

# THE AMERICAN OWL

BATTLES ON THE LAND: FARMWORKERS & FARMERS FIGHT FOR SURVIVAL



The streets of Washington and the fields of southern California have once again become arenas of struggle for the people who grow and harvest food in the U.S. In the past two months a striking farmworker was shot dead by police in California's Imperial Valley, and 2000 protesting farmers fought with police in Washington after blocking traffic with their tractors.

The strike in California, which was initiated in January by the United Farm Workers union against major growers of lettuce and several other crops, has been the most violent farm labor struggle of recent years. Police and company guards have assaulted UFW pickets with tear gas and attack dogs as the workers have tried to prevent strikebreakers from working in the fields. Also, the growers and their allies in the state urged Governor Jerry Brown to call in the National Guard to control the pickets. After he refused, the growers bought full-page advertisements in the major national newspapers, in which they denounced Brown and depicted the strikers as "marauding bands of armed rioters." UFW President Cesar Chavez has responded with a call for a national boycott of Chiquita bananas, which are sold by United Brands Co., parent company of one of the major lettuce growers the UFW is fighting.

The walkout, which has spread to more than 4000 farmworkers in Impe-

rial Valley and parts of neighboring Arizona, represents an important new phase of the UFW struggle: the effort to make wages and working conditions comparable to those in the unionized sectors of industry. The UFW is demanding wage increases of 40 to 100 percent (the average now is \$3.70 an hour plus piecework earnings) and substantial improvements in benefits. The growers complain that in recent years the pay of California farmworkers has risen at least 20 percent faster than the wages of other agricultural laborers and they insist that further increases will force them out of business. The companies apparently regard the current battle as decisive in determining whether fruit and vegetable production will remain a low-wage business. The growers have been on the defensive since 1975, when the UFW succeeded in pushing through the California legislature the Agricultural Labor Relations Act, which for the first time guaranteed collective bargaining rights to farmworkers in the state. The UFW has become much stronger since the passage of the law and succeeded in signing a peace treaty with the Teamsters union, which had been taking over UFW contracts by intimidating workers and making "sweetheart" agreements with the growers.

Although the UFW gained protection and support from the liberal state government, it soon faced an inten-

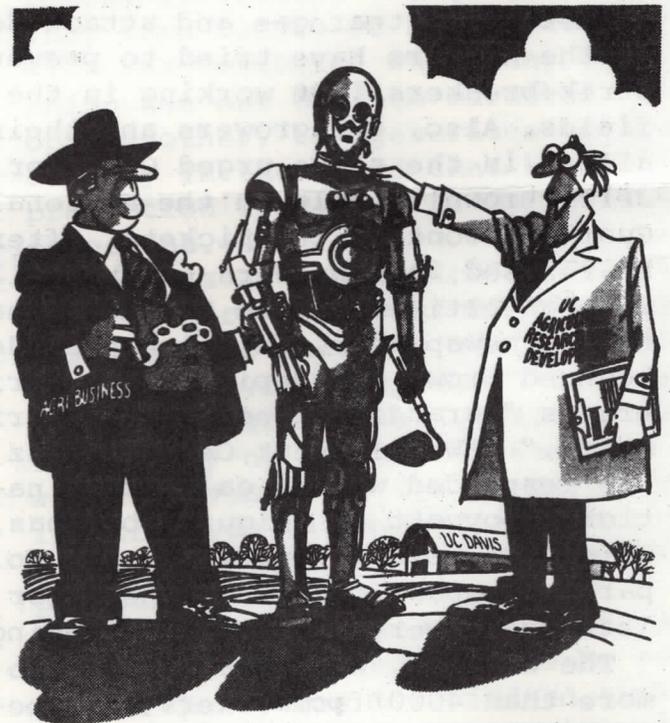
sified new assault on the part of the growers: a major new push for mechanization of harvesting. The mechanization of tomato-picking, in particular, had closely paralleled the growth of the UFW and the general increase in the militancy of farmworkers; this process accelerated greatly after the 1975 labor law. In addition to the automatic harvesters, the growers began to use electronic tomato sorters, immediately eliminating more than 11,000 workers. This transformation of production required the development of a new breed of tomato the machines could handle--ones that were virtually cubic in shape, had a rubbery skin, and had almost no taste. Rather than reducing retail prices, the machines made tomatoes one of the most expensive vegetables on the market; mechanization also accelerated the concentration of land ownership in California, since smaller growers could not afford the new machines and often had to sell out to the ever-expanding agribusiness companies.

Most recently, the development of mechanization for other crops has been moving ahead quickly, especially in the case of lettuce, the most profitable crop in California. Researchers have been spending millions of dollars perfecting futuristic devices such as one that shoots gamma rays into heads of lettuce to determine if they are ripe.

**M**uch of this research, it turns out, is being done by the publicly-funded University of California. The university's Agricultural Experimentation Station has, in addition to developing the new machines and new breeds of crops, sponsored seminars for growers on ways to deal with farm labor, and university researchers have crossed UFW picket lines to test mechanical harvesters on farms being struck by the union. University officials have denied that there is anything wrong with this

kind of "pursuit of knowledge," but in January, at about the same time the lettuce strike began, a public interest group filed suit against the university, challenging the use of state funds for mechanization research and instead called for state compensation for farmworkers thrown out of their jobs by the machines. The suit also accused university officials of conflict of interest, since many of them are also executives or board members of various agribusiness corporations.

