AMERICAN CATHOLICISM AND FARM LABOR ACTIVISM: THE FARM LABOR AID COMMITTEE OF INDIANA AS A CASE STUDY

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Abstract

While scholars have studied the United Farm Workers (UFW) in California from many angles, boycott activity outside of California is neglected in these studies. This thesis seeks to reorient the current literature on the UFW to the activity of outside supporters of the farm worker’s struggles in California. Specifically, this thesis investigates the actions of one advocacy group in Northern Indiana, the Farm Labor Aid Committee (FLAC), that moved to bolster boycott support in the Midwestern state in support of the UFW.

By studying this group, one sees the connection between a national movement and its networks of local support. This thesis argues that the Catholic Church proved crucial for mobilizing supporters in Northern Indiana to the causes of migrant workers in California. Inspired by liberation theology, and the UFW’s use of Catholic iconography, many Catholic Church members felt compelled to dedicate their time to publicly demonstrating their support for the UFW and its boycott efforts.

FLAC remained active throughout the late-1960s and early-1970s in supporting the activity of the national boycott. In the early years of the committee, the leadership focused solely on supporting the actions of the UFW and publicizing the activity of the union in Indiana. But as the movement progressed in the 1970s, FLAC moved to support an expansion of the UFW and farm labor organizing into Indiana. Ultimately, FLAC failed to contribute to any unionization in Indiana, but the activity of the small committee points to the strength of Catholicism in uniting a racially diverse group designed to support a union far removed from its home state. By providing networks of communication and unifying imagery with Catholic iconography, white Catholic students in South Bend, Indiana felt compelled to support largely Mexican-American migrant farm workers in California.
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INTRODUCTION

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 to support their cause by boycotting grapes or lettuce to force growers to the negotiating table. The UFW’s decision to boycott proved to be a turning point in the actions of the union. Earlier strikes did not have the impact on growers that the organization had hoped because of the relative ease with which growers could find replacement workers. In order to gain national attention, and traction at the negotiating table, the leadership of the UFW had to bring others into the struggle. The boycott fulfilled this need. But in order for the boycott to be successful, the union needed support from beyond its own membership.

Crucial support came from the various farm labor unions or advocacy groups that emerged throughout the United States as a direct response to the widely publicized mobilization of farm workers in California. The Farm Labor Organizing Committee (FLOC), based out of Toledo, Ohio, was one of these groups. César Chávez, head of the UFW, gave the keynote address in FLOC’s meetings on multiple occasions.¹ The Obreros Unidos (OU) in Wisconsin was another organization that emerged within the formative years of the UFW. A less well-known advocacy group also grew out of this heightened awareness of the farm labor issue:

Indiana’s Farm Labor Aid Committee (FLAC). These groups provided consistent support for the boycott strategy that the UFW employed, and advanced the cause in their respective regions.\textsuperscript{2}

The early successes of the UFW’s boycotts also reflected the larger social and political environment of the United States during the 1960s. In this decade, Americans experienced an increased consciousness about civil rights. Leaders such as Martin Luther King, Jr. brought to the attention of U.S. citizens a message of equal rights for African Americans. The concomitant women’s movement of this decade introduced influential feminists such as Betty Friedan and Ella Baker. When social justice became a very prominent issue throughout the nation, the UFW found more willingness to accept its grievances than farm organizations had experienced before. Holding to the spirit of social reform, the UFW showed the nation again that a traditionally underprivileged group could surmount powerful and recalcitrant oppositional forces.\textsuperscript{3}

While the UFW undoubtedly benefited from the general social climate of the United States in the late-1960s and early-1970s, the farm labor movement tapped into specific national structures of reform, namely the Catholic Church. The union drew the attention of Catholic Church members by displaying its faith in Catholic symbolism, such as icons of the Virgin Mary and conducting pilgrimages and fasts. This garnered the attention of Catholic activists who bolstered the union’s grape and lettuce boycotts. As a case study for this national phenomenon, this thesis examines how sympathetic Notre Dame students spawned the boycott efforts in Northern Indiana and led the way for the creation of FLAC. As part of their efforts, FLAC members advocated for migrant workers within the Hoosier state in hopes of spreading UFW


unionization into the Midwest. As the case of FLAC in Indiana suggests, socially conscious Catholic and Christian supporters of the union aided in the construction of the UFW’s national campaign. Before discussing the details of the thesis, however, a review of the literature is necessary to situate the thesis historiographically.

The early literature on the farm labor movement is shaded by its proximity to the politics of the era. Authors close to the influence of César Chávez and the UFW wrote such works as *Huelga* by Eugene Nelson, *Sal Si Puedes* by Peter Matthiessen, *So Shall Ye Reap* by Joan London and Henry Anderson, *Forty Acres* by Mark Day, *Long Road to Delano* by Sam Kushner, and *Chavez and the Farm Workers* by Ronald B. Taylor. They typically focused upon the exceptional actions of Chávez and the UFW’s co-founder Dolores Huerta. They praised the actions of the farm workers, and vilified the farmer and agribusiness. Despite this bias, there is invaluable information within these works that typify the progress of the UFW, contributing excellent interviews to the overall literature. These works were also groundbreaking in bringing forth information on the motives behind the tactics of Chávez and the United Farm Workers. Jacques E. Levy’s *César Chávez: Autobiography of La Causa* is another important example. As Chávez’s personal biographer, Levy’s work includes many personal anecdotes from the union leader that recall his actions and intentions and those of the top of the organization’s hierarchy. It provides a unique look at the UFW, but it also portrays the rosy picture of Chávez and the United Farm Workers.  

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Not all of the works produced contemporaneously with the early years of the UFW can be categorized as contributing to the positive image of the union or its leaders. Ralph de Toledano’s work, entitled Little Cesar, approaches the subject from the view of agribusiness. He argues that the average farm worker had an agenda separate from that of the UFW, claiming that the union was guilty of attempting to coerce these workers into following their agenda, which did not answer their grievances. For example, the union accepted a $1.65 base wage in exchange for the previous incentive laden wages that, Toledano argues, brought more money home for the farm workers.\(^5\)

In the late 1970s and 1980s, sociologists began to look at the UFW as a model for gauging successful insurgency. J. Craig Jenkins focuses on what assisted the UFW in putting together an effective run at farm labor unionism when so many other organizations could not sustain an advance against agribusiness. He points out the failures of one labor union that operated before the emergence of the UFW, the National Farm Labor Union (NFLU), in his work The Politics of Insurgency. The major difference between the UFW and the NFLU was the societal response they received. In short, the ability of the UFW to garner societal response led to their success. Jenkins states that the NFLU failed to engage the major agribusiness corporations in negotiation because the corporations were too powerful and the political environment presented too steep of a hill to climb. Institutional programs, such as the Bracero Program, created more opposition to the NFLU than it could overcome. Although the U.S. government initially introduced Braceros as a replacement workforce during World War II, the program continued into the 1960s and many farm corporations used this as a strike breaking

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force even though it was not meant to be used in that capacity. Moreover, Jenkins uses the story of the NFLU to elucidate the different environment in which the UFW existed. The Delano-based union did not experience the negative environmental conditions that the NFLU endured. The Bracero Program had ended, and the political environment shifted to a more conciliatory stance towards farm labor. Liberal reform swept through the nation in the early 1960s. With the positive electoral results for the Democratic Party, and the success of the civil rights and student movements, the stage was set for a successful Mexican American/farm labor movement. Jenkins argues, “As the UFW would soon demonstrate, these changes created opportunities for the development of sustained farm worker insurgency.”

While Jenkins highlights changes in the social context that led to UFW success, other scholars point to other important factors. For example, some have focused on the organizational and leadership elements of the union. Edward Walsh believes that Jenkins’ model of insurgency is overly determined by environmental conditions and does not take into consideration the interaction between the environment, the leadership of the organization, and the level of discontent of the underprivileged group. In response to an article that Jenkins and Charles Perrow published in the *American Sociological Review*, Edward Walsh states, “[Jenkins and Perrow ignore] the reciprocity of the influence cycle between a movement and its environment.” Walsh explains his emphasis on leadership and organization by relaying the importance of correct decision-making in the farm insurgency movement. An example of this came with the UFW’s refusal to receive help from the Communist Party (CP). Torn between accepting this outside help and realizing the negative publicity such an allegiance would generate, Chávez decided to not accept the Party’s assistance. When the government inspected the UFW, they

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found no ties to communism, preserving the organization’s integrity in the Cold War era of the United States. Walsh believes that incidents like this show the importance of competent leadership regardless of what positive environmental factors exist.⁷

Frank Bardacke takes these arguments a step further by investigating the ramifications of Chávez’s reliance on the boycott as the major form of labor insurgency. Bardacke shows how Chávez became too reliant on white response to the UFW, and neglected the grassroots movement of the Californian farm worker. This led to structural difficulties in the organization. As a result, in 1973 the UFW lost the contracts it gained through the grape boycotts. The UFW made a brief jump back into relevancy with the passage of the Agricultural Labor Relations Act (ALRA) in 1975, which allowed for state run elections for labor representation. However, this success was squandered by Chávez’s lack of ability to adjust to grassroots action. Bardacke argues that Chávez could not adapt to the needs of the farm worker, and by 1979, the UFW had lost many of the gains it had made through the ALRA. In essence, Bardacke is continuing Jenkins’ argument that societal response was the biggest contributing factor in the early successes of the UFW.⁸

