

1968?

PROCEEDINGS OF THE
TWENTY-SECOND GENERAL CONVENTION
OF THE
AMALGATED MEAT CUTTERS
AND BUTCHER WORKMEN
OF NORTH AMERICA, AFL-CIO

SPEECH BY
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ORGANIZING COMMITTEE

Thank you very much Thank you, Brother Gorman, Brother Lloyd,
officers, delegates, members and friends. Thank you very, very much

I have a rule when I speak that I do not like to speak very long,
because I feel that anything that has to be said can be said in a
very few words, and in a very few minutes. I think today I am going
to break this rule because I am very anxious for the members of this
great organization to know some of the details of the things that are
going through, some of the hopes and aspirations, and also some of the
brutalities, some of the injustices that are being committed against a
group of American workers who are trying very desperately, under all
sorts of disadvantages, to build a union

We heard that both your organization and the Packinghouse Workers
have voted to merge, and I want to let you know that we are happy that
two great friends, our great friends, are now united I think it is
a splendid thing

I would like to give you a brief idea of what we mean when we say
"agriculture" when we speak of farmworkers and growers Many times
in the large cities of our country many people who are not familiar
with agriculture keep thinking of agriculture in the same terms that
we are accustomed to think of it, as some years back. Many of us think
that agriculture is a family farmer plowing a small field of land and
desperately trying to make a living. This is not so in California
At least this is not so with those that are really opposing us.

It is so large, they have a new name for themselves. They call
themselves "agribusiness "

It is so powerful that it is ^{an} over five billion dollar industry in
California It is the largest industry, larger than aircraft and larger
than any other industry It accounts for one out of every three jobs
in California--so big and so powerful that they own many of the politicians
and even many of the judges together with the land.

They have also owned the workers for many years. Almost three years ago a group of workers said, 'We're no longer going to be owned by these men and we're going to strike to try and build a union like all of American workers have built unions, and we do not want any more, any less, we just want to be treated fairly and equally and we want most of all to be able to have some say-so over our working conditions and our wages.'

So we started out with the hope of building a union.

You see, we thought that when we started out to strike that we were striking the employers, but that is not the case in agriculture today in rural America, in California, Texas, and Florida. When you strike the employer, you are striking not only the employer, you are striking the city and county government, the courts, and yes, in many cases you are striking even the churches. It's an immediate response reaction to our strike that we have all of these other forces that we couldn't even dream would be against us. Who would be against unionism in this day and age in our country? We found that they were, the school boards, the city council, the county board of supervisors--you name it.

And so we soon found that it is really jungle, really a jungle. There are no laws or procedures, there is nowhere we can go. If a worker gets fired because he belongs to the Union, there isn't a thing we can do. If a worker gets blackballed for being in the union there isn't anything we can do. And in many cases workers get harrassed and beaten in the picket line. We really can't go any place.

Not only that, but the most effective strikebreaking has not come from the employers. The most effective strike breaking tactics have come from the government, it's come from the court, from the local police, from the local courts. That's where it is coming from. And against this kind of opposition we have to try to build a union.

As you know, we don't have the protection of the National Labor Relations Act. We could have 100 per cent of the workers wanting a union. In some case we have taken 100 per cent signed cards to the Board. We go to the Board and we say that we want an election and they tell us, 'You can't, you're out of our jurisdiction.' But don't let the employers go to the Board complaining that we are picketing, that we are boycotting somewhere a thousand or two thousand miles from Delano, and don't think that the Board will not come down and use the same lawyer that cannot be used to protect us to harass us and bring charges against us for secondary boycotting and picketing. That's one of the most ridiculous things I've ever heard.

We had a good example in Coachella Valley. When we went there about a month and a half ago after two years of solid work with the workers, getting them organized and having a vast percentage of them in favor of not only voting for the union but of walking out on strike, we went there and on the 17th of last month we called a strike against the grape growers. And out of a possible, at the very most 2,000 workers, over 1700 walked out of the fields. Normally and ordinarily this would be enough to stop production and to get the growers on the table.

