

RACISM IN AGRICULTURE

By Phillip Veracruz

The objective of the Delano Grape Strike was primarily economic. The meager request was but ten little red pennies. When you look at a penny you see the words "Liberty", "In God We Trust", and the Latin words connoting unity and diversity. You also see the engraving of the Great Emancipator. These few pennies were just a morsel on the rich growers' table, but the system has nurtured his greedy ambitions to unbelievable proportions....

Farm workers' children love pennies. As they grow up they begin to realize it takes more than pennies to live, to get an adequate education and survive.

In their confusion they fight among one another for the morsels that fall from the master's table. They mistake one another for the enemy. But recently, they have seen a way out of this chaos. They have begun to think together and re-evaluate their direction for coordinated action. Their spirit demands freedom, social justice, economic progress and independent political judgment and action.

We are the children of yesterday, cursed by poverty and oppression. Our inspiration comes from the lives and example of great men such as Lincoln, Gandhi, the Kennedys, King, and many others. Dim hope flares up with the unprecedented encouragement and involvement of millions of sympathizers and generous supporters who sacrificed to make life more pleasant, decent and enjoyable for others. It is just a natural response that we band ourselves together in a Farm Workers Union for mutual benefits and protection.

The local grape growers here in Delano are like the greedy dog with a big bone in his mouth. While crossing a stream he sees his shadow and tries to grab the other dog's. He drops his own bone in the process. This is what is happening in the grape strike. Growers are losing their market. Their grapes are rotting in cold storages and many of them no longer have credit with the banks.

Meanwhile, the poor workers sweat and suffer to produce the boss's wealth but are denied even a minimal wage for subsistence. They get sick from harmful pesticides and frequently become victims of malnutrition, which is a fancy word for slow starvation.

And so we fight on because even though we are the much despised and hated minorities, the blacks, the browns; we are at the same time indispensable as the labor force in the multi-billion dollar industry which is now called Agribusiness. We are tolerated for convenience if we observe the ugly rules of color lines. We are permitted to cross them to work or spend our money, but not to live. We must not be allowed to dilute the super-race.

The railroad tracks in Delano are the color line. In the eastside the whites live and enjoy their sense of superiority. Though among them one is poor and ignorant, he hates Mexicans because they compete for jobs and are paid less. Besides in the cowboy movies he learned that a wild Mexican can throw a knife at his back. He believes that it would be much better and safer if there were no Mexicans at all.

Anglos in the eastside of Delano don't like blacks either. After all, black ancestors were brought here in chains to work in the cotton fields of the south, while theirs came from civilized Europe where the King of France had his head chopped off, where Napoleon butchered thousands of people and where Hitler gassed six million Jews. Perhaps many of them believe that Lincoln made a mistake of freeing the slaves because the kind act gave them hope. They feel that blacks are "too militant and cannot be trusted in dark alleys." They resent the long-haired radicals who have the guts to say that the American Dream is a nightmare.

In their ranches, the growers maintain segregation. Anglo,

Filipinos, Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, Japanese, Arabs, etc., have their own respective groups with their bunk houses and kitchens. Each group is completely a stranger to the other even if both worked for the company for years. The sinister idea is to keep workers divided. When one group forms a union and strikes for recognition and collective bargaining, the others scab on their fellow-workers. So, exploitation goes on for big profits and prosperity in the agricultural industry and it is never shared by the workers.

People who are segregated by race, nationality or language from others have no mutual understanding nor trust. Isolation fosters suspicions, fear and racial hatred. Thus discussion, agreement and unity among workers is impossible to achieve for the ultimate goal of unionization. On the other hand, the growers become richer, more powerful and ruthless under the shield and influence of the farm bureau federations.

In the farm workers union, all races meet and join together to achieve an ideal—mutual understanding, sincere cooperation and true cooperative cooperation and true brotherhood. The farm workers movement in Delano is the closest approximation of the ideal that I have seen in many years. My hope is that our unity and brotherhood will be permanent.

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