

No. 8952

RESOLUTION CONCERNING A GRAPE BOYCOTT

NOT ADOPTED by the General Assembly

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Background

At the 1987 General Assembly (Louisville, Kentucky), Resolution —8739 was considered which called for a boycott of California table grapes and a study of the issues involved. The General Assembly referred Resolution 8739 to the General Board "for objective and equitable research, discussion and action..." The 1988 General Board postponed action on Resolution 8739 indicating a need for more information and time to consider available information. In response to a poll of the General Board membership in October 1988, the following general areas were identified as needing further inquiry: (1) the use of pesticides, (2) the character of the proposed boycott, (3) the work of the California Agricultural Relations Board, (4) the work of the National Farm Workers Ministry, and (5) the growers (activities and effects of a boycott). T.J. Liggett, Claremont, California was asked to undertake a study of this pending resolution and the concerns of the General Board. EP Subsequently, Dennis Savage, Whittier, California, and Fred Jobs, Sacramento, California agreed to assist with the necessary research. Dennis Savage conducted most of the interviews and collected most of the print resources. Fred Jobs conducted the formal interview with the General Counsel of the Agricultural Labor Relations Board. T.J. Liggett drafted the report and is responsible for its format and recommendations to the General Board. The focus of the report is on labor relations and pesticides.

RESOURCES FOR STUDY

The General Assembly should know that the files of this report include articles and clippings from: (abbreviated titles used) PACKER (4), CALIFORNIA FARMER (3), NEWSWEEK (2), NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER, LOS ANGELES TIMES (16), FOOD MONITOR, CHRISTIANITY & CRISIS, ST. LOUIS POST DISPATCH (2), CHRISTIAN CENTURY, WITNESS, FRESNO BEE (9), JEWISH JOURNAL OF GREATER LOS ANGELES, VALLEY CATHOLIC (San Jose), BAKERSFIELD CALIFORNIAN (4), DETROIT NEWS, CATHOLIC MIRROR (Des Moines), BUSINESS TRAVEL, COLUMBUS DISPATCH, DENVER POST, SAN FRANCISCO CHRONICLE (2), NEW YORK TIMES (4), KANSAS CITY STAR, INDIANAPOLIS STAR, CHRISTIAN SCIENCE MONITOR (2), WASHINGTON POST, CATALYST, HAMPSHIRE GAZETTE, TIME, DELANO RECORD, ISSUES IN FOOD SAFETY, and FAMILY FARM NETWORKER.

The file also includes a two-hour interview with David Stirling (General Counsel for the California Agricultural Labor Relations Board), materials from the California Certified Organic Farmers, 78 pages of data distributed by the Grape Workers and Farmers Coalition, numerous statements of church bodies (denominations, councils and judicatories), a significant number of copies of correspondence between interested parties, letters exchanged between Dennis Savage and parties consulted, a collection of public documents from agencies of the federal government (Labor and Agriculture), and the state of California (Food & Agriculture, Agriculture Labor Relations Board), materials issued by the United Farm Workers and by the National Farm Worker Ministry, including the full text of a collective bargaining agreement between the UFW and a major grower, and an impressive listing of the religious and secular entities which have endorsed the boycott in recent years.

In addition, there are texts of testimony given by professional experts in public hearings, and the results of surveys by governmental and academic personnel. Also included are summary-notes from interviews with officers of the California Institute for Rural Studies (University of California at Davis) and the office of the California Certified Organic Farmers. Illustrative of resource material in print are such monographs as SHADOW OVER THE LAND (on problems of extensive use of chemicals).

The interpretation of data and judgments has been influenced by sustained conversations with persons, including members of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), who are deeply involved in the issues from the perspective of growers, workers and government, including on-site experiences in Sacramento, Delano, Bakersfield, Los Angeles, and San Diego. Beyond what was possible for us, given the constraints of time and experience, we openly recognize a vast remaining area of ramifications which are not addressed in this report.

Information

LABOR RELATIONS

Today, the California table grape industry involves approximately 1,100 vineyards with a total of about 87,000 acres under cultivation. About 50% of the growers have vineyards of 200 acres or less and are considered "small farmers". Many of the large vineyards are operated by large, diversified corporations. There are about 50,000 laborers, most of them year-around, but a significant number are seasonal/migrant workers. They include native-born citizens, naturalized citizens, aliens with green cards — and, according to rumor, undocumented workers. Our sources indicate that wages range from \$4.25 to \$8.00 per hour, depending on seniority and skill required. A very limited number also receive health benefits and pensions. Some work is done on a "piece-work" basis (by box, row, etc) and not by the hour.