But not in our case. The employers went to a federal judge in Los Angeles and got an injunction against the Department of Justice and against the Immigration Service prohibiting the Immigration Service from enforcing the regulation on "green cards," the regulation being that wherever a strike is certified in agriculture, no green carder-- this is an immigrant that comes across from Mexico--can be permitted to work. But we had them for six days. They got the injunction and they brought many in, they brought 3,000 of them.

You see, once the pressure is on, they have so much power. We know that many of these decisions the courts make in California dealing with the strike are not legal decisions. We will win this appeal, and we will win most of them, but it doesn't do any good because by the time we win them the crop has been picked and we have had it. These are straight political decisions that are being made against us.

The State government, Governor Reagan, has been using the Department of Employment to break our strike. They don't recognize any of our strikes at this point and the reason that they don't recognize them, that the State doesn't recognize them, is that this gives them the right then to recruit through the placement service strike breakers to be sent in to break the strike. And they are doing that. We have had many problems with Governor Reagan, and there is a lot of talk going on that he is moving out of California. But we say even though he is very bad, we wouldn't wish him on any of you.

So the whole question of collective bargaining is really in this jungle, only if we have the strength to do it. And the growers think they own everyone and every thing in this land. There is only one major fault in this, and that is that they don't own the American labor movement, and this is the only one that is going to help us come through.

We get some of the most ridiculous injunctions against us. In the Coachella strike a young priest out of Notre Dame came to me and helped us. He was in the picket line. There were 24 men and women. He was taken from the picket line inside the field and was beaten up with 24 men and women. The next day we got an injunction. But the same day, one of our guys was hit with a grape stake -- something like a two-by-four-- they busted his arm. Six of our guys were run over by cars. This all happened in one day. What happened the following day? We can't get the sheriff to make an arrest. We get handed an injunction, that's what we get. And it restricts us to one man per entrance. Some of these entrances sometimes are as far as a quarter of a mile from one to the other. I am sure that you wouldn't do it, and we wouldn't do it. We wouldn't place one man at three o'clock in the morning or 3:30 or four o'clock in the morning, one man with all the violence going on, a half mile apart. And so we decided to pull the picket line.

So what I am saying in effect, those injunctions they are bringing against us are really no picketing injunctions.

There is no doubt that the industry is well organized and well financed. There is no doubt that the grape strike has become to them not a question of whether we are going to have a union in the grape industry, not a question of whether there is going to be a union in agriculture. I am convinced, we are convinced that they are making every effort they can to break the union, to break the union

I am also convinced that if we don't get the help we need it is very possible they will succeed in doing this. They have been doing it for 60 years, for 60 years. And with all of these handicaps that we have there is one thing that we have which they don't have, there is one thing that we have they can't take away from us, and that is the spirit of the people. The farm workers want a union. They're going to do anything and everything that is legal and moral to get a union. They are going to suffer, they are going to give up their lives, they're going to give up everything that they already have because you see, they won't really lose anything. They have nothing to lose. And so a union to them is the only way, the only way out.

There is some talk in some quarters about the labor movement being fat. We are new in the labor movement. Let me tell you something, with myself and with anyone who has been on strike with the farm workers you could not prove it by us, because we have gotten all kinds of help from the labor movement. If it weren't for the labor movement we wouldn't be striking today. We would not be here today. (Applause)

So you start from the position of a community organizer, which I was, a social worker, if you want to call it that, becoming a labor leader, and not understanding this kind of thinking, to a position where every time now that they say this I react to it out of pure experience.

With all of the handicaps that we have had, the last three years we have been able to write 12 contracts, 12 contracts with the biggest wine growers, grape growers for wine, in the industry. They are good contracts. (Applause) They are good contracts. We have the things that are necessary to build a strong union: a union shop and hiring hall, dues checkoff, grievance procedure, wages -- in one case we have increased the wages 100 per cent--some paid holidays, some vacations, and the beginning of a health and welfare fund.

I am sure as I stand here today that if we were willing to sell out the people, the workers, I could walk up into the Growers Association right this minute and get maybe 40 contracts. We are not going to do that. (Applause)

The growers are continually complaining against the union They find many faults with us.

