

Viva La Causa! Grape Boycott of South Bend

IVAN CASTILLO

Abstract

In 1965, the National Farm Workers Association voted to join the Filipino American grape workers on strike against the Delano-area grape growers that galvanized the Hispanic Rights movement for agricultural workers. Boycotts spread across the nation as local organizations such as the Saint Joseph County Grape Boycott Committee (SJCGBC) organized in support of the movement. Archives from Indiana University of Kokomo, and the University of Notre Dame, as well as interviews with local Latino leaders, reveal that area students raised awareness about the distribution of non-union grapes on local campuses and in local stores. Their work pushed the SJCGBC to lead a boycott of local Kroger stores. Local organizing, such as the Grape Boycott of South Bend, built national support for the farm workers movement.

Introduction:

In 1935, President Franklin Roosevelt signed the Wagner Act, as part of his "New Deal" policies. The Wagner Act established the National Labor Relations Board, giving all workers in the U.S. the right to bargain. However, the legislation excluded protection for domestics and farmworkers, most of whom were black women, Chicanos, Filipinos, and Mexicans. This injustice had not been corrected and continued to deprive individuals of basic civil rights. For a time in the late-1960s and early-1970s, the United Farm Workers (UFW), an organization of farm workers based out of Delano, California, successfully persuaded many Americans and farm workers alike to support their cause by boycotting grapes or lettuce in the attempt to force growers into negotiations. With a mission to write the wrongs that were committed, Cesar Chavez, a farmworker himself, led the national movement in a fight against the oppression against migrant workers. However, due to the easy accessibility of farm-owners to find replacement workers, the early strikes failed to have the impact on growers the organization had hoped. In the attempt to gain national attention and for the boycotts to be successful, the leaders of UFW needed support from beyond its own membership, traveling across the nation and informing others about the unfolding movement.

The movement quickly spread throughout the country to: Chicago, Detroit, New York, and Toronto. Crucial support also came from various farm advocacy groups that emerged throughout the U.S as a response to the wide mobilization of farm workers in California. For example, the Farm Labor Organizing Committee (FLOC), based out of Toledo, Ohio worked closely with Cesar Chavez, who gave keynote addresses at multiple FLOC meetings. Although less well known than FLOC, an advocacy group called the Farm Labor Aid Committee (FLAC) emerged in Indiana to address poor working conditions for Indiana farmworkers. The farm labor movement tapped into specific structures to build support, especially the Catholic Church. Drawing on their universities Catholic character, students from St. Mary's College and the University of Notre Dame gave moral support to the boycott efforts in Northern Indiana. Far removed from the center of the movement, contributions outside of the California area are often overlooked. However, the national movement would be nothing without the work of local organizers and communities throughout the country. Therefore, in order to understand the farm workers movement, we must understand local movements, like the Grape Boycott of South Bend, Indiana.

Notre Dame: Protest Like A Champion Today

The Catholic character of the University of Notre Dame in South Bend, Indiana made

the area ripe for boycott. Since the founding of the university by the Congregation of Holy Cross in 1842, the universities Catholic ideals have always been fundamental. Emphasizing on ideals such as the commitment to the community for the common good, students soon followed. David Cormier and Wayne Sule, two university graduate students, and William Richardson of Notre Dame's Moreau Seminary, participated in the public activity of the South Bend boycott movement. Working for the Saint Joseph County Grape Boycott Committee (SJCGBC), they picketed stores that continued to sell "scab" grapes: the name "scab" originating due to the chemicals consisting of pesticides used in the harvest. As a group, they supported Notre Dame students in their fight to remove non-union grapes from the school cafeteria.¹ A student group led by Steve Moriarty and Richardson, called for removal of the non-union grapes from the school cafeterias, centering their argument on principles that they believed would be well received by the catholic university due to the teachings of Christ. Urging food service director Bernard Mehall the students were, "disturbed to see a Christian University disregard human suffering and engage in activity which is not being tolerated by a large number of other Christian organizations throughout the world" and that, "by buying the grapes, [Mehall] supports the growers."² Bernard Mehall, responded by saying if he did not purchase the grapes, he would be making the decision for the students to support the cause, something he could not do. Mehall continued to state, "every individual has the right to buy grapes if he likes. I don't think I should project my feelings onto a group that might be contrary."³ Instead, Moriarty and Richardson would have to convince students to boycott the grapes in the dining halls. In their desire to endorse the boycott, Moriarty and Richardson decided to take matter above Mehall to the Council of the Vice Presidents of the University.