Historically, agricultural workers have been among the most vulnerable segment of the labor force, with limited or no supervision of employment conditions and often with low educational background. In the 1950's Caesar Chavez and others began working on behalf of farm workers. While there was much variation, wages were generally low and housing and toilet facilities were sub-standard on many farms. Some growers, sensitive to these conditions, made improvements, but it was clear that, as was true in the industrial history, a major change in labor-management relationships was necessary.

On March 31, 1962, the United Farm Workers was organized and thus began a long and difficult struggle to obtain and guarantee appropriate rights for farm workers. The struggle included a boycott that lasted 5 years and a long "fast" by Caesar Chavez. In the early 1970's, there was a second boycott which was organized to protest the use of violence against farm workers.

In August 1975, California passed the Agriculture Labor Relations Act which established a Board with oversight of elections and contracts, and the adjudication of complaints. From 1975 until 1983, this system seemed to work well. Elections were held, contracts signed and complaints handled with dispatch. One grower told us that the system actually facilitated his management, since the wage scales were simplified and the union assisted in maintaining discipline in the work place. During this period, the state administration was perceived as pro-labor and labor provided support for sympathetic political candidates. Similarly, grower political support was given to candidates who advocated changes in the system.

In 1983, a new administration began in the California state house which brought changes for the Agriculture Labor Relations Board. The new leadership perceived the ALRB as having been strongly pro-labor and took steps to rectify what they saw as an imbalance. Regional directors no longer resolved problems "in the field" but referred them to Sacramento. A backlog of cases projected an impression to the workers of a hostile bureaucracy which discouraged worker complaints and used the ALRB to implement its "pro grower" bias. Certification of elections became less frequent and worker-complaints declined out of frustration. What the ALRB saw as the achievement of a much needed neutrality was perceived by the union as a bias against labor. The LOS ANGELES TIMES reported: "... the fury of the General Counsel's latest attack on the union and Chavez will surely raise new questions about the credibility of his role as a neutral party in disputes between the union and growers."

Emotions run high on this issue. Some growers and their church leaders expressed strong, angry feelings about Chavez and the tactics used by some of his organizers. Labor publications were branded as distortions and exaggerations, if not deliberate misstatements of facts. Conversely, labor leaders saw the new policies as clearly an alliance of "big money" with government to conspire against the interest of the poor. Machinery which was created to bring justice was perceived as having been transformed into a new instrument of oppression.

Public relations have become a major consideration. Growers have contracted with the Dolphin Group for a large-scale program to advance their cause. The UFW has likewise utilized available means to dramatize for the public the plight of farm workers. Growers complain that the UFW is spending more time and money on promoting the boycott than on organizing workers. Labor complains that the massive outlay of funds by growers could better be spent on implementing a more progressive policy on labor relations. There are few objective and neutral sources of information.

PESTICIDES

Out of the experience in World War II when DDT was used as a pest control, we have witnessed a dramatic growth in the creation and use of chemicals to combat pests and diseases and to increase the quantity and quality of vegetables and fruits. Agrichemical manufacturers are "big business" in our economy and many pesticide producers are subsidiary corporations of some of the major conglomerates in our nation. The U.S. Department of Agriculture estimated that American farmers spent \$7 billion on chemicals.

The history of the use of DDT clearly demonstrated that a new product could have ominous long-term consequences which far outweighed the immediate, short-term benefits. Our society has been slow in finding adequate and effective methods to control the use of these new products. It is to the credit of the United Farm Workers that since 1970 they have pressed for a more responsible policy on the use of pesticides in their contracts. Their immediate concern for worker safety was augmented by a broader concern, the general society.

Currently, there are some 50,000 pesticide products in 600 chemical categories (NEWSWEEK). It was not until 1972 that the Environmental Protection Agency was charged with regulating them under FIFRA (Federal Insecticide, Fungicide and Rodenticide Act). While the short-term benefit of pesticide use is quickly apparent, it takes years to make a mature judgment about the long-term effects. Of this mass of relatively new chemicals being used, "the EPA has developed data on only 192, and it has fully reviewed and re-registered only two of them" (NEWSWEEK). The recent alarm about Chilean grapes and the use of Alar on apples is a "sign of the times" of the critical situation which we face. (See the current issue of CONSUMER REPORT.)