In the 1990s, few writers of the United Farm Workers continued with the findings of Bardacke and Jenkins. In addition, many works on the UFW in this decade—including Conquering Goliath by Fred Ross, César Chávez: A Triumph of Spirit by Richard Griswold del Castillo and Richard A. Garcia, and The Fight in the Fields by Susan Ferriss and Ricardo Sandoval—did little to expand on the ideas of those works produced in the 1960s and 70s, other than to update the story by extending the history of the UFW into the 1980s and 90s. However,


their contributions to the literature are still important as they engaged the actions of the UFW. Furthermore, all of these works recognize the contributions of Catholic and Protestant Church members in the farm worker movement. But these works do not go far enough in exploring how this affected the national boycott effort. Although most of the works give tepid consideration to the national boycott effort, they do not fully engage the topic beyond those areas directly connected to the California members—such as the work done in Chicago by Eliseo Medina.9

One work that delves deeply into the UFW’s emphasis on Catholicism is Frederick John Dalton’s The Moral Vision of César Chávez. This work examines Chávez’s decisions on fasting and conducting pilgrimages to inspire Catholic supporters and garner Christian sympathy. Dalton does not expand his research on Catholic support for the UFW outside of California. Moreover, his argument is about the moral support of Catholicism, not the structural support. In other words, he targeted his work specifically on the Catholic actions of Chávez. He did not focus on how this aided in the creation of a national system of support.10

Writers have studied beyond the farm labor movements of the Southwest in work on the Farm Labor Organizing Committee in Ohio and Obreros Unidos in Wisconsin. Dennis Nodin Valdés contributes a chapter in Chicano Struggle on FLOC, and W.K. Barger and Ernesto Reza produced a work on FLOC entitled The Farm Labor Movement in the Midwest. Both works attribute the movement’s origins to inspiration from the UFW. And both consider the contributions of the Catholic Church significant, agreeing that Catholic members were consistent in their personal and financial support for the labor union. Obreros Unidos also received

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assistance from Catholic Church members as Marc Simon Rodriguez’s dissertation “Obreros Unidos” points out. But ultimately the UFW only inspired FLOC and OU. These unions were not formally connected to/affiliated with the California union. This study, on the other hand, focuses on an organization that was formally affiliated with the UFW.¹¹

As the previous discussion suggests, Catholic’s response to the farm labor movement has not been fully explored in the literature on the UFW. The current scholarship does not delve deeply enough into the contributions of organizations outside of the California area, such as FLAC in Indiana. Extending the analysis of the UFW beyond California opens a window into the connection between Catholic Church members and farm labor. Using FLAC as a case study, this thesis explores the mobilization of Catholic supporters of the farm labor movement, both students and non-students, far removed from the Southwest. This shows how Catholic supporters created a national movement that transcended racial and state boundaries to bolster the grape and lettuce boycotts.

Catholicism was important to the UFW for providing supporters to the movement with a vision for social justice. Clergymen and laity contributed to the UFW movement by becoming involved in the rank-and-file activity of the union. The focus on social justice already gained momentum in Catholic teaching as a result of the climate of Vatican II and the emergence of liberation theology. Those members influenced by this movement and social activism provided

outside support and a network of communication which aided in the emergence of a national support group made up of members inspired by Chávez’s use of Catholic practices and iconography. Chávez was adept at courting Catholic member support since his actions perpetuated the connection between the union and the Catholic religion. By focusing on pilgrimages, fasting, and Catholic iconography, white supporters who typically would have no connection to the largely Mexican-American union became interested in the union’s activities.

This thesis argues that this Catholic connection assisted in the formation of a national movement as the case of FLAC illuminates by analyzing the contributions of Catholic members in the Indiana-based farm organization, Farm Labor Aid Committee. Graduates of Notre Dame University created this committee during the heyday of farm labor activity—the late-1960s to the early-1970s. This group originally contained a majority of white Catholic students. And it existed as a group in favor of the boycott actions of the UFW. By exploring how this support group worked within the Midwestern state of Indiana, one can garner a better understanding of the implications of Chávez’s emphasis on white, outside constituents over grassroots supporters within the farm worker community. This thesis attempts to answer three simple questions: what moved a group of college graduates in Northern Indiana to support Chávez’s movement? What role did Catholicism play in this? And, how did activists and migrant workers interact?

Ultimately, by answering these questions on a Midwestern small activist group, I seek to shed light on the broader paradox of César Chávez’s early success but ultimate failure to galvanize a widespread migrant worker movement. This initial foray into the boycott activity in Indiana is designed to gauge these questions, and open doors to further research. Organizations like FLAC contributed to the UFW through bolstering boycott activity throughout the nation. Therefore, one cannot overlook the importance of outsider support for the early success of the UFW. The
connection between these two organizations casts doubts on the top-down approach to UFW organization and shows how this structure does not have long-term sustainability in a grassroots insurgency, such as the farm worker movement. Finally, this thesis seeks to understand what it was about Chávez that inspired Notre Dame graduates in Indiana to put so much effort into the grape boycotts in California.

To answer these questions, this thesis breaks down the argument into two chapters. Chapter 1 deals with the UFW’s early achievements. By studying the organization’s tactics, one sees how the UFW succeeded in obtaining outside support. This support proved instrumental in the advances of the union. In addition, prominent outside supporters lifted the small farm labor union to the national stage. This heightened general social environment in which the UFW operated combined with support inspired by Catholic liberation theology and social justice to propel the union to the gains it received from local farmers.

Chapter 2 changes focus to the Midwest, a region mostly overlooked in the scholarship, to investigate the contribution that areas outside of California made to the farm worker movement in the Southwest. This subject is important in understanding how the UFW’s boycotts had an impact in the Midwest, and in turn, why many in the Midwest were eager to participate in helping the UFW overcome the historically poor conditions of farm workers. Unveiling new archival information on FLAC, a small farm worker support group, this thesis seeks to explain why this organization existed and how it contributed to the UFW grape and lettuce boycotts. In doing so, this thesis uncovers why primarily white, Midwestern, Catholic
college students were drawn to Chávez and the farm labor movement in the 1960s and 70s, particularly the grape boycotts in support of farm workers in California.
CHAPTER 1 – A CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT RUN BY MINISTERS

The late-1960s represented the apex of the farm worker movement in the United States. At this time, César Chávez and the United Farm Workers (UFW) brought the grievances of a largely Mexican-American work force to the general public in the United States, and succeeded in forcing many California growers to sign contracts with the farm worker group. The UFW experienced an environment in the late-1960s ripe for political and social action. Students and social activists promoted social actions such as equal rights for African Americans and women. Therefore, the UFW’s agenda fell on receptive ears. However, in order to understand the successes of the UFW, one must recognize the contributions of Catholic Church members to the success of the movement. These supporters provided an already existent national support system made up of those members inspired by liberation theology and social activism. This group was instrumental in summoning the nationwide attention that the UFW’s grape and lettuce boycotts required. And it was these boycotts that contributed to the UFW’s victories over local growers in California. Catholic member support for farm labor extended beyond the UFW to smaller labor organizations around the country. The Farm Labor Organizing Committee (FLOC) in Ohio and Obreros Unidos (OU) in Wisconsin, were the two most prominent unions in the Midwest that benefited from the actions of members of the Church. While Mexican-American farm workers created the farm labor organizations, direct support from local Catholic members proved crucial to their success.

This chapter focuses on these three farm worker organizations that emerged in the 1960s—UFW, FLOC, and OU. These organizations demonstrate how Catholic supporters contributed to farm worker unionization. By organizing through Catholic organizations, the
largely Mexican American workforce was able to recruit White supporters unconnected to the farm labor movement. FLOC, *OU*, and the UFW relied on the consistent support that Catholic clergy and laity afforded farm worker movements. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, however, the media and organized labor gave most attention to the UFW. The AFL-CIO argued that the UFW needed to succeed in California in order for nationwide reform to occur. Although Latinos did not unanimously support this strategy, countrywide activism in support of the UFW boycotts ensued, and much of the unified support the UFW enjoyed can be credited to the social and political network of American Catholicism.\(^\text{12}\)

Catholicism is an important unifying element within the Latino community, but it is not a constant. As with any group of people, beliefs and lifestyles in the Latino community vary greatly. But the social activity of Latinos in movements like the UFW, points to what Anthony M. Stevens-Arroyo refers to as the two dimensions in religiosity—the popular and the institutional. Although many members of the Latino community were not informed or interested in the *institutional* matters of the Catholic Church, the *popular* Catholic symbols and images were still powerful in uniting the community behind a common cultural identity. This imagery aided in the cohesion of the Latino Community during the civil rights movements of the 1960s and 1970s, and more importantly for this thesis, in the farm worker movement.\(^\text{13}\)