Reverend Theodore Hesburgh, the president of the University of Notre Dame, supported the grape boycott. In support of the boycott and Cesar Chavez, Reverend Hesburgh wrote to the Council of the Vice Presidents commenting, "as you know, this whole movement [the UFW boycotts] is led by a very exemplary Catholic, Mr. Cesar Chavez."⁴ He continued by saying, "personally, I do not think that it would be any great sacrifice for us to cease buying these grapes since we serve them rather frequently on campus. Our moral support would be much more important than forgoing the grapes." Reverend Hesburgh pushed the Council to side with the students because nothing could be done without the approval of the Council. The Council rejected the appeal. However, Reverend Hesburgh continued to support the boycott personally by stating in a letter to Richardson reading, "in the event of the majority vote [to continue the purchase of grapes], I shall give my personal support, although I realize I am not committing the University in doing so, and will make that clear."⁵ Hence, the boycott group was not successful in removing the grapes from the university cafeteria. Unsatisfied with the decision, Reverend Hesburgh kept his promise to endorse the boycott and included in the letter he wrote, "I would prefer that you just use my name...using the University title may seem to imply that I am committing the University community, which I cannot do." The students were not successful in removing grapes from the university, but the awareness they raised at Notre Dame soon spread to the entire South Bend community.⁶

1 Beverly Welsh, "Group Plans Push for Boycott," *South Bend Tribune*, May 2, 1969, pg. 28, evening edition.

2 Ibid

3 Ibid

4 Letter to Vice Presidential Group from Theodore Hesburgh, 28 October 1968, Gilberto Cárdenas Papers, Julian Samora Library at the Institute for Latino Studies, University of Notre Dame.

5 Letter to William Richardson from Theodore Hesburgh, 9 December 1968, Gilberto Cárdenas Papers, Julian Samora Library at the Institute for Latino Studies, University of Notre Dame.

6 "Notre Dame Grapes of Wrath: A Failure," pg. 6.; Letter to William Richardson from Theodore Hesburgh, 5 May 1969, Gilberto Cárdenas Papers, Julian Samora Library at the Institute for Latino Studies, University of Notre Dame.

Kroger: Right Store, Wrong Outcome

Outside of universities, organizations such as the SJCGB focused on corporations that were selling the products that Chavez called on Americans to boycott. The largest struggle the SJCGB faced was in 1969 against Kroger stores, a Cincinnati-based grocery chain. At an April conference held in Chicago, the SJCGB and other Midwest committees concluded that the best means to force grocery chains to refuse to sell "scab" grapes was to boycott the main grocery stores. Mirroring the strategies used by the UFW, the SJCGB would focus on A&P and Kroger, two of the most visible grape grocery stores in South Bend, believing that if they fell to the union's demands then the rest would follow. The boycotters in Chicago and Detroit succeeded in removing scab grapes from the city, but SJCGB was concerned that distributors would send those non-union grapes to cities through Northern Indiana, stating that, "since Chicago and Detroit are not accepting them, it is expected that they will be dumped on South Bend." This made the South Bend boycotts critical to the success of the boycotts in the Midwest.⁷