Governmental agencies give mixed and confusing signals, as evidenced by a recent announcement of the Environmental Protection Agency which prohibits the use of Captan (one of the pesticides cited in the resolution) in the production of 42 fruits and vegetables — but permits its use in 26 other fruits and vegetables! When we asked one knowledgeable person what possible reason that could be for such a decision, the answer was the cynical observation that the 26 crops which can still use Captan are the "big money crops". So growers will continue to use Captan on almonds, grapes, cherries, peaches, lettuce, pears, etc., while at the same time the EPA has prohibited its use on 42 other products.

On March 23, 1989, the EPA announced that the amount of toxic chemicals spewed into the air in the USA is about 2.4 billion pounds annually — an alarming 3 times the amount earlier estimated. Some of these products are linked to cancer, birth defects and impotency. On the same date (3/23/89) it was announced in Basel, Switzerland, that 116 nations had signed a treaty dealing with toxic waste — reflecting the international dimensions of the problem.

The responsible use of pesticides in agriculture is complicated because of (1) the huge "unknown factor" about the long-term effects of individual products, (2) the difficulty in supervising the use of the chemicals in the rural areas, and (3) the still unknown consequences of the cumulated effect of ALL the chemicals which might have a compounding result. The potential dangers are not self-evident, it is difficult to guarantee the proper use of devices to protect workers and to regulate the intensity of the use of the chemicals. When the pro-grower THE CALIFORNIA FARMER admitted in its September 1988 issue that some growers continue to use illegal chemicals to enhance crop production, the need for improved oversight and regulation was no longer debatable.

The effect of pesticides on farm workers is difficult to assess. Dr. Richard Howitt, Prof. of Agricultural Economic at the University of California at Davis surveyed three counties, directly interviewing farm workers. He concluded that many seasonal workers do not report what they consider minor injuries and problems, due to the pressure to maximize their working time in the fields. He estimated that no more than one out of three injuries are reported and that on the basis of his three-county survey, there are between 30 and 60 chemical injuries per day on California farms.

In the specific cases of the five pesticides mentioned in the resolution, we find contradictory opinions. In some areas of California, we were informed by knowledgeable and credible persons that grape growers do not use any of the five — but they use others which are not mentioned. Judgments about the particular five vary. Dr. Marion Moses, M.D. is an environmental and occupational specialist who affirms that:

METHYL BROMIDE—a fumigant, nematicide, insecticide marketed since 1932. It is highly poisonous and workers who survive acute poisoning often suffer permanent damage to the nervous system . . . low level exposure over time may cause neuropsychological and neurobehavioral effects . . . has caused more occupational deaths in California than any other pesticide.

PARATHION is an insecticide first marketed in 1947. It is a carcinogen in the rat and causes retinal degeneration and other eye damage. Parathion and Phosdrin together are responsible for more than two-thirds of acute poisoning of workers in agriculture reported to the state of California.

PHOSDRIN is an insecticide first marketed in 1953. It is a "nerve gas" type of pesticide. It is not known if Phosdrin is a carcinogen since there are no studies on file in either rat or mouse. It is readily absorbed through the skin and has caused worker deaths.

CAPTAN is a fungicide and its largest use is in California grapes (41% reported in 1986). Captan is among the pesticides the National Academy of Sciences listed as posing a cancer risk to consumers. The risk of chronic effects such as cancer and birth defects in farmworkers is of great concern.

DINOSEB—a herbicide and insecticide first marketed in 1945. It was suspended by the Environmental Protection Agency in October 1986. It was banned because of its teratogenicity (birth defect producing) properties. It also causes tumors in laboratory animals as well as sterility and other effects on reproduction.

Dr. C. K. Winter, Ph.D., is an extension toxicologist and Dr. M. W. Stimmann, Ph.D. is the state-wide pesticide coordinator. Both work at the Cooperative Extension of the University of California at Davis. Their judgments on the specific pesticides are as follows:

METHYL BROMIDE does not produce a residue on vines or fruit and there is a low potential danger for farm workers. **PARATHION** may be a carcinogen, was used in 163 applications in 1986 on 7,800 acres. Only 1 grape sample out of 344 tested contained 0.2 parts per million—below the 1.0 ppm established tolerance level. Breaks down slowly—21 day worker re-entry interval recommended. **PHOSDRIN** is not suspected to cause cancer, no detectable residue found on samples analyzed in 1986-87 by the Department of Food and Agriculture. **CAPTAN** breaks down fairly rapidly, degrades in the presence of water. Department of Food and Agriculture tests were 10% below the established U.S. tolerance. Residues can be removed by washing.

