it, because they have less capital resources available," said Villarejo. "They have to rely more on their own labor and family labor. And if there are serious problems like flooding, or if there are fluctuations in prices or other factors that make it more difficult to make a profit, they just don't have resources behind them to back it up."

UFW president Arturo Rodriguez says the union's intention is not to target the smaller growers,

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The estimate originally came from Villarejo of the Institute for Rural Studies, who estimated that a 50 percent increase in worker wages would result in a 5-cent increase in a basket of berries. That's no guarantee, however, that it would be distributed in that way. Rodriguez said the phrase is used merely as a symbolic message to consumers that improving conditions for strawberry workers doesn't have to cost a lot.

But at the crux of the matter is who controls the industry, the UFW says. That's the larger grow-

wage violations.

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"Everybody knows the Driscolls are a dominant player in the strawberry industry," said Rodriguez, referring to the area's largest shipping company, headquartered in Watsonville. "If we're going to have any impact on the workers, Driscoll has to be in agreement. There's nothing smaller growers are going to do unless the big growers make a decision to support this. They make decisions about where and when to plant, what pesticides to use, marketing strategies and getting contracts with supermarkets."

Growers cry foul

Portraying an industry as rife with abuse is simply not fair, say growers.