Before boycotting the stores, Cesar Chavez wrote to Kroger asking for their compliance and structured his argument along the lines of health concerns for the migrant workers. He wrote to Kroger stating that they "should be as concerned as are our workers in the vineyards about the health and safety of your customers and would not want to sell grapes that are contaminated and poisoned."⁸ The California Farm Bureau had already called for an end to the use of DDT and other chemicals due to their negative effects on health and the environment. Chavez concluded his letter to Kroger by stating, "please be advised that this letter serves as our official notification to your company regarding these most serious matters; now we must go to your customers to advise and warn them of the dangers to their health." Chavez hoped the president of Kroger would stop selling the scab grapes before a boycott was necessary, but the Kroger president instead took a stance of neutrality. The company explained its policy in a memo that was sent out to managers in all areas on May 8 1969:

Our company's position remains the same...pursue a middle-of-the-road course supporting neither the Grape Growers' nor the United Farm Workers' position...It is our plan at this point that when grapes come into season, we will actively promote and advertise them.⁹

The SJCGB did not see this as a neutral stance, arguing that, "Kroger stores aid the growers by selling their scab grapes which have been shown in laboratory tests to contain DDT residues."¹⁰ The committee preferred to meet with Kroger representatives before starting to boycott the store. However, the company refused to conduct a meeting stating, "there is no point...The only way is to let the grapes rot on the shelves, or that a majority of consumers tell us to take them off."¹¹ These words and actions were not enough for the SJCGB, which continued to argue that, "once the grocer buys from the grower, the harm is done. The grower has his money and will continue to break the farmworkers strike." Therefore, the committee decided to launch a boycott of Kroger stores.

In May, the SJCGB led a campaign throughout South Bend and Mishawaka designed to, "inform local residents of current efforts to boycott California and Arizona table grapes in local stores."¹² A&P stores still remained a target, but the committee focused more of its

7 Holy Cross Bulletin, 11 May 1969, IUK archive, box #7 Midwest Boycott Activity.

8 Letter to Jacob E. Davis from César Chávez, 2 June 1969, IUK archive, box #7 Grape Boycott.

9 Kroger is a Strike Breaker, 8 May 1969, Gilberto Cárdenas Papers, Julian Samora Library at the Institute for Latino Studies, University of Notre Dame

10 Ibid

11 SJCGB News Release, 29 May 1969, Gilberto Cárdenas Papers, Julian Samora Library at the Institute for Latino Studies, University of Notre Dame

12 Beverly Welsh, "Group Plans Push for Boycott," *South Bend Tribune*, May 2, 1969, pg. 28, evening edition.

efforts on Kroger since it had the largest presence in the Midwest. In an effort to put pressure on Kroger, the committee began a two-week campaign of picketing the stores. A press release from the SJCGBBC stated, "our task during these 2 weeks will be to spread the new information to area consumers regarding the pesticide poisoning of the farm workers and the danger to grape buyers..."¹³ Nevertheless, the committee also experienced pushback from the community in local newspapers. A resident of South Bend wrote to the *South Bend Tribune* concerned about the disturbance the SJCGBBC caused while she and others shopped. She argued, "the grape pickers are not poor abused migrants, but are actually community people of that area."¹⁴ She continued to attack the United Farm Workers (UFW) by arguing that, "the greediness of the Farm Workers Union to obtaining dues to which they are not entitled is causing this illegal strike. We the buyers of the grapes would be assessed additional monies to support union leaders for doing absolutely nothing." Her anger continued and bitterly denounced the local boycotters as well, writing,

If the local pickets would take their hungry little egos and their infantile desire to be noticed down to some of our local agencies that are actually working with the migrants, they would be doing some concrete good...It is a poor strike that depends upon the easily manipulated and gullible students...to run its picket lines for them. Have these students actually worked on the grape farms, do they know first hand that the propaganda they are fed is actually so?¹⁵

Not only were some residents against what was occurring in cities such as South Bend, but the same resident declared that she would, "double [her] purchase of grapes and...insists that she have the full use of the public sidewalk to load her groceries as well as to walk on without interference."¹⁶ This criticism shows just how many barriers the SJCGBBC faced to convincing Kroger to stop supporting the Grape Growers.