Despite the growing numbers of Latinos in the U.S. Catholic Church, the support that the Latino community received from the institution had been tepid before the 1960s. Conservative leaders of the Church’s hierarchy showed an allegiance to Euro-American members, while


denying Latinos support in social and civil issues. An example is seen in Los Angeles on December 24, 1969. The St. Basil’s Church held a Christmas Eve Vigil in Spanish for its Latino members, but refused admittance to Latino members for the English mass held shortly after. When a few Latinos attempted to enter through a side entrance, police officers appeared with riot gear to remove the “trespassers.” This event, coupled with other situations in Los Angeles, propelled many members of the Latino and Anglo community to reject the conservative views of the Catholic Church hierarchy and embrace those views pushed forward by the Second Vatican Council of 1962-4.\textsuperscript{14}

Out of the climate of this council emerged what became known as liberation theology. This idea focused on adapting Christianity to empower those who are disenfranchised. Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger claimed that, “since in [liberation theology’s] view all reality is political, liberation theology is also a political concept and the guide to liberation must be a guide to political action.” This view took hold in the Latino community during the late 1960s and early 1970s, as some Latinos attempted to use their faith to push forward the political agendas protecting farm workers. Across the U.S., farm worker unions and advocacy groups emerged and many enjoyed support from Catholic clergy and laity. Although the farm worker movements enjoyed Catholic supporters, liberation theology was not successful in influencing the majority of Catholic Church members to embrace the struggles of the Latino community.\textsuperscript{15}

Despite this lack of enthusiasm by the majority of members, Catholic symbolism and those Catholic Church clergy members who did participate in the movement were essential to the farm worker movement’s successes. Catholic members were instrumental in providing outside

\textsuperscript{14} ibid., 324-5.

support to the farm worker movement. They also contributed resources (meeting places and financial support) and an already established network of communication to spread information. This phenomenon was very common throughout the apex of the Mexican-American and farm worker movements of the late 1960s and early 1970s. Farm worker movements sprang up throughout the United States, and the United Farm Workers in California, led by César Chávez and Dolores Huerta sparked the nationwide fervor.

**The United Farm Workers**

In the 1960s, César Chávez emerged as the leader of a farm worker union that overcame the unsuccessful past of farm worker organizing in California. Some argue that the environment was ripe for such a movement to flourish, considering the heightened activity of student protests of the Vietnam War and the Civil Rights Movement. But one must also consider the actions of the UFW in garnering the support of outside actors and Catholic supporters. The UFW attracted much of its Catholic support because of Chávez’s consciously explicit use of Catholic symbolism and practices. Many members of the union also felt a connection to the Catholic Church and aided in the dissemination of Catholic images. As one sees in the UFW, Catholic action ultimately proved instrumental in assisting the union in bringing growers to the negotiating table.16

Two men receive credit for shaping Chávez into a union leader, Fred Ross and Father Donald McDonnell. Ross was a social worker who embraced Chávez and brought him into the Community Service Organization (CSO), a group designed to lobby on behalf of the Los

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Angeles area Mexican-American population. This propelled Chávez towards organizing Mexican-American workers. The origins of Catholicism in the United Farm Workers stemmed from Chávez’s relationship with McDonnell. McDonnell took Chávez on as an understudy on intellectual and social matters, and introduced him to “Rerum Novarum.” Pope Leo III wrote this encyclical on May 16, 1891 which focused on labor and capital and supported the formation of labor unions. Chávez learned to keep Catholic clergymen close to his operations and maintained a tight relationship with McDonnell, since it precluded some attempts by opponents to defame him and his operations. As a community organizer, local newspapers produced stories claiming that Chávez had connections with the Communist party. These stories originated from members of the Republican party that were not happy with his attempts at registering Mexican-American voters. Chávez appealed to Father McDonnell who explained the situation to FBI agents who had approached Chávez, and released an announcement denouncing the incorrect statements.17

McDonnell was active in labor organizing amongst farm workers before the arrival of Chávez. He and Father Thomas McCullough established a union entitled the Agricultural Workers Association (AWA). The AFL-CIO took notice of this organization and moved to create the Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee (AWOC). Fathers McCullough and McDonnell resolved to fold the AWA and join with that organization, since it was receiving AFL-CIO funding. This union conducted many strikes throughout the early 1960s, and gained a large constituency of largely Catholic Filipino workers. When Chávez resigned from the CSO, the AWOC approached the community leader to lead its organization. Chávez, however, elected

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to not work for another union, since he desired to create his own. He focused on creating a community of members before stressing the group with labor activity. He assembled a group of leaders in the newly formed National Farm Workers Association (NFWA) that consisted mostly of Mexican Americans, but he also added Jim Drake to the fold. Drake was a Protestant minister that worked with the California Migrant Ministry (CMM), an organization geared towards assisting migrant workers in the area.\(^\text{18}\)

Chávez was initially skeptical of the CMM and its Protestant members, but eventually began to embrace them since they, “developed a very clear conception of the Church.” According to Chávez, that clear conception specifically referred to, “be at the mercy of the poor, and not to try to use them.” While working for the CSO, many members of the CMM helped Chávez with the organization of Mexican Americans. He learned to enjoy the help from the members of the Protestant Church because he felt that the local Catholic parish was “far removed from the people.” It was not until a Franciscan\(^\text{19}\) priest, Father Mark Day, became the union’s chaplain in 1967 that local Catholic Church members became involved in assisting the Mexican-American farm working community in Delano, California. It was Catholic members with beliefs similar to liberation theology, such as these, which created a means for a national web of support.\(^\text{20}\)

In 1965, the AWOC moved to strike against grape growers in the Delano area for higher wages comparable to what farmers paid to Braceros. This decision put the nascent NFWA in a

\(^{18}\) La Botz, 45.; Griswold del Castillo and Garcia, 32-3 and 35-6.

\(^{19}\) The Franciscans were a group of Spaniards that established missions in what is now Southwest United States as early as the 16\(^{th}\) century. The Catholic sect continues its presence in California today.

bind as the strike forced the union to deliberate between sticking to its original plan of building a strong community before labor activity or helping the AWOC. The NFWA held a vote on September 16, 1965 (Mexico’s Independence Day) to decide if they would join the AWOC in its grape strike. The fledgling union unanimously voted in favor of helping the largely Catholic Filipino group, beginning the NFWA’s participation in labor insurgency. This move came quicker than Chávez had initially desired, but the association felt it needed to appear supportive of its fellow union.21

Although Catholic support began to surge at the beginning of the strike, there were limits to how much time these clergymen and laity could commit. Day decided to take time off from working with the UFW, and Father Victor Salandini, who proposed to become the NFWA’s lobbyist in Washington, split his time between lobbying for the NFWA and pursuing an economics Ph.D. Some Catholic parishes were also reluctant to commit strong support to *la causa* since many growers and supporters of the growers were also members of the church. For example, Perelli-Minetti, a liquor company that used non-union grapes, had a licensing agreement with the Benedictines, a Catholic religious community. Examples like this point to why the Catholic Church as a whole was reluctant to support the farm labor movement. But the UFW continued to receive support from those members within the church inspired by social action and liberation theology.22

Despite the lukewarm efforts of Catholic Church members at the beginning of the strike, Chávez still desired a similar structure to his union as a Catholic monastery. The staff of the union was required to live on poverty wages and commit fully to *la causa*, sometimes working

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21 Griswold del Castillo and Garcia, 42-3.; Ferriss and Sandoval, 88-9.

22 Jenkins, 143.; Dalton, 52-3.
up to 100 hours a week. And the hierarchical structure of the union was not open for democratic elections until 1980, reinforcing the union’s pledge to Catholic principles. This did not mean that the NFWA only accepted Catholic support. In fact, Chávez felt that the NFWA showed its strength by appealing to a wide variety of supporters. This included members of different religions and political viewpoints.

Even with the outside support that the NFWA was able to acquire, striking was not coercing corporations to negotiate. The NFWA, therefore, decided to couple its strike with a national boycott on grapes. The union resolved to focus on four companies that were the most visible to the public; Schenley Corporation, DiGiorgio, S&W Fine Foods, and Tree Sweet. The decision to boycott brought national attention to the union, including support from other union leaders. The NFWA received a big boost to its boycott when Walter Reuther, president of the United Auto Workers (UAW), visited the farm workers in California. Reuther defied the local police and led the farm workers on a parade throughout the city. He also pledged $5,000 a month to the newly formed union, forcing the AFL-CIO to also recognize the NFWA and support them with food donations. One admirer and supporter that the union acquired was Robert F. Kennedy, the brother of the recently assassinated president. Although there is no guarantee that Kennedy was attracted to the union for the religious connection, Kennedy was also a Catholic. In 1966, the Senate Subcommittee on Migratory Labor came to Delano, and held meetings regarding the farm worker’s situation. After the meeting, Kennedy endorsed the strike and made an appearance at the DiGiorgio picket line.