Really it is not a question of money, because we are not asking that much money from them. We know they can do it. All of the information we have from our research proves to us they can very well afford what we are asking. That is not the question. The real basic question, the real gut issue, is that they don't want to recognize the union They don't want to let go of those people that they have had under their thumbs for so long This is the real question The real question is not the increase in wages, not what we are asking They have had the people like a faucet, they can turn it off and on will This is what they don't want to let go of. These are the things that they don't want to let go of, the immense power that they have over these human lives

It is always very dangerous to single out people for thanks and I know that there are many of you who have helped us, many of you who have been very warm to us all over the country At the risk of offending some of you, there are a few men in your organization that I must say something about

President Lloyd has been very helpful to us, very considerate Brother Gorman has been an invaluable help to us. We have come to him many requests and he has never said no. His time and his effort and his support are very, very much appreciated and very much needed.

Leon Schacter has been a close friend of us for some years now.

Brother Pollock, Sam Pollock, in our boycott against another company was very instrumental in bringing us some very good support and very good help We have know him for almost three years He even walked with us on our march to Sacramento almost two and a half years ago.

Brother Kelly in Chicago has helped us, and Franklin Garcia, who walked the picket lines and knows the horrors and the brutality of the Texas Rangers who is here with you, is a great friend of the union.

Brother J. J. Rodriguez, whom I have known for almost 20 years, has been very helpful to us in Los Angeles.

Then there is a man that we have not known too long but who sort of took us in when we came to the big city of New York. When we sent in a group of people who had never been to anything bigger than their own towns in the country, who went to New York and who just couldn't conquer the fear of being in New York City, let alone begin to do the boycotting, this man took us in, more than just on a trade union relationship, but a real brother to us, and we give him very special thanks for the things that he has done for us, Irving Stern.

Another man in the labor movement that has been with us constantly and has been so much help to us, he is here with me. He is from the National AFL-CIO, Bill Kirched who has been of much, much help to us.

We have done, I think, everything that we can, and we will continue to do everything we can to build a union. We are not going to stoop down to the level of the opposition. We are not going to use violence, regardless of what happens. But I think that even more important than building a union, and even more important, I think, whatever the gains that we have made, one thing that has to be said very clearly, you see, in America today we are going through a great change. The poor all over the country are getting up and demanding things, demanding justice. And as we struggle to build a union out poor workers, and the Negroes struggle to bring about the rights that they have as poor Negroes, there is the central question that is being asked all over the land, and that is how we can we struggle for justice, how can we continue to struggle in our case non-violently? How can we continue to do the things that we know we have the right to do, not asking that they be given to us on a silver platter, but just giving us fair play, the protection of the law of the land so that we can carry on our work? How can we do this in the face of so many contradictions?

How can we continue to make people have faith in our government and in our land when the patent disregard for the law is shown every time that we move to do something? How can we interpret to the poor that a judge in Los Angeles makes strictly a political decision, not a legal decision, a political decision to break our strike in Coachella? How can we interpret to the people when the Department of Justice, the Immigration Service, permits 'wet backs' and green card workers to come in and break the strike.

How can we explain these injustices by those who should be upholding justice? This is a question more important for our future as a country, more important than whether we build a union or not.

We are doing everything that we can, and we need, then, your help, desperately. The season has started and it will be over in two and a half months. If we don't do it now, we have to wait another year.

I think as it is we have waited too long. Not three years of striking, but we have waited for over 50 years. The history of labor organizing in the fields is a long one, a bloody one, and one of one defeat after another. Some day we hope that his history will be written, will be put in a book form, and if we are successful, we are going to do that.

The thing that is very hard to understand is, how can it be possible? How can it be possible in our land, so rich and so affluent, how can it be possible for these people who produce food to not have enough food for themselves? This is very, very, difficult to understand.

Again I want to thank you for having me here. We are going to be sending many, many, people all over the land asking your help. We don't know who many of you are. We do know that you belong to this great organization, and we are going to seek your help. Thank you very much.