The boycott against the Kroger Company continued despite the negative reactions of many in the community. The committee had succeeded in bringing the national A&P stores to its side, stating, that the chain would, "not sell scab-harvested table grapes from Arizona and California until the growers meet with the farm growers." This meant the committee could put all of its resources towards targeting the Kroger Company. Depicting Kroger as a racist organization, the University of Notre Dame Coalition for Political Action described the racist tendencies of the chain, citing that, "Kroger stores are found in the Midwest, east of the Mississippi and down into the South. As one might expect of a firm with heavy investments in Southern markets, Kroger is less than sympathetic to the aspirations of America's black and brown minorities."¹⁷ The SJCGBBC used this information in its campaign to appeal to racially conscious individuals, and to affirm individuals who refused to shop at the grocery chain. In September 27, 1969, protestors picketed the Kroger store in South Bend with signs reading, "Support Farm Workers, Don't Eat Scab Grapes," "Halt Pesticide Poisoning of Farm Workers."¹⁸ Many of the pickers who appeared at the Kroger stores at the Town & County Shopping Center and on In. 23 were students from the University of Notre Dame and St. Mary's College. A few shoppers ate grapes as they left the store to show their disapproval of the boycott. Two youths stood on the sidewalk eating grapes and talking to the picketers, but no serious friction developed between the protestors nor shoppers or store personnel as the picketers were forced to leave the area under the threat of facing trespassing charges. The com-

13 Letter to Boycotadores from SJCGBBC, 7 July 1969, IUK archive, box #7 Midwest Boycott Activity.

14 Mrs. G. S. of Mishawaka, "Grape Buyer," *South Bend Tribune*, October 6, 1969, pg. 6.

15 Ibid

16 Ibid

17 Fact Sheet on the Kroger Company by the Notre Dame Coalition for Political Action, unknown date, IUK archive, box #7 Midwest Boycott Activity; Letter to the *Fort Wayne News-Sentinel* from Fred Heredia, July 16, 1970, IUK archive, box #7 Midwest Boycott Activity.

18 Paul Lamirand, "Kroger Stores Are Picketed," *South Bend Tribune*, September 27, 1969.

mittee responded by stating, "Kroger has declined to join A&P in supporting the table grape boycott of the United Farm Workers," in the attempt to convince consumers to shop at A&P who had sided with the UFW and not at Kroger.¹⁹

On August 29, the Midwest boycotters held a meeting in Dayton, Ohio at the request of Cesar Chavez. The meeting was designed to refocus on the strategies that were used to put pressure on Kroger stores. The SBCGBC commented, "the result has been that the majority of the stores in the Midwest are still selling scab grapes. It was therefore decided that each city should expand the boycott to include all stores..."²⁰ By February 1970, the committee grew concerned over the effectiveness of the efforts in the Midwest regarding the grape boycotts. As a response, the committee released a report on February 28, 1970 urging their supporters to not lose their faith and to not allow their efforts to be in vain. Statistics showed that grape shipments were running 30% behind from the numbers shown in the previous year. The committee commented, "the traditional walls around Los Angeles and San Francisco are starting to show their cracks. In the month ending October 23, San Francisco received 111 carlots of grapes, compared to 144 in 1968, a decrease of 23%. Los Angeles received 261 carlots compared to 393 in the month ending Oct. 23, 1968."²¹ The movement saw progress in their main objectives. On July 29, 1970, twenty-six Delano growers signed contracts with the UFW. Soon after, the SJCGB and the Fort Wayne Grape Boycott Committee (FWGBC) formed a coalition and became the Farm Labor Aid Committee (FLAC) in the summer of 1970 in order to continue their efforts in the boycott. The group argued, "as soon as union grapes hit eastern markets early last month, their sales boomed. Other growers in Delano...saw the writing on the wall...since then news of additional contracts come in almost daily."²² Nevertheless, FLAC continued its pressure on shops that went against their causes by asking supporters to only shop at stores that provide the UFW grapes.

