

Migrant Workers Organize a Boycott of Campbell

By WILLIAM SERRIN

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TOLEDO, Ohio — In upstairs rooms in an old building in the Hispanic section of town, festooned with posters and slogans that smack of the radical 1960's or even of an earlier unionism, labor activists are conducting a spirited fight against the Campbell Soup Company.

The fight is led by Baldemar Velasquez, president of the Farm Labor Organizing Committee, a group he founded to organize farm workers in northwest Ohio and elsewhere in the Middle West.

The committee's campaign, which includes a boycott of Campbell products, involves the issue, often a key issue in such labor fights, of the mechanization of migrant worker jobs. The campaign has met with strong opposition from Campbell. It is also opposed by the United Food and Commercial Workers. The union, which represents 10,000 Campbell workers, says a boycott could harm its members. The American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations also opposes the boycott.

Response From Campbell

Migrant workers "have been put upon for years" in agriculture, said Raymond S. Page, Campbell's vice president for corporate relations.

But he said Campbell employed no migrant workers in Ohio. Rather, he said, the farm workers were employed by independent growers under contract to Campbell. He said Campbell had contracts with about 90 Ohio growers this year, and only seven growers had plans to hire migrants. He said there would be fewer than 50 migrants working for those growers.

"We have a conscience," Mr. Page said.

Mr. Velasquez said Campbell and other food processors have vigorously opposed his committee because they fear it could lead to increased unionization among migrant workers in the Middle West. He said there are 3,000 jobs on farms contracted to Campbell and that 65,000 migrant workers, who are soon to arrive in fields and orchards, are employed in agriculture in the Middle West.

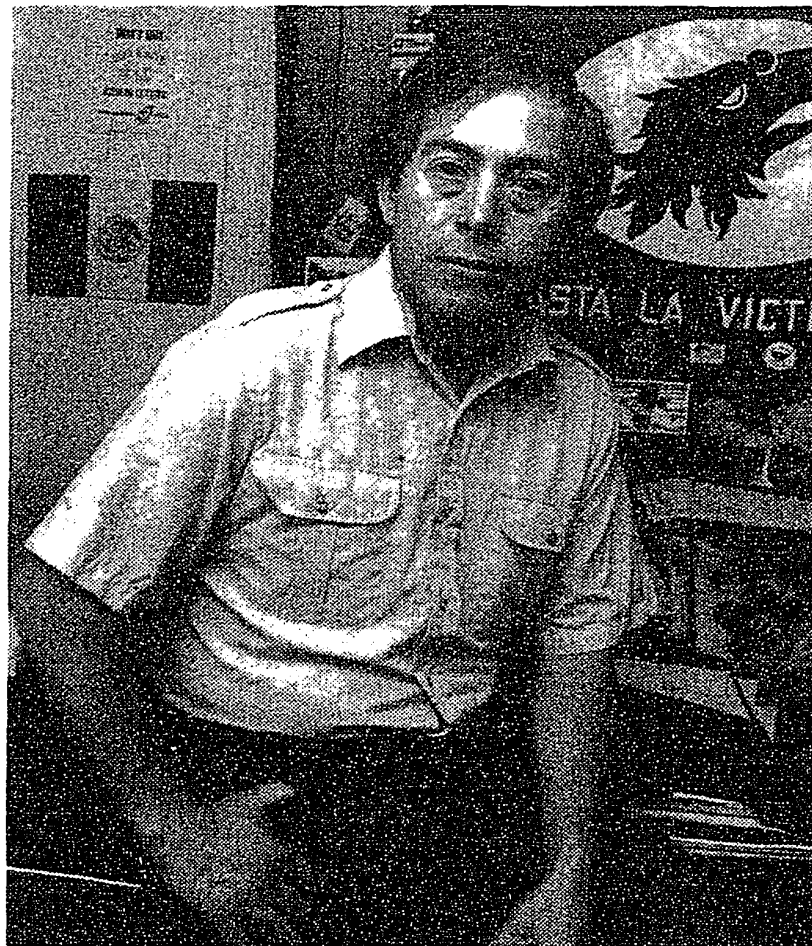
"They are trying to discredit us," Mr. Velasquez said of Campbell.