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24 La Botz, 71-4.; Jenkins, 153.
On March 7, 1966, the NFWA moved to spread the news of their boycott and apply pressure on the state government in Sacramento by conducting a march from Delano to the state capital. The union decided to appeal to Catholic sentiments by calling the march a pilgrimage, and it was designed to arrive at Sacramento on April 10, Easter Sunday. In addition to the NFWA signs that many carried, some marchers also displayed portraits of the Virgin of Guadalupe or carried crosses. Although not all members of the march were happy with the Catholic imagery, such as Epifanio Camacho who declined to hold any church paraphernalia, the religious icons showed that many identified their plight with that of their faith. The marches were successful in breaking Schenely’s opposition to the strike, and as the marchers reached Sacramento the Schenely Corporation’s lawyer made contact with Chávez to set up negotiations.\footnote{25 Ferriss and Sandoval, 117-9.}

Catholics and clergymen were not the only members of the march. Protestant believers, students, and union members also joined the farm workers on the “pilgrimage.” This march caused many to view this union activity as not simply a labor struggle, but also a civil rights and social justice issue. In fact, the new director of the AWOC, Al Green, asked his Filipino union members to not join the NFWA on the march to Sacramento. He argued that the NFWA was “a civil rights movement…run by ministers.” Indeed the NFWA was moving away from traditional union methods and focusing on a religious message in order to appeal to a constituency of non-farm workers and the Anglo majority in the United States. As a result, many Catholic supporters felt compelled to spread the word of \textit{la causa} and recruit supporters to assist the marchers.\footnote{26 Jenkins, 154-5.}
As the boycott and strike continued throughout the late 1960s, the union made little progress in bringing grape growers to the negotiating table. Chávez ordered his union members to adhere to a strict, non-violent approach to opposition, but patience wore thin as progress slowed and some activists fought back against the growers and their employees. Chávez was afraid that he was losing control of the newly named United Farm Workers Organizing Committee (UFWOC). The union leader decided to reestablish his non-violent stance by appealing to his religious faith. He conducted a fast from food until UFWOC members promised to adhere to non-violence. This fast contained religious connotations because Chávez argued that it was, “informed by my religious faith and by my deep roots in the church.” His decision to fast was a monumental juncture in UFWOC’s grape struggle. It revitalized those members of the union that were the engine to UFWOC’s movement. Catholic farm workers began to show up to Chávez’s home with crucifixes and depictions of the Virgin of Guadalupe. The media also took an interest in the fast with some high profile supporters giving support to the farm worker leader. Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. sent a telegram to Chávez expressing his support for UFWOC, and Robert Kennedy traveled to California to attend mass with Chávez on the final day of his fast.

The fast did not receive uniform praise, however, as many non-Catholics became concerned over the religious connotations of the union activity. Chávez meant for the fast to be seen as a personal decision of penance, as he believed that non-violence, fasting, and prayer could help the UFWOC overcome the power of agribusiness. But a few student supporters quit over the action, and some leaders, such as Anthony Orendain, voiced their discontent over the

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27 The NFWA and AWOC decided to consolidate the power of the two friendly organizations. The two unions merged and became an affiliate of the AFL-CIO. Initially the rank-and-file members of the NFWA split on the merger, Chávez convinced the union that it was in their interests to unite with AWOC.

28 La Botz, 92-6.; Chávez quote found in Dalton, 131-4.; Ferriss and Sandoval, 140.
situation. They disagreed with actions that strengthened the union’s appearance as a Catholic organization and not an independent labor union. However, it seemed that Chávez’s fast paid off for the union. Priests and Catholic volunteers organized masses amidst the fast of Chávez and used this to attract other Catholic sympathizers. The attention to boycotts and the appeal to religious faith aided in establishing the UFWOC as a recognized union in California. On July 29, 1970, growers and farm workers met at Reuther Hall in Forty Acres (UFWOC headquarters) and signed a contract. Grape pickers received a hiring hall and a pay increase from $1.65 to $1.80 an hour. The piece rate bonuses were also increased, and groups made up of growers and workers organized to prevent pesticide abuse.29

After the UFWOC managed to sign contracts with many different grape growers, the union moved to expand their strike and boycott to the lettuce growers of Salinas Valley. But this area proved tougher to organize as the once friendly Teamsters union decided to compete with the UFWOC over representing the field workers. The Teamsters began to lose patience with the UFWOC since the farm labor union’s strike hurt the Teamster’s shipping and packing-shed business. The Teamsters decided to sign “sweetheart” deals with the lettuce growers, with little benefits, to provide security for their other workers. The UFWOC moved to picket the fields that the Teamsters had organized. This conflict resulted in violence, as the Teamster’s hired goons to intimidate the UFWOC supporters. The symbols and structures of the Church became even more important as the labor movement itself was divided over helping the UFWOC. Although Walter Reuther and the United Auto Workers continued their support of the Mexican American

29 La Botz, 94.; Jenkins, 172.
farm workers, the Teamsters moved to protect their own interests at the UFWOC’s expense. Therefore, the UFWOC needed more help than organized labor could provide.  

A delegation of Catholic bishops put an end to the struggle between the two unions. Led by Monsignor Roger Malhony and George Higgins, a negotiation between the Teamsters and the UFWOC resulted in a resolution by the Teamsters to rescind their contracts with the lettuce growers but not the food-processing sheds. However, the growers, and recalcitrant members of the Teamsters continued to defy the negotiations and pushed the UFWOC out of the fields. In fact, many of the grape grower contracts had begun to expire and many signed contracts with the Teamsters.  

In addition to the Teamster struggle, some politicians resolved to curtail the organization of farm workers. In Arizona, the state government passed a resolution to prohibit boycotts and strikes during crucial harvest-times. This measure extremely incapacitated farm worker leverage over growers, and the UFWOC decided to make a stand against the legislation by starting a petition to recall the Arizona governor, Jack Williams. The state government also considered a similar proposition in California, but voters rejected the initiative.  

The union continued on its path towards removing the Teamsters from the fields and combining the boycott with strikes to overcome grower strength in California. In 1971, the UFWOC became an official member of the AFL-CIO and shorted their name to the United Farm Workers (UFW), but the challenge of maintaining their struggle did not receive another boost until 1975 when Governor Jerry Brown passed the Agricultural Labor Relations Act (ALRA).  

30 Jenkins, 175-8.  
31 Griswold del Castillo and Garcia, 117-8.  
32 Ferriss and Sandoval, 197.
Negotiations for such an act were prompted by another UFW “pilgrimage” from San Francisco to Sacramento. The act guaranteed union elections in the fields, and by 1979, the UFW won many vegetable contracts throughout California. Throughout the 1970s and 80s, the UFW continued on its path of mixing farm organizing with Catholicism. Chávez continued to engage in fasts up to his death in 1993, and the UFW proceeded to conduct “pilgrimages.” The UFW’s actions in California changed the livelihoods of many Mexican-American farm workers. But the long-term effects of the UFW cannot just be measured by their successes in California. The union inspired the creation of other organizations throughout the United States, including two in the Midwest: the Farm Labor Organizing Committee and Obreros Unidos. These two organizations demonstrate not just the ripple effects of the UFW mobilization, but further point to the activity of Catholic Church members in the national farm worker movement of the 1960s and 70s.33

Farm Organizing in the Midwest

While the United Farm Workers in California undoubtedly overshadowed the activity of other farm labor unions in the United States during the late 1960s and early 1970s, the Midwest also witnessed increased activity in farm labor organizing. Two organizations, the Obreros Unidos (OU) and the Farm Labor Organizing Committee (FLOC), were the most successful in organizing Mexican-American farm workers. The UFW served as an inspiration to both organizations and many of the same characteristics of the UFW were also apparent in OU and FLOC.

33 Bardacke, 215.; Ferriss and Sandoval, 200.
Obreros Unidos emerged in Wisconsin because of one man’s decision to pressure the state government into recognizing migrant worker grievances. Jesus Salas, the son of a migrant family from Crystal City, Texas, moved to raise awareness of the migrant community in Wisconsin by designing an eighty-mile march from Wautoma, Wisconsin to Madison. He hoped that the publicity generated from the march would pressure lawmakers into raising the minimum wage to $1.25 and enforce housing regulations already in existence. This organization, like the UFW, received outside support from Catholic supporters. These supporters provided the farm workers with a meeting place and extra bodies for the march. The march started at the St. Joseph’s Catholic Church in Wautoma, and religious leaders sympathetic to the farm worker’s cause joined the Mexican-American protestors. The march was successful in informing farm worker’s of Salas’ determination. In 1966, as a result of the march, Salas created Obreros Unidos in Almond, Wisconsin in response to worker’s complaints against Burns & Sons potato processing. Salas called for workers to sign authorization cards to force Burns to negotiate with the union. Burns & Sons attempted to halt the union organizing, but Salas brought the situation to the Wisconsin Employment Relations Commission (WERC). The commission agreed with Salas and cited Burns & Son’s violation of the Wisconsin Labor Law. Although this decision came too late in the season to make a difference in 1966, the conflict catapulted Salas into union organizing.\(^3^4\)

OU continued its labor activity throughout the late 1960s, but eventually folded due to financial problems. Salas left the union and moved to work with the United Migrant Opportunity Services, Inc. (UMOS). This committee was a product of the Johnson Administration’s Economic Opportunity Act of 1964. Salas used his time with this group to organize urban

\(^{34}\) Rodriguez, 136-140 and 167-72.; Valdés, Al Norte, 190-1.
Latinos and focus on the UFW’s grape boycotts. As seen in other Latino organizations, Catholic clergy and other religious leaders made up the administration of UMOS. When Salas took over in 1968, the group switched into Chicano control, but the religious leadership was instrumental in forming this migrant advocacy group and supporting its actions.\textsuperscript{35}

Despite the quick end to Obreros Unidos, one sees in the union that Catholic involvement in the Latino farm working movement extended beyond California and into the Midwest. Jesus Salas and other Chicano activists who migrated north from Crystal City were the centerpiece to the 1960s farm labor activity in Wisconsin, but the assistance of the Catholic clergy and laity cannot be overlooked. Those church members who desired to actively support social causes like Obreros Unidos provided the farm workers with support by supplying the activists with meeting places and public assistance in marches. They were also responsible for setting up an advocacy group designed to assist urban Chicanos and buttress the grape boycotts in California.