Kroger stood strong in its stance of neutrality. The UFW victories with K-mart, A&P, and Jewel stores who stopped selling non-union grapes revitalized the campaign against Kroger. FLAC wrote, "for those who remember last summer with Kroger, this is your big chance. For those who missed last summer with Kroger, this may be your last chance!"²³ FLAC took a different approach this time and attacked Kroger by picketing the warehouse and store in Fort Wayne, Indiana. Kroger had shut down its warehouse in Chicago and now relied on the one stationed in Fort Wayne. Approximately 100 Mexican-Americans, joined by local AFL-CIO members, marched from Memorial Park in Fort Wayne to Washington Boulevard and Broadway Street. Despite these efforts, Kroger leaders never changed their stance.

The Grape Boycott as a whole had a positive effect on the South Bend community. In an interview with Ricardo Parra, executive director of the Midwest Council of La Raza in 1970, comments, "people were becoming more aware of it [farm workers movement] everyday and what was going on. It was necessary that a spotlight be put on this [farm workers movement]".²⁴ Ricardo Parra further comments, "there was a feeling. This was a certain time, a special time". Unlike California, South Bend, IN did not have the population or the recognition to put the issue on the national stage. Hence, the struggles and grievances of California Grape growers were now present in the Hoosier state, but organizations such as the SBCGBC and local education institutes and universities, along with its citizens, addressed the issue and pressed for change.

19 Ibid

20 El Boycoteador, 30 October 1969, IUK archive, box #7 Midwest Boycott Activity.

21 El Campesino (FLAC newsletter), 10 July 1970, IUK archive, box #7 Midwest Boycott Activity.

22 Ibid

23 El Campesino, 4 August 1970, IUK archive, box #7 Midwest Boycott Activity; "March Protests Non-Union Grapes," Fort Wayne Journal-Gazette, 9 August 1970, pg. 22a.

24 Ricardo Parra. Director of Midwest Council of La Raza. Interview

Cesar Chavez: The Legacy Left Behind

Despite the failure to change the stance of Kroger, leaders such as Cesar Chavez and Dolores Huerta gave hope to the dream of supporting unprivileged groups in U.S. Society. For some local residents, by the time the farm workers movement that Cesar Chavez and many others were fighting reached the Midwest its mantle was broader than farmworkers alone, bigger than the symbolic black eagle seen all over UFW flags. Ramon Rodriguez moved to South Bend in 1950 and was president of Local No. 5 of the United Auto Workers, but worked on onion and peppermint fields for 60 cents an hour. Rodriguez commented, "We were doing it for Cesar Chavez," and then continued to say, "but maybe we were doing it for ourselves too."²⁵ In November 9, 1984 Cesar Chavez addressed the Commonwealth Club of California sharing his words in his dream and stating, "Like the other immigrant groups, the day will come when we win the economic and political rewards which are in keeping with our numbers in society. The day will come when the politicians do the right thing by our people out of political necessity and not out of charity or idealism."²⁶

Approximately 47 years have passed since Cesar Chavez galvanized the Hispanic Rights movement by sacrificing his health and engaging in his first of many hunger strikes. Hurdles remain, but because of the work of communities throughout the country like South Bend, the government has since passed legislation providing limited protection for farm workers. The era and the bravery of many leaders still inspire the people who lived it and will continue to inspire future leaders. The cause lives on through them.

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25 Martin DeAgostino, "Battle For Rights in '70s Continues to Shape Local Hispanic Community," *South Bend Tribune*, April 25, 1999. Pg. 1-6.

26 1984 Cesar Chavez Address to the Commonwealth Club of California