His group is loosely allied with the United Farm Workers of America, headed by Cesar Chavez, to whom Mr. Velasquez bears a physical similarity and seems to emulate.

Support From Churches

Last August, Mr. Velasquez led a 560-mile march, joined by Mr. Chavez, from Toledo to Campbell's headquarters in Camden, N.J., to draw attention to the boycott.

In December, the organization took advertisements in newspapers calling for support of the boycott, and in January Campbell replied with an advertisement saying its employment practices were excellent.



The New York Times
Baldemar Velasquez, head of the Farm Labor Organizing Committee, says he is not opposed to mechanization but would rather see machine jobs go to unionized workers, not to youngsters or relatives of the farmers.

The company acted, Mr. Page said in an interview in Camden, because "the charges were so unjustified."

A number of church and community groups and local union organizations support Mr. Velasquez. He has retained Ray Rogers, a New York labor activist who was instrumental in union activities a few years ago against the J. P. Stevens Company, the textile concern, and who has gained a reputation for militant campaigns against businesses.

Mr. Velasquez has promised increased pressure on Campbell this summer. He said his organization, which reported it had 3,500 members, including 1,500 dues payers, would add 2,000 members.

The group purchased a computer system to help its campaign with money received in January from a \$180,000 settlement of a lawsuit against the sheriff of Putnam County, Ohio. The suit stemmed from a strike on Labor Day 1979 by several dozen members of the organizing committee. A

lawyer for the group was assaulted and his skull was fractured.

There is no question that the organization, in large part, exists because of Mr. Velasquez.

He was born in Pharr, Tex., in the Rio Grande Valley, one of nine children. He came north as a child with his parents, who were farm workers, and worked in potato, sugar beet and strawberry fields. In 1954 his family settled in Putnam County, where his mother still lives. A graduate of Bluffton College in Ohio, he is an admirer of Mohandas K. Gandhi and the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

'He's a Charmer'

Mr. Velasquez, 37 years old, is paid \$630 a month and lives in Toledo with his wife and three children. Even Mr. Page, in part, has spoken admiringly of Mr. Velasquez. "He's a charmer," Mr. Page said.

Mr. Velasquez founded the organization in 1967, and from 1968 to 1970 it had 33 contracts with growers. The contracts were not renewed. Mr. Velas-

quez said his group realized it was the food processors, not the growers, who had the economic power, and the organizing committee realized it had to confront Campbell.

In 1978, the group called a strike of 2,000 farm workers against Campbell. Mr. Velasquez said the boycott was called in 1979 after the company refused to bargain.

He seeks a major modification of the crop contract system, under which processors like Campbell contract with growers to produce agricultural products, and improved pay and benefits.

"Our people need a fair day's wages," Mr. Velasquez said. Campbell said that migrant workers employed by growers under contract to the company make at least the minimum wage of \$3.35 an hour. The organizing committee said that some workers make less than that wage.

Contracts With Growers

Mr. Page said the farm workers' group was incapable of organizing workers or winning contracts with growers and wanted the company, in effect, to designate the group as a hiring hall for agriculture workers.

"He wants the Campbell Company to tell these growers that they have to hire these employees and they have to belong to that union," he said.

Mr. Page said Campbell was trying to improve migrant housing and day care for children.

"We're not saying that because they are not our employees, we have no responsibilities," Mr. Page said.

Mr. Page said the boycott has had little effect on Campbell, which, in the nine months ended April 29, earned \$149.6 million, an increase of 17 percent from a year before.

One result of the organizing committee's presence is that more machines are being used to cultivate tomatoes in Ohio and there are fewer jobs for farm workers.

Increased Mechanization

Campbell said that when the strike was called in 1978, 40 percent of Ohio tomato production was mechanized. Today nearly 90 percent is mechanized, according to the company.

Mr. Page said mechanization was necessary to compete. "Without mechanization there wouldn't be any tomatoes in Ohio today."

Mr. Velasquez said mechanization was one method food companies used to block organization of farm workers.

He said he was not opposed to mechanization because agricultural work is often drudgery. But he said jobs on machines should be given to farm workers, not, he says, as often has been the case, to high school and college students and to growers' family members.

He spoke optimistically of his summer plans. "When we started this campaign we didn't know how to do much more than pick tomatoes," he said. "Now we're learning how to run a boycott."