

During the winter and spring of this year, J. Kenneth Weller contracted between 300 and 500 field workers in Texas and Florida to come to the Crosswell area to pick pickles. The contract promised work from July 25th to September 15th at \$1.30 per hour. Since the state minimum wage for farm workers was raised on July 1st from \$1.30 to \$1.45 per hour, Weller switched from the hourly rate to the piece rate after the workers were one or two days in the fields. He paid them 47 1/2 cents per bucket. The state law requires that he pay this amount for 5 gallon buckets, but the workers claim that they can show that the buckets they had to fill are mostly 6 1/2 gallons. They also point out that Weller refuses to pay them for the large relish pickles, even though the field-man insists that they pick them and put them in the buckets.

SOUR PICKLES IN MICHIGAN

When Weller violated the contract he had with his workers by switching from hourly to piece rate, 80 workers went to Mr. Weller to demand that he pay them the agreed hourly wage. He refused to discuss it with them.

When they returned the next morning, he told them to either pick by piece rate or to leave.

Almost all of the workers returned to work at the piece rate because they could not afford to leave and look for other work. The next day some 300 workers were told that the pickle harvest was finished! They were told to look for work elsewhere!

The workers were shocked! How could the 6 or 7 week pickle

season be finished in

2 1/2 days?

Since Weller and his field

men did not tell the workers why they were fired, they could only guess. This was the first time in 6 to 8 years that some of the workers had been coming to Michigan to work for Weller that they could recall the workers trying to talk to Weller about his failure to abide by his contract. It seemed to his workers that he wanted slaves, or no workers at all. When they called him on his breach of contract, they were fired without a word of explanation.

Since the majority of the workers had signed authorization cards designating the United Farm Workers Organizing Committee, AFL-CIO, as their sole bargaining agent, the workers made union recognition their first demand when they met with Weller on Tuesday, August 4th at 4:45 p.m. Mr. Weller said that he would have to consult with his legal counsel before agreeing to that, so the worker representatives from each of the labor camps said that they would wait until he did so. In a few minutes he returned saying that his lawyer was in a meeting and could not be reached, so he suggested that they return two days later to discuss the matter. The workers representatives again decided to wait right there until he could be reached. Mr. Weller said it was getting late to reach a lawyer. When we suggested that he call or visit him at home, he told us that he did not have his phone number or address. We insisted that we would wait in his office even if it took him until morning to get in touch with him. (The police later happened to mention that the lawyer is Ken Weller's brother!)

Mr. Weller left and called the police. They told the men that they were trespassing on private property and would be arrested. They responded that they were employees of the Weller Company, and that they were there to discuss a matter of breach of contract and other legitimate matters with their employer. They said that if the police wished to arrest them for that, they were willing to go to jail. They added that they were sure that the jail would be more comfortable than their camp shacks. The police said they had no intention of making the workers lose what they had coming to them.

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