From our reading and consultations, it would appear that there is wide-spread agreement that many of the pesticides are toxic (poisonous) and could be fatal in large amounts. The debate really hinges on the level of "acceptable tolerance" at which the potential benefits outweigh the potential dangers. The problem is that the "benefits" are usually self-evident while the potential dangers, especially long-term, take years to define with accuracy.

Clouding the decision-making process is the very large economic factor which heavily favors wide use of pesticides (to enhance quantity, quality of production and profits) and which has become a major factor in determining the policy decisions of all levels of government, local, state and national. With the

globalization of the world's economy, it is clear that there are some dimensions of the issues which can only be resolved through international agreements.

Significant progress is being made toward a new style of agriculture which uses few or no synthetic pesticides. In 1979 California approved the Organic Food Act which established standards on the basis of which food could be labeled "organic". By 1986, California Certified Organic Farmers had approved 285 growers with 9,700 acres under cultivation. By 1988 the acreage had increased by 174% to 26,640 and there is every reason to presume that the progress will continue.

OBSERVATION

Our study has not resulted in a completely clear and unambiguous analysis of the issues posed by Resolution 8739. There are some observations, however, which should be shared:

1. Criticism of a system should not be interpreted as questioning the integrity of all the persons within the system. Our survey and contacts reveal the presence among both workers and growers of persons who sincerely seek justice and environmental safety. These persons would welcome a resolution of the present conflict.
2. Both supporters and opponents of the boycott are active in the political arena, giving substantial support to candidates and parties that favor their positions. This political dimension plays a crucial role.
3. Both find professional experts in the fields of medicine and toxicology to support their positions. Even the findings of university research projects are suspect in many circles because of industry financial support to the projects.
4. Economic power, especially chemical companies and corporate agriculture, are concentrated in their opposition to the boycott.
5. Organized labor and environmentalists tend to support the boycott.
6. Religious communities are divided, with some evidence to show that they tend to reflect the political and economic interests of their major constituencies.
7. Government has abdicated its regulatory responsibility both in the failure (1) of the State of California to provide a truly neutral agency for the handling of agricultural labor relations; and (2) of both the State of California and the federal government in Washington to provide adequate regulation of the use of pesticides, for the protection of the workers, the environment and the general population. (California has one of the best environmental control laws but implementation falls short of full safety for workers and the public.)
8. Given the present realities, THERE IS NO REAL NEUTRALITY ON THE ISSUE OF THE BOYCOTT. To reject the boycott is to support the interests of agribusiness and chemical companies. To adopt the boycott is to support the workers and, indirectly, the environmentalists.
9. There has been SERIOUS TIME-LAG in governmental recognition of the dangers in certain pesticides. DDT is one example. Another is Dinoseb which was permitted to be used for 41 years before being banned!
10. There is considerable evidence that policies of extension departments, lending institutions and regulatory bodies are heavily influenced by the large corporations that produce chemicals used in agriculture and encourage massive use of chemical products.
11. The boycott's first and most important effect has been the raising of awareness among the general public of the need for economic justice and environmental safety. Indirectly it has exercised pressure on the growers in terms of their awareness of the concern for safety in the work place. More indirectly, it has heightened the awareness of government for the need for improved regulation of agricultural labor relations and safety for workers and the general public.

CONCLUSION

This report recognizes that:

1. No absolute claim can be made for truth and justice to be found exclusively on one side of this issue.
2. There are good and committed persons who hold opposing positions on the validity of the boycott.
3. The specific issue of California grapes and grape workers only "touches the hem of the garment" of the larger issue of justice for workers and safety for them and the general society.
4. Ethical realism calls for hard decisions even when ambiguities remain.
5. The fact that one cannot solve all of a problem is no reason to refuse to act on a facet of the problem.

6. In modern times, Christian ethicists have repeatedly affirmed the "preferential option for the poor" as a guideline for action.

THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED, that the General Assembly of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) meeting in Indianapolis, Indiana, July 28-August 2, 1989, endorse the farmworkers' grape boycott and encourage all members, congregations, regions, institutions and general units of the church to cease the purchase and use of California table grapes.

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED, that the General Assembly encourage members, congregations, regions, institutions and general units of the church to continue studying the issues involved and take consequent actions through avenues such as: printed study guide materials, articles in THE DISCIPLE, advocacy of effective governmental regulation of pesticides and farm labor relations, and encouragement of organic farming with minimal use of synthetic chemicals.

General Board

The General Board recommends that the General Assembly ADOPT Resolution 8952. (Debate time 24 minutes)