In addition to the battles over wages and job protection, the UFW has been hit with an internal crisis resulting from challenges to the domination of the union by Chavez. Criticism of the UFW president from within the union and among its supporters heated up in the summer of 1977, after Chavez returned from a trip to the Philippines. He had gone to that country upon the urging of Filipino workers in the union who wanted to publicize the struggle against the



Renault, Sacramento Bee

*"It Uses the Short-Handled Hoe and Won't Join the United Farm Workers."*

repressive policies of the Marcos regime. Chavez not only refused to criticize Marcos, even after returning, but had a friendly meeting with the dictator and accepted an award from a government that has banned strikes. Since then, Chavez has been charged with suppressing his opponents in the UFW and virtually running the union single-handedly. He has also been accused of doing little to support undocumented immigrant workers in the fields and of failing to help other farmworker groups. As a result, many UFW staff members and supporters have left the organization. One group of defectors went to Arizona and organized in 1977 the first strike of undocumented workers in U.S. labor history.

**S**ignificantly, as Chavez has made the union more bureaucratic, he has, at least until the current strike, gained more respect from the growers. Business Week reported last year, "Many growers give the union high marks for becoming more professional and business-like in its approach to bargaining and to resolving grievances. Says one grower who has more than 10,000 acres in the fertile San Joaquin Valley: 'The UFW is finally starting to act more like a traditional industrial union and less like a cause.'" The UFW organization, and Chavez in particular, is thus facing a crucial point in its history. The question now is whether the current lettuce strike represents a return to a more militant form of struggle, or whether Chavez is indeed going to make the UFW more and more like its old rival, the Teamsters union--a corrupt, authoritarian organization that acts tough but really has very cozy relations with management.

**SMALL FARMERS.** In political terms, the situation of small farmers in the U.S. is even more complicated than that of farmworkers. Whereas

farmworkers are clearly waged laborers employed by large agribusiness companies, the farmers are a strange mixture of worker, capitalist, and self-employed professional. Lately, more and more farmers have been acting like militant workers. As farm prices have fallen and yet costs of land, machinery, fertilizer, etc. have risen sharply, farmers have formed grass roots organizations to demand additional federal help in maintaining their standard of living. In 1977 a group of farmers in Colorado founded the American Agricultural Movement, which has grown rapidly in a series of demonstrations that culminated in the February blockade of Washington.

Essentially, the demand of the farmers is more federal help through adherence to a concept known as parity, which is defined as the relationship between farm prices and production costs which existed in the years 1910-1914, a period the farmers regard as one of reasonable prosperity. The farmers want price support policies to be revised to recreate the parity ratio today.

The greater militancy of small farmers is also a reaction to the acceleration of the old process of concentration of food production. Thousands of small farms every year are taken over by agribusiness companies or else converted by speculators into commercial or residential use.

**W**ithin these developments, the economic viability and political role of the small farmer are becoming more ambiguous. Militant farmers sent food to striking miners last year, but in many ways they have acted like small businessmen. It remains to be seen whether small farmers will be swept away by capitalist development, or whether they can, through their struggles, survive and play a key role in the process of transforming food production and distribution.

HOLLYWOOD DISCOVERS THE WORKING CLASS:  
HARLAN COUNTY, BLUE COLLAR, NORMA RAE

Films in the U.S. that show people at work are rare commodities, and films that actually focus on the struggles of workers have been even more scarce and very poorly distributed. Consequently, the commercial distribution of the above films, all within the last three years, is quite significant. The three films all deal with a common subject: workers and unions.

Harlan County was the earliest of the three films and the only documentary. In 1973, miners at the Brookside mine in Kentucky went on strike after the coal operator refused to sign a contract with the newly formed local of the United Mine Workers. Independent filmmaker Barbara Kopple went down to film the miners and their families for the strike's duration, which turned out to be three years. The result of her work is powerful footage, including close-ups of the sheriff threatening workers, and lengthy filming of community meetings in which men gradually accept the need for women on the picket line as women demand equal participation in the struggle.

The absence of any narration allows the audience to concentrate on the relationships and battle unfolding. A strong point here is the film's community focus and the sense one gets that the fight will continue long after the strike is over.

Norma Rae is also about an attempt to start a union local in the South, only here it is a textile factory instead of a mine. The movie, based on the true story of a woman organizer at a J.P. Stevens plant, centers on the transformation of a young Carolina millhand into the prime militant of a major unionizing drive. But the movie is far removed from documentary flavor. Indeed, in his overly optimistic portrayal of how a large company

is defeated by a handful of people with no previous union experience, the director has almost created a work of union propaganda.

But apart from its shortcomings regarding union issues, Norma Rae is significant and enjoyable for its portrayal of a working class woman who is intelligent, self-reliant and outspoken. Whether protesting the "triple shift" (organizer, housewife and millhand) by flinging dirty laundry in her husband's face, confronting the plant manager with workers' demands, or talking openly about premarital sexuality, Norma Rae reflects many facets of women's lives.

Blue Collar is the most contemporary and provocative of the three films. The movie shows three workers, two black and one white, caught in the squeeze of union, company, government and marketplace oppression. One night they rob a local union office but come away with nothing but an accounting book which contains evidence of union corruption. They then decide to bribe the union with the notebook; when they do, the union has one of them murdered, co-opts another, and generates so much anxiety in the third that he seeks protection from the FBI by turning informant.

There is an assumption in the film that workers and criminals are not distinct and separate groups: hustling is what survival is about. This gets rid of the artificial morality that leads many to excuse tax evasion while condemning store robbery and is effective in raising the question of appropriate responses to societal pressures.

All three films have drawn large audiences. Yet it remains to be seen whether Hollywood will indeed abandon its notion that moviegoers are not interested in films about work.