The Farm Labor Organizing Committee (FLOC) in Ohio also emerged in the late 1960s. The United Farm Workers in California inspired Baldemar Velásquez, a former migrant worker, to create a farm worker union, FLOC. Velásquez committed himself to Catholic principles, claiming that it was his “Mom’s Christian conviction [which taught him] to have strong faith.” He went to Ohio and began work on creating his own union with his father. The union organization moved quickly, and in 1968, FLOC resolved to strike against growers within Lucas County, Ohio for higher wages. The union was pleased to experience immediate success as twenty-two growers agreed to terms with the union to finish out the season. However by 1970, many growers refused to negotiate with FLOC and switched to other crops that did not require as

\textsuperscript{35} Rodriguez, 214-7, 229.; Valdes, \textit{Al Norte}, 192.
much hired labor. This pushed FLOC away from union organization and into advocacy issues as many of the labor contracts fell through and labor strikes became ineffective.\textsuperscript{36}

FLOC’s foray into advocacy issues in Ohio demonstrated the organization’s complicated relationship with local Catholic constituencies. In 1970, FLOC resolved to convert a camp for children, owned by the Catholic Church, into migrant housing. This caused tension between the Church and FLOC leading the local Catholic Church to break any funding they were giving to the union. But in 1974, FLOC returned to labor organization and by 1978 Catholic Church members inspired by the message of liberation theology returned to the union’s side and supported their goals. Father Robert Haas of Toledo stated that FLOC was “difficult and complex, but worth the effort.” The church members provided FLOC with support in public events using their networks of communication to bring in extra supporters to the union. Church members also provided financial assistance.\textsuperscript{37}

FLOC continued its labor organization throughout the 1970s and into the 1980s, conducting their protests in a similar fashion to the UFW and OU. But one element in FLOC distinguished this organization from the other two: its focus on three-way negotiations between the union, the grower, and the corporation. FLOC aimed to come to terms with all three of these dimensions in the Midwest. Despite that difference, its tactics mirrored those of the UFW. Velásquez undertook fasts to give strength to the union, and the organization embarked on marches to raise awareness of farm workers, similar to Chávez’s focus on Catholic practices. FLOC defining activity was against the Campbell Soup Company. FLOC conducted a 560-mile

\textsuperscript{36} Valdés, \textit{Chicano Struggle}, 45-8.; Barger and Reza, 52-8.

\textsuperscript{37} Quote found in Valdés, \textit{Chicano Struggle}, 50.; Barger and Reza, 58-60.
march from Toledo, Ohio to Camden, New Jersey, the headquarters of Campbell Soup. In 1985, FLOC won contracts with the soup company.\footnote{Barger and Reza, 60-79.; Valdés, Chicano Struggle, 56-61.}

The farm worker movements of the late-1960s and early-1970s coincided with student-led Vietnam War protests, feminist activism, and other social movements. The UFW and other organizations undoubtedly benefited from this heightened level of social activism. Prominent political figures, such as Robert Kennedy endorsed the union in hopes that it would bring progressive voters to his side. But it was the Catholic enthusiasts and clergy that created outside supporters, ideology, an existing network of leadership, and symbolism to the movement’s nationwide appeal. As seen in this chapter, Catholic support from those members inspired by social activism and liberation theology provided a necessary ingredient to farm labor organizing in the West and Midwest. However, historians have been slow to give extensive attention to how outside supporters created a nationwide movement that was geared towards buttressing the UFW boycotts. The next chapter explores one such group led by Catholics in Indiana that worked to support the UFW boycotts in hopes of spreading the farm worker movement to the Midwestern state.
CHAPTER 2 – AN ADVOCACY GROUP FROM VARIOUS BACKGROUNDS

The UFW’s call for national grape and lettuce boycotts transformed a local labor insurgency into a country-wide battle, with the union emerging on a national scale. César Chávez stated, “With boycotts, time becomes your ally. In the end, it can be a more powerful force than all the money that special interests can muster.” Indeed the boycotts were essential to the union because of the grower’s ability to sidestep UFW strikes. Through the grape strikes in the 1960s, the union had the assistance of the Teamsters and other unions in the area, but the grower still had access to undocumented Mexican workers and other strikebreaking forces. The UFW never moved to incorporate these workers into its union. As the union moved to boycott lettuce in the 1970s, the Teamsters stepped in to protect their shipping and packing workers by signing favorable deals with the growers, evading the UFW’s demands. Only through the boycotts was the union able to exert enough pressure on California growers to coerce them to the negotiation table. Chávez astutely channeled the political activity of students and Christians towards assisting the UFW in its attempts to pressure growers into dealing with the union. And Catholic supporters and other social activists emerged throughout the U.S. to support the UFW on its national campaign.39

The UFW made the decision to send staff members throughout the United States to galvanize support for the farm workers. The union sent talented leaders to Midwestern cities. Eliseo Medina moved to Chicago; Dolores Huerta worked in Detroit. But the UFW did not rely solely on its own staff. Supporters of the union sprang up in cities to assist the California farm

workers by creating boycott committees such as the St. Joseph County Grape Boycott Committee (SJCGBC) in South Bend, Indiana or the Fort Wayne Grape Boycott Committee (FWGBC) in Fort Wayne.\(^\text{40}\)

The reasons some felt inspired to create boycott committees for farm workers in a different state vary, but in the case of the SJCGBC, Catholicism played a major role. South Bend is the home to the major Catholic institution of higher education, Notre Dame University. Notre Dame’s students provided the engine for the local boycott effort. The group was active throughout the late-1960s working in the university and the city to support the UFW’s efforts. They led a campaign against the purchase of non-union grapes in the Notre Dame cafeteria and an attack on Kroger for its refusal to cease selling grapes. Students of the Catholic institution became involved in picketing stores. This student activity suggests that the Catholic connection between the students and the UFW proved to be a unifying message in which these supporters could identify. As the 1960s ended, so did the major mobilization for the grape boycotts. The UFW shifted its focus to lettuce, and North Indiana began to coalesce into a larger farm worker advocacy group.

In the 1970s, the Farm Labor Aid Committee (FLAC) incorporated some of these boycott committees and moved towards focusing not just on the UFW, but local farm worker struggles. FLAC moved towards developing an Indiana migrant community, fighting for local legislation in favor of farm workers, and finally on organizing workers in the Hoosier state. Ultimately, this last effort did not succeed, and FLOC emerged as the major farm worker union in the Midwest. However, FLAC stands as an example of how Catholic members contributed in creating a national boycott movement and in passing state-level legislation. But at this time, Catholicism

\(^{40}\) Jenkins, 167.
took a back seat as the FLAC leaders hoped to center their message on local labor issues. This chapter explores the story of the boycotts in Indiana, and examines the tactics these UFW supporters used to stimulate Midwestern support for the boycotts.41

**The Saint Joseph County Grape Boycott Committee**

The Catholic environment of Notre Dame University contributed to the mobilization of boycott supporters in the South Bend area. Two university graduate students, David Cormier and Wayne Sule, and William Richardson of Moreau Seminary, a Catholic Seminary in Notre Dame, Indiana, participated in the public activity of the South Bend boycott movement. They worked for the Saint Joseph County Grape Boycott Committee, picketing stores that continued to sell “scab” grapes. Their first action as a group dealt with supporting Notre Dame Students in their fight to remove non-union grapes from the school cafeteria.42

The student group, led by senior Steve Moriarty and Richardson, urged food service director Bernard Mehall to remove the grapes. They centered their argument on principles that, they believed would be well received at the Catholic University—the teachings of Christ. They stated that they were “disturbed to see a Christian University disregard human suffering and engage in activity which is not being tolerated byaa (sic) large number of other Christian organizations throughout the world.” Moriaty objected to Mehall’s decision to continue the purchasing of grapes because he felt it inhibited the individual students from making the choice.

41 “Proposal for Support of Farmworkers Organizing Campaign,” unknown date, IUK archives, Box #5 Midwest Migrant Workers: Information.

