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Cesar Chavez

UNITED FARM WORKERS
AFL-CIO
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LETTER FROM CESAR CHAVEZ TO FRIENDS OF THE FARM WORKERS

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Dear Sisters and Brothers:

We need your help, again, in another life and death struggle for our Union. The lettuce negotiations have broken off. They will not resume without a long economic conflict. What happened to the negotiations is simple:

> Farm workers have been betrayed again by an industry that remains stubbornly committed to destroying the workers union. The same growers who signed "sweetheart contracts" behind the backs of their workers in 1970 have now demonstrated that they do not want any kind of an agreement with the union that does represent their workers. Lettuce workers gave up the boycott, postponed strikes, returned to work and waited seven months because they believed that the lettuce negotiations were serious and hopeful. Now we have learned that the lettuce growers were not bargaining in good faith but were in fact stalling to get past the 1971 Salinas and Santa Maria harvests and, at the same time, working with Governor Reagan to attempt to pass legislation that would kill the strike and boycott.

In July of 1970, while UFWOC was reaching a settlement with the grape growers in Delano, lettuce growers were making secret agreements with the Teamsters Union in an effort to bypass the union of the workers. The growers announced the Teamster contracts and farm workers responded with the largest farm labor strike in U.S. history. On August 24, 1970, 7,000 lettuce workers went out on strike in the vegetable industry. Several large companies rescinded their Teamster contracts and signed with UFWOC. But the rest of the industry continued to fight and in September, they found a local judge who was willing to outlaw all strike activities in the Salinas Valley. The workers had to take their cause to you in the cities and begin the boycott of lettuce in the U.S.A., Canada, and Europe.

In March of 1971, UFWOC and the Teamsters signed a three-year jurisdictional agreement, giving UFWOC jurisdiction over all farm workers. Under pressure from the boycott, the growers at that point decided to negotiate with UFWOC. To show good faith, UFWOC suspended the lettuce boycott for 30 days, beginning March 26th. Then, at the request of the growers, this "moratorium" was extended and then extended again and again.

From May 7, 1971 to November 10, 1971, we met on a weekly basis with the growers. They insulted us openly, insinuated that we were not a trade union, challenged our confidence, made anti-Semitic slurs against one grower who

signed a UFWOC contract and raised endless objections to agreements we had signed with other employers. At no point did we ask for any provisions not already in other UFWOC contracts. For the sake of peace, the workers agreed to give up certain major clauses vital to their interests. However, the growers refused to meet them half-way. For example, they refused to agree to the most basic clause in our contract--the hiring hall--which would abolish the infamous farm labor contractor system; even though over 200 growers--large and small--with whom UFWOC has contracts have all agreed to the hiring hall.

The workers gave visible evidence of their good faith by calling off the boycott and strike. Despite this, the grower committee continually lectured the Union on "integrity", "trust", and "responsibility". However, this same committee which claimed to represent the entire vegetable industry continually misrepresented its responsibilities and the extent of its authority. In fact, it represented no one.

On the last days of the negotiations (November 9-10, 1971) it became clear that the growers have no intention of reaching an agreement. They had just returned from the Western Growers Association (WGA) meeting in Las Vegas (November 2-4, 1971) where there was a lot of tough talk about fighting the farm workers. WGA elected as president, Mike Schultz, who was Reagan's campaign manager for agriculture and a leader of the fight for anti-farm worker legislation. Daryl Arnold, a former Freshpict officer, who resigned when his company signed with UFWOC, was elected WGA Executive Vice-President. They began attacking the Union publicly.

Looking back, it is not hard to detect signs of bad faith by the growers:

1. Even though negotiations were supposed to take the place of the economic battle, Salinas growers continued to stump the state and the nation attacking the Union, working hand in hand with the National Right-to-Work Committee, the John Birch Society, and assorted right-wing groups. At a case in point, Mrs. Ann Merrill, wife of a prominent Salinas grower, became fond of publicly calling her non-white workers "orangutans". Would you call this good faith?

2. In the midst of the negotiations in June, July, and August, Salinas and Santa Maria growers continued to fire and harass workers for Union activity. In Santa Maria, Evaristo Gonzalez, Andres Serna, Rafael Guerrero and others were fired. In Salinas, Jesus Guzman, Felix Sanchez, Roberto Trevino, Celestino Rivas and others were fired for associating with UFWOC organizers and for other pro-Union work. On one Salinas area ranch the entire Union committee was fired. Would you call this good faith?

3. The Western Growers Association which represents all the lettuce growers worked actively to promote anti-farm worker legislation to outlaw strikes at harvest and the boycott. Would you call this good faith?

The lettuce growers decided to draw us into lengthy negotiations to stop the boycott, to stall us through the 1970-71 harvest, to buy time by recognizing us while working hard for legislation that would outlaw strikes and boycotts (two such efforts - A.B. 964 and S.B. 40 - have now been killed by the

California legislature), to gather financial resources for a long campaign against the farm workers union, and to organize other parts of the agricultural industry in a major effort to crush UFWOC.

UFWOC negotiated in good faith and kept negotiating seriously until the end because of our commitment to bring unionization to the vegetable industry through negotations rather than through another long strike and boycott. But the growers want to fight. They must believe that their millions of dollars and their influential allies are not unified enough and powerful enough to stop the farm workers movement.

I think they are making a mistake. They seriously underestimate our patience and determination. This struggle has never been easy but farm workers are accustomed to suffering and to hardship. It took five years to win the Delano grape strike. The lettuce workers are no less determined. With hard work and continued support from our friends we can bring dignity and a measure of justice to the vegetable fields of California and Arizona.

Viva la Causa!

Cesar E. Chavez

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