



“Summary of article by Robert J. Thomas: Microchips and Macroharvests: Labor-Management Relations in Agriculture” in Frontier Issues in Economic Thought, Volume 4: The Changing Nature of Work. Island Press: Washington DC, 1998. pp. 234-238

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### **“Summary of article by Robert J. Thomas: Microchips and Macroharvests: Labor-Management Relations in Agriculture”**

Since the 1960s the United Farm Workers have called several strikes and consumer boycotts to bring attention to the poor working conditions faced by agricultural workers in the U.S. Southwest. During the same period, adoption of mechanical options has been rapid in some cases and been slow in others. This unevenness is related to the struggle between employers and unions for control over agricultural labor markets and working condition as well as to the changing structure of the industry in the Southwest.

### **POLITICAL ECONOMY OF AGRICULTURE AND UNIONIZATION**

Since the 1960s the agriculture industry in the U.S. Southwest has been an arena for political and economic ferment. Growers, plant breeders and electrical engineers have collaborated in attempts to rationalize fruit and vegetable growing. While impressive technological innovations have been achieved, including plants bred to withstand mechanical harvesting and machines fitted with sensors to detect signs of ripeness, diffusion of these technologies has not been straightforward. Many employers rely on a low-waged labor force; as long as it continues to be replenished by new waves of immigration, they have little incentive to mechanize. The United Farm Workers have engaged in a protracted struggle to organize field workers to improve their pay and working conditions. At the same time an industry that was once family farms has been reorganized by large industrial enterprises which saw agriculture as an investment opportunity.

### **IMMIGRATION POLICY AND FARM WORKER ORGANIZING**

Historically union organizing in the fields of the Southwest faced great obstacles. Employers were well organized through the American Farm Bureau Federation which maintained implacable hostility to unionization and successfully fought attempts to bring farm workers under the National Labor Relations Act of 1935. At local levels, in communities economically dependent on agriculture, growers used the police or vigilantes against union organizing.

From 1880 to about 1940, agricultural was organized around small farms producing for local markets. Skilled family labor was sufficient for most operations except during planting and harvesting seasons. The labor market for unskilled seasonal labor was a political construction, shaped by producers' influence on immigration policy to ensure a supply of unskilled labor “willing to travel in search of employment, and willing to accept meager wages... which would be available when needed for short periods but which could be jettisoned when unneeded.”[32]

From 1942 until 1965, the Bracero Program formalized recruitment of cheap seasonal labor through contractual arrangements between U.S. grower associations and the Mexican government. The Kennedy administration dismantled the Bracero Program in 1965, but farm labor remained outside the National Labor Relations Act. Eligibility rules for state unemployment benefits gave agricultural workers little choice but to move on when the season ended. Few citizens, even among the growing urban unemployed, were attracted to work in the fields while a loophole in immigration law allowed emergency increases in immigration during labor shortages. Bracero labor was replaced by “green card” and undocumented Mexican labor.

## **STRUCTURAL CHANGE IN AGRICULTURE AND A NEW UNION APPROACH**

After World War II the structure of the industry changed as agricultural production became more concentrated in large farms. In some cases mechanization took hold; some enterprises were susceptible to union challenges. Large firms like Tenneco, Purex, Coca-Cola, and Schenley built marketing networks, links to fertilizer producers, vast landholdings, and technical advances that increased the costs of entry and eroded the position of small growers. Advertising created brand-name associations for many agricultural products, both processed (e.g., Campbells soups or Gallo wines) and unprocessed (e.g., “Sunkist” inked on orange skins). Concentration and scale stabilized employment practices, concentrated workers, and made them easier to organize. The high visibility of brand-name producers and their exposure in many product markets made these firms ripe targets for consumer boycotts.

The United Farm Workers (UFW), headed by Cesar Chavez, adopted a non-traditional, community-based effort that offered a credit union, insurance, and other member services to create bonds within the fragmented workforce. It leveraged the growing concentration and changing structure in the industry to exploit pockets of stability and promote consumer boycotts of well-known producers. Grape production in Kern County, California provided one of the few opportunities for year round work in agriculture. The scale of the industry (a large proportion of the country’s grape output) and the meticulous pruning and weeding required in the off-season enabled workers to settle in the area and commute from farm to farm. As farms became larger, workers remained with one company for longer periods of time.

An early UFW strike against grape growers, sparked by members’ refusal to cross picket lines put up by Filipino workers, succeeded in bringing workers in protest together, but failed when employers imported strikebreakers from Mexico. The UFW turned to a consumer boycott turning it into “a biting economic weapon. Through effective public relations, an emphasis on non-violence, dramatic pilgrimages, highly publicized fasts, Chavez and the UFW made the plight of the farm worker much more visible.”[39]

Boycotts in the wine grape, table grape, and lettuce industries faced different circumstances, but eventually made inroads in winning representation and securing contracts. In the wine industry, where large corporations like Schenley were involved, boycotts of brand-name products were effective and the UFW built a base around contracts with several large wine producers. Table grapes mainly come from medium sized producers and are not sold by label, but a protracted education campaign induced consumers to substitute other fruits for grapes, and the boycott paid

off for the UFW after a long and bitter struggle. In the lettuce industry, there were mixed results. Lettuce has few substitutes, but some large producers were vulnerable in other product markets leading three to sign contracts. However, smaller growers resisted the UFW.

These victories proved tenuous. Employers resisted contract provisions or began signing contracts (often “sweetheart deals”) with other unions, most prominently the Teamsters. Still, the UFW emerged as the most influential agricultural union by the late 1970s. They achieved substantial increases in wages and benefits, an Agricultural Labor Relations Board to enforce labor law, widespread representation, and a system of hiring halls and seniority that undermined the exploitative labor contract system. But agricultural employment still remains less attractive than other sectors and mechanization has begun to reduce the number of workers in the fields.

### **CHALLENGES FOR LABOR RELATIONS: TWO CASES**

The UFW has had little success in mediating the impact of technology. Employer decisions about labor-displacing technology are influenced by cost and managerial control. “These are, of course, the points on which the UFW and other farm labor unions find themselves hung: the more successful they are as economic and political agents, the more likely it is that companies will attempt to eliminate them as obstacles to organizational performance.”[42]. Illegal immigration also poses challenges to any attempts to improve workers’ conditions.

Production of tomatoes for processing was a major, very labor intensive part of post-war agriculture. The University of California created a mechanical harvester and a tomato able to tolerate it, but growers only became interested after the termination of the Bracero Program cut the unlimited supply of cheap labor. Employment dropped from 50,000 to 18,000 in just a few seasons. Another drop in employment occurred during the late 1970s when electro-optic sorting reduced the number of workers per harvesting machine from twenty-five to only five or six.

In the head lettuce industry, private and public sources also combined to develop new technologies. The industry was slow to mechanize, but the UFW was active in organizing lettuce workers. Lettuce is sold directly from the field to supermarkets and institutions, so growers have developed durable links with buyers. Large growers are well capitalized and able to grow lettuce year-round by operating in several areas, reducing dependence on price fluctuations. When the Bracero Program ended, the industry raised wages to attract workers. Citizens did not move into the back-breaking work, but undocumented workers did. So paradoxically, the lettuce industry is both highly unionized and highly populated by undocumented workers too vulnerable to offer effective resistance. “Employers, not surprisingly have been quite adept at whipsawing the UFW with the issue of undocumented workers and the threat of mechanization.”[45]