He argued that, “by buying the grapes, [Mehall] supports the growers.” Not to be out-dueled, Mehall responded that if he did not purchase the grapes, then he would be making the decision for the students. He argued, “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.” But he did leave the door open for the students to discontinue the purchase of grapes by stating that if the grapes were not sold, then he would be forced to discontinue the grapes for economic reasons. Some of the students formed a picket line and passed out leaflets urging other students to forgo the grapes. The picketers hoped that the students would, “search their conscience and join with other Christians in support of the farmworkers.” In addition to this action, Moriaty and Richardson chose to take the matter above Mehall to the Council of the Vice Presidents of the University in hopes that they would endorse the boycott and remove the grapes from the school.43

The boycotters happened to find an influential supporter on their side. The President of the University, Reverend Theodore Hesburgh, supported the grape boycott and César Chávez, and wrote to the Council of the Vice Presidents on the student boycotter’s behalf. He wrote, “As you know, this whole movement [the UFW boycotts] is led by a very exemplary Catholic, Mr. Cesar Chavez.” The president pushed the council to side with the students in favor of the boycotts. He continued, “Personally, I do not think that it would be any great sacrifice for us to cease buying these grapes since we serve them rather infrequently on campus. Our moral support would be much more important than foregoing the grapes.” But he was not able to make the decision without the council’s approval, so he invited the members to support or reject the measure. He did leave open the opportunity to support the boycott personally, even if the council did not side with his opinion. He stated, “In the event that the majority vote [to continue

the purchase of grapes], I shall give [the student boycotters] my personal support, although I realize I am not committing the University in doing so, and will make that clear.”

Despite the support of Hesburgh, the boycott group was not successful in removing the grapes from the school cafeteria. The Council of the Vice Presidents determined in favor of Mehall’s decision. Mehall argued, “I don’t think the boycott is that strong. What they need is strong [national] legislation. It may be that the boycott will help to obtain legislation but it hasn’t happened so far.” Although Hesburgh was unsatisfied with the decision, he came through on his promise to endorse the boycott. He wrote to Richardson, “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.”

Although the students were not successful in removing the grapes from school, the arguments used by the students and Hesburgh reveals the extent to which Catholicism contributed to the mobilization of boycott supporters. The Vice Presidential group was not willing to support the boycott publicly, but the role of Chávez as a Catholic added to the support of outsiders in UFW actions. Hesburgh referred to Chávez as an “exemplary Catholic.” He was willing to support the boycott stating, “I am willing to stand up personally for this and that you can count on.” Even though it did not result in the support of the University, the boycott still emerged as a major issue at the Catholic university at the time. This suggests that because of Chávez’s use of Catholic symbolism and practices, Notre Dame students felt connected to the

44 Letter to Vice Presidential Group from Theodore Hesburgh, 28 October 1968, IUK archive, box #7 Grape Boycott.

45 “Notre Dame Grapes of Wrath: A Failure,” pg. 6.; Letter to William Richardson from Theodore Hesburgh, 5 May 1969, IUK archive, box #7 Midwest Boycott Activity.
farm worker movement far removed from Indiana. These students, therefore, provided the UFW with outside support by protesting the purchase of grapes in the Notre Dame cafeteria.46

The arguments that Catholic boycott supporters at Notre Dame used to persuade students and faculty at the University were apt for the school’s milieu, but as the SJCGBC focused on corporations outside of the school’s environment, the tone of the arguments required adjustment. The largest struggle that the boycott committee faced in the late 1960s was its fight against Kroger stores, a Cincinnati-based grocery chain. The SJCGBC attempted to convince the managers of the grocery chain to cease the distribution of table grapes. Kroger argued that it maintained a neutral stance and gave the consumer the choice on purchasing the grapes.47

The SJCGBC and other Midwest boycott committees concluded at an April conference in Chicago that the best means to force grocery chains in the area to refuse to sell “scab” grapes was to boycott the area’s main grocery stores. This attack mirrored the strategies of the UFW in California. The UFW focused on the most visible grape companies, believing if they fell to the union’s demands then the rest would follow. SJCGBC agreed with that tactic and moved to boycott the Kroger and A&P stores in South Bend.48

The SJCGBC argued that South Bend was important to the national boycott. The committee stated that boycotters in Chicago and Detroit had managed to remove scab grapes from the city. As a result, the SJCGBC believed that distributors would send these non-union grapes to cities throughout Northern Indiana. They stated that, “since Chicago and Detroit are

46 Letter to William Richardson from Theodore Hesburgh, 9 December 1968, IUK archive, box #7 Grape Boycott.

47 El Boycoteador (SJCGBC’s newsletter), 30 October 1969, IUK archive, box #7 Grape Boycott.

48 Ibid.
not accepting them, it is expected that they will be dumped on South Bend.” This mobilized boycott supporters to take their city seriously in the national boycott effort.\footnote{Holy Cross Bulletin, 11 May 1969, IUK archive, box #7 Midwest Boycott Activity.}

The SJCGBC and other Midwest boycott groups received assistance in their efforts from the union leader in California. Before picketing the stores, Chávez wrote Kroger and asked for their compliance. Chávez structured his argument along the lines of health concerns. He wrote that Kroger “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.” He continued that the California Farm Bureau has called for an end to the use of DDT and other chemicals because of their negative effects on health and the environment. He ended the letter 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.”\footnote{Letter to Jacob E. Davis from César Chávez, 2 June 1969, IUK archive, box #7 Grape Boycott.}

Chávez hoped to appeal to the president of Kroger by focusing on the health concerns associated with these chemicals. But the Kroger president would not change the store’s stance of neutrality. The company’s policy is seen in their memo sent out on 8 May 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.

However, this did not sit well with the Indiana based boycott group. The SJCGBC did not see this as a neutral stance. They argued, “Kroger stores aid the growers by selling their scab grapes which have been shown in laboratory tests to contain DDT residues.”\footnote{Kroger is a Strike Breaker, 8 May 1969, IUK archive, box #7 Midwest Boycott Activity.}
Before starting a boycott on Kroger, the boycott committee moved to meet with Kroger representatives and reach an agreement. But the Kroger 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 our consumers tell us to take them off.” The SJCGBC felt that this sort of action was not enough. “Once the grocer buys grapes from the grower, the harm is done. The grower has his money and will continue to break the farmworkers strike.” As a result, the committee resolved to boycott Kroger stores outright.  

The SJCGBC also worked on the A&P food stores, a grocery chain that had 4,710 stores nationwide. In May, the committee conducted a leafleting campaign throughout South Bend and the nearby city of Mishawaka designed to “inform local residents of current efforts to boycott California and Arizona table grapes in local stores.” One of their objectives in this campaign was to distribute petitions asking people, “not to shop at A&P Food Stores until the A&P makes a national commitment not to handle table grapes.”

Although A&P stores remained a SJCGBC target, the committee focused most of its efforts on the Kroger Company since it represented the largest presence in the Midwest. They increased their efforts against Kroger by beginning a two-week campaign of picketing and leafleting the stores. The SJCGBC called upon the support of outside sympathizers in the Catholic Church. An SJCGBC Press Release stated, “groups of leading citizens and clergymen [attempted] to arrange meetings with Kroger area managers to request formally that Kroger stores remove California and Arizona table grapes from their shelves for the duration of the boycott.” But the local Kroger officials were not swayed by these meetings and the boycott

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52 SJCGBC News Release, 29 May 1969, IUK archive, box #7 Midwest Boycott Activity.
committee resolved to conduct a two-week leafleting and picketing campaign against the store. They 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…” They designed the tactic to appeal to a mass audience and not just those sympathetic to the Catholic Church. But local Catholic clergymen still participated in the movement by negotiating for the grape protestors, again lending support to boycott activity. Although the SJCGBC reoriented their argument for a general audience, they still garnered the support of Catholic and Christian outsiders to assist the movement. These leaders came from an already existing network of leadership that FLAC utilized to provide support for the boycotts.54

SJCGBC experienced unfriendly press from the local newspaper as it published opinion pieces condemning the national boycott and the local efforts. The South Bend Tribune printed one article by the prominent conservative journalist William F. Buckley, Jr., which denounced the UFW and its boycott attempts. Using the accounts of two members of the boycott effort in Toronto who visited the farm workers in Delano, Buckley argued that these boycotters left the area feeling that the conditions were not poor in the region and that grape pickers in California were the most affluent of all farm workers in the nation. Buckley stated that if the grape pickers were successful in unionizing, then the farmers would convert their crop to wine grapes which require less human labor to produce. He continued by asserting that if one is to boycott grapes from California then that person must also reconsider consuming Polish hams or purchasing automobiles because of the use of Liberian rubber since the conditions in those two countries were poor.55

54 Letter to Boycoteadores from SJCGBC, 7 July 1969, IUK archive, box #7 Midwest Boycott Activity.

David Cormier responded to the allegations of Buckley by writing to the *South Bend Tribune* and denouncing the article. He stated, “All of Mr. Buckley’s ‘facts’ can be challenged by well documented evidence.” He first commented that the growers would not switch their crops over to wine grapes, “What multi-million dollar industry has ever been abandoned just because its workers became organized?” He then challenged Buckley’s reliance on the accounts of the Toronto ex-boycotters by writing, “[Regardless] of what the two Toronto liberals concluded, the farmworkers’ hovels are very real, their children’s lack of education is very concrete, and their standard of living is far below that which Mr. Buckley enjoys.” He continued, “No one denies the terrible working conditions in Liberia, or South Africa, or elsewhere. Why deny that they exist in our country?” The Tribune never printed Cormier’s reply.⁵⁶

One local, irate reader also wrote to the Tribune concerned over the disturbance that the SJCGBC caused while she shopped. Citing Buckley, Jr. as a well informed person she argued, “the grape pickers are not poor abused migrants, but are actually community people of that area.” She then continued to attack the United Farm Workers. She argued, “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 did not center solely on the UFW. She also denounced the local boycotters. She acrimoniously wrote,

> 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

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⁵⁶ Letter to the Editors of the *South Bend Tribune* from David Cormier, July 2, 1969, IUK archive, box #7 Midwest Boycott Activity.
actually worked on the grape farms, do they know first hand that the propaganda they are
fed is actually so?57

The reader’s negative account points to the activity of the boycotters. By picketing local
grocery stores, the SJCGBC disturbed this “grape buyer” enough to enact a response. Not only
did the reader write the opinion piece to be printed by the Tribune, but she also declared that she
would “double [her] purchase of grapes and…insist that [she] have the full use of the public
sidewalk to load [her] groceries as well as to walk on without interference.” It also further
suggests the extent to which Catholicism provided the boycott effort with supports. It was
students performing the picketing. The Catholic institution of Notre Dame undoubtedly
provided the boycott activity with the actors necessary for picket lines. Again, this sheds light
into how Catholic institutions with energized supporters far removed from California enforced
the boycott in locales across the nation.58

The SJCGBC continued its boycott against the Kroger Company while dealing with the
negative press. The boycott succeeded in bringing the national A&P stores to its side. The
grocery chain would “not sell scab-harvested table grapes from Arizona and California until the
growers meet with the farm workers.” As a result, the committee resolved to focus solely on the
Kroger Company. The SJCGBC attempted to call upon supporters of civil rights issues by
depicting Kroger as a racist organization. The University of Notre Dame Coalition for Political
Action put together a fact sheet describing the racist tendencies of the grocery chain. The
coalition stated, “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.” The

58 Ibid.
SJCGBC used this information in its campaign against the store, hoping to appeal to racially conscious individuals inspired by the Civil Rights movement, and to secure supporters who refused to shop at Kroger. The committee also juxtaposed Kroger with A&P stating, “[Kroger] has declined to join A&P in supporting the table grape boycott of the United Farm Workers,” hoping to convince consumers to shop at A&P. Although the argument centered on racial issues, students within the Catholic institution contributed to the arguments used by the Indiana based boycott committee.59

The boycott effort in Indiana received a boost as the SJCGBC moved to assist those in Fort Wayne, Indiana who hoped to create a committee in their city. On July 20, 1969, members of the SJCGBC traveled to Fort Wayne and presented the movie *Huelga* to those that attended and explained the South Bend boycott effort. According to the *El Boycoteador*, the SJCGBC newsletter, the meeting was well attended and received with enthusiasm. These two boycott committees eventually served as the basis for the Farm Labor Aid Committee which appeared in the early-1970s. This bolstered the SJCGBC’s support in attacking the Kroger Company. The organization began to expand beyond South Bend, and away from its outsider, Catholic base. By adding the Fort Wayne boycotters to the fold, the SJCGBC brought into the movement ex-farm workers, such as Fred Heredia, who led the Fort Wayne effort. Regardless, the activities of the new grape boycott committee mirrored many of the tactics of its South Bend counterpart.60

The Fort Wayne Grape Boycott Committee borrowed much of the arguments that the SJCGBC used in South Bend. They argued, “Fort Wayne and the state of Indiana is being used

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59 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.

60 *El Boycoteador*, August 9, 1969, IUK archive, box #7 Midwest Boycott Activity.
by some of the largest grape growers as their dumping ground for non-union grapes.” Since many of the grocery stores in Fort Wayne also refused to discontinue the sell of “scab” grapes, the FWGBC also moved to picket the stores. The committee stated, “It is our job as true believers in the struggle of [UFW] to see that all non-union grapes are kept out of the city of Fort Wayne. If we can’t get cooperation from the stores in this city, then our only alternative will be to continue picket lines to keep consumers informed of what they are doing by purchasing scab grapes from these stores.”

The SJCGBC and the FWGBC remained active in disrupting the sell of grapes throughout Northern Indiana, but it did not seem that they were able to crack Kroger’s stance of neutrality. On August 29-31, 1969, the Midwest boycotters conducted a meeting in Dayton, Ohio at Chávez’s request. The meeting was designed to reevaluate the boycott strategy up to that point, which had been the almost exclusive attention on Kroger stores. According to the SJCGBC, “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…” Although Kroger had managed to continue offering non-union grapes to its patrons, the Northern Indiana boycotters remained active in their attempts to publicize the boycott.

By February 1970, the SJCGBC grew concerned with reports that the grape boycott was losing its effectiveness. It released a report on February 28, 1970 to inform its supporters not to lose faith in their efforts. According to the SJCGBC, grape shipments were running 30% behind the statistics from the year before. The boycott committee continued, “The traditional walls around Los Angeles and San Francisco are starting to show their cracks. In the month ending

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61 FWGBC News Release, unknown date, IUK archive, box #7 Midwest Boycott Activity.

62 El Boycoteador, 30 October 1969, IUK archive, box #7 Midwest Boycott Activity.
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.” The memo ended with, “STILL THINK THE BOYCOTT IS LOOSING (sic) EFFECTIVENESS???” By releasing this memo, the SJCGBC attempted to pull in those that were giving up on the boycott, and perhaps their attempts did prove worthwhile.\(^{63}\)

On July 29, 1970, twenty-six Delano growers signed contracts with the UFW. It seemed as if the California-based union was close to securing contracts with the remaining grape growers. The SJCGBC and the FWGBC combined to form the Farm Labor Aid Committee in the summer of 1970 in order to coordinate their efforts in the boycott. This new group announced the victory just a few days later. They 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.” But FLAC continued its boycott of non-union grapes, asking supporters to shop only at stores that provided the UFW grapes.\(^{64}\)

FLAC had not forgotten Kroger’s stance of neutrality, and continued to attempt to change the grocery-chain’s policy. Fresh off UFW victories over K-mart, A&P, and Jewel Stores, which stopped selling non-union grapes, FLAC attempted to reopen its 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!” FLAC decided to attack Kroger by picketing the distribution warehouse and store in Fort Wayne, Indiana. This was of great importance to the Midwest boycotters because Kroger had shut down

\(^{63}\) Ibid.

\(^{64}\) *El Campesino* (FLAC newsletter), 10 July 1970, IUK archive, box #7 Midwest Boycott Activity.
its warehouse in Chicago and relied on the one in Fort Wayne to provide goods for the Midwest stores. The Fort Wayne branch of FLAC marched from Memorial Park in Fort Wayne to Washington Boulevard and Broadway Street to protest the Kroger distribution plant. Fort Wayne’s local AFL-CIO members joined approximately 100 Mexican-Americans in the march. The boycotters in the Midwest never convinced Kroger officials to change their stance on purchasing grapes. But the UFW persuaded many grape growers to sign contracts with the union nonetheless. In the 1970s, the political environment in the United States had begun to change, however, creating a different milieu for the UFW.65

The Nixon Administration ushered in a new conservative swing in American politics. When Nixon came into office in 1969, the Department of Defense began increasing their consumption of grapes while “conservative politicians such as California’s Senator George Murphy and Governor Ronald Reagan endorsed grape consumption and called for legislation to block the boycott.” In the first half of 1969, the Department of Defense had already purchased 8 million pounds of grapes, 1.1 million pounds more than the entire year of 1968, and virtually the same amount of all of 1967. Conservative politicians from California effectively used the government to support agribusiness in the state.66

The Department of Defense sent out a memo explaining their policies on the purchasing of grapes. The Defense Department stated that it is its policy to not engage in labor disputes because it “needs to maintain a sound working relationship with labor and management.” But the SJCGBC was not content with the Department of Defense’s explanation. They argued that


66 Jenkins, 170.; Fact Sheet: Department of Defense Use of Table Grapes, 28 March 1969, IUK archive, box #7 Midwest Boycott Activity.
the U.S. government was “taking sides in this labor dispute.” And continued that the U.S. government was also guilty for allowing undocumented workers to be implemented as strike breakers, a complaint that the UFW was also making in California.67

The UFW called for a nationwide boycott on lettuce just as the political environment began to turn conservative. After bringing many grape growers to the negotiation table and procuring a number of contracts, the UFW set its sights on the lettuce growers of Salinas Valley in the summer of 1970. The growers, however, refused to meet with the UFW and the workers struck, declaring a boycott on all iceberg lettuce. The lettuce growers attempted to circumvent the negative publicity of not allowing their workers to unionize by signing favorable deals with the Teamsters. This created animosity between the two unions and violence broke out on the picket lines with Teamster members terrorizing the largely Mexican American UFW picketers. It also propelled the newly formed Farm Labor Aid Committee to become active in the UFW lettuce boycotts. But this new group sought objectives beyond supporting the UFW boycotts.68

The Farm Labor Aid Committee

FLAC’s strategy was two-pronged. First, the committee desired to bring the struggles and grievances of California Grape growers to the attention of Hoosiers. FLAC achieved this strategy by staging pickets and asking for support from outside sympathizers. They also called for assistance from local churches and universities. Second, the committee focused on local issues faced by migrant farm workers in Indiana. FLAC objected to negative state legislation,

67 Fact Sheet: Department of Defense Use of Table Grapes, 28 March 1969, IUK archive, box #7 Midwest Boycott Activity.; SJCGBC News Release, 24 October 1969, IUK archive, box #7 Midwest Boycott Activity.

68 La Botz, 120-3.
bad local press, and poor conditions in Indiana migrant camps. The Farm Labor Aid Committee designed these tactics to realize their objectives of spreading the UFW movement into Indiana. By focusing on this two-pronged strategy, FLAC hoped to perpetuate UFW’s actions and prepare Indiana farm workers for supporting a labor movement in the Hoosier state. FLAC had no desire to start its own union, but it hoped to inspire a community of farm workers who were prepared to accept UFW representation. Although some FLAC members still identified with the UFW because of their Catholic connection, the group moved beyond its emphasis on Catholicism and began to focus primarily on local farm workers.

FLAC outlined their new objectives, consisting of six activities. They first mentioned their support for the “nationwide boycott of non-UFWOC lettuce.” But they also moved in the direction of creating a farm worker community better prepared for union activism, similar to the beginning stages of the United Farm Workers. FLAC’s next five activities included 1) “a research project on national and Midwestern farmworker problems,” 2) “developing community awareness and support of the migrant cause,” 3) “establishing a state-wide legislative support group to protect farmworkers from current and future grower attempts at anti-union legislation,” 4) “the establishing of a network of contact persons within the major farm labor camps,” 5) and “conducting leadership and organizing workshops (in Spanish) in the area for both migrants and local people who are potential leaders and/or organizers.”

FLAC’s primary focus rested on the United Farm Workers, and they generated their six activities to prepare Indiana for a hopeful expansion of the UFW. In 1971 FLAC released a proposal to “lay the groundwork for the organizing of migrant farmworkers.” They hoped to pave the way for the UFW in the area. FLAC stated, “UFWOC operations based in Texas are in

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69 “Proposal for Support of Farmworkers Organizing Campaign,” unknown date, IUK archive, box #5 Midwest Migrant Workers Information.; La Botz, 45-53 (for information on the UFW’s organizing tactics).
the initial steps of extending this struggle to the Midwest. FLAC has been in contact with UFWOC coordinators in Texas and Chicago for several months and is developing its summer project under their direction.” These contacts pushed FLAC beyond simply supporting the boycotts and into advocating for local farm workers.\footnote{“Proposal For Support of Farmworkers Organizing Campaign,” IUK archive, box #5 “Midwest Migrant Workers: Information.”}

This signaled an adjustment in the make-up of the UFW movement in Indiana. No longer did it focus as strongly on outsider, Catholic students to supply the support for its Midwest activity. In order to extend the UFW into Indiana, the group needed to reach out to those that would be the most affected by expansion: migrant farm workers. The make-up of the group remained diverse. FLAC was “a group of people, from various backgrounds, who have come together in the interest of the nation’s farm worker.” Many within the Farm Labor Aid Committee were not of Mexican American or farm working background, but they did argue that that community must be active in order to enact change. FLAC stated, “The people working with FLAC feel that the many problems facing farmworkers must be solved, but the farmworker themselves can only bring about a true solution. So FLAC cooperates with and assists farmworker organizing groups which are striving towards this goal.”\footnote{Ibid.}

The main contributor to FLAC continued to be David Cormier. But other members, closer to the migrant community, also participated in the committee. One such member was Fred Heredia, an ex-farm worker, who originally headed the FWGBC. Benito Lopez also
became active in FLAC activities. He too was an ex-farm worker who felt compelled to push for union representation in Indiana.\footnote{Letter to the \textit{Fort Wayne News Sentinel} from Fred Heredia, July 16, 1970, IUK archive, box #7 Midwest Boycott Activity.; “Affidavit of Benito Lopez,” April 26, 1971, IUK archive, box #7 Legal Issues.}

Despite FLAC’s new direction, those members of the organization close to Notre Dame, such as Cormier, continued to seek the Catholic school’s support. In fact, FLAC leaders began their campaign against iceberg lettuce in Indiana much in the same way as SJCGBC did during the grape boycott. They informed the Notre Dame administration of their stance on the lettuce. The university sent out memos providing information on the boycott, asking for feedback on what stance the school should take. The preparer of the memo, the Office of Campus Ministry, was a supporter of the UFW and showed their sympathy for the boycott, but had to admit that a boycott on lettuce had more problems than a grape boycott. The memo stated, “there is real doubt that the boycott will be as successful as it was with grapes.” The memo continued by relaying a phrase uttered by Msgr. George Higgins, secretary for research of the United States Catholic Conference, who said boycotting lettuce was like “boycotting bread – or fresh air.” But the show of support by the Office of Campus Ministry pointed to the existing structures and leaders that the UFW was able to acquire. The office focused on the probability of a successful lettuce boycott. Although it had its doubts, it still felt compelled to support the largely Catholic farm workers in California.\footnote{University of Notre Dame memo, 21 August 1972, IUK archive, box #8 Lettuce Boycott.}

The Office of Campus Ministry also had to come to terms with the recent legislation passed by the Arizona legislature, which hurt the farm worker’s leverage against the grower. They stated that the legislation “is a victory for the growers but one which may mobilize pro-Chavez forces around the country.” The legislation restricted the primary boycott (a boycott on a
particular product), and outlawed the secondary boycott (a boycott on an entire store that insists on selling the undesirable product). In addition, it outlawed farm worker strikes during harvest time. This legislation passed, but it received a reaction from the UFW and its supporters. Chávez did not back down from his stance on lettuce and was jailed for inciting a secondary boycott. While in jail, Chávez conducted another fast to garner more attention for the union.  

FLAC responded to this fast by releasing a memo expressing their support for the boycott and justifying their existence. FLAC stated, “The farm workers’ struggle for dignity and social justice demands the active participation of all people of conscience who eat the fruits and vegetables of their labor.” The farm worker advocacy group also informed the public of their commitment to the boycott. The group promised, “Until contracts are won, FLAC will promote the boycotting of all non-United Farm Workers iceberg head lettuce.” FLAC provided their supporters with lettuce labels of companies that had signed contracts with the UFW. Chávez’s use of fasting stimulated the local Catholic boycotters to re-state their support for the lettuce boycott.  

The committee attempted to spread the word about the lettuce boycott, asking churches to publicize the boycott in their church bulletins. The first part of FLAC’s strategy received some negative feedback as one former farmer took exception to one of these ads at his church. He decided to write FLAC and inform them why their support of the lettuce boycott was unfounded. He argued that FLAC put too much emphasis on the farmer, claiming that FLAC blames them for the deprived conditions of the farm worker. The former farmer argued that it was the

74 ibid.; Ferriss and Sandoval, 168-174.

75 FLAC Press Release, 22 May 1972, IUK archive, box #8 Lettuce Boycott.
corporations that made the economic decisions. He continued by addressing FLAC’s grievances about child labor.

As far as child labor that is popycot. I worked in the field when I was eight yrs. old and it didn’t hurt me. If children got out and worked a little more they wouldn’t have so much time to raise hell and demonstrate so much. Work has never hurt any healthy child nor has it hurt any healthy man or woman, but, what does hurt you, me, and everybody is, THE OVER PAID union members in all fields of labor.76

Despite the former farmer’s concerns, FLAC continued to spread the word of the UFW. Utilizing the Christian networks in the state, the farm labor committee garnered the support of students and Christian clergy and laity to its cause, much like Chávez’s union did in California.

FLAC sent letters to contacts in colleges in Indiana, such as Vincennes University and Earlham College in Richmond, asking them to distribute El Malcriado, the UFW newsletter. The committee also contacted churches, such as the First United Presbyterian Church in Union City. This contact was important to FLAC since the Pastor, James E. Roghair, was the Vice-chairman of the Migrant Ministry Committee of the Indiana Council of Churches. Cormier, FLAC’s director, wrote to the National Council of Churches that clergymen “have been particularly helpful” in migrant work in the state. He continued, “Reverend Robert Kolze of the Council of Churches has done a great deal in support of the farmworkers.” Although FLAC did not garner the support of Catholics as strongly as the SJCGBC had, non-farm workers remained an active support system in Indiana. Regardless, FLAC continued to attempt to tap into the already established networks of communication and leadership in the area.77

76 Letter to FLAC from ex-farmer, unknown date. IUK archive – Box #5 Midwest Migrant Workers.
While garnering this outside support, the committee addressed the second part of their strategy and moved to work towards improving farm worker conditions in Indiana. In late 1971, a group led by Lou Rosenberg in Indianapolis, the Ad Hoc Committee on Migrant Legislation, determined to “reconstitute [their] Committee as an umbrella organization for all legislative efforts on behalf of migrants.” Rosenberg designed this committee to contain three facets. First, it was “a committee which will fight in three long ignored arenas: in the legislature, in the administrative agencies, and in the courts.” Rosenberg also felt the committee was sophisticated enough to embrace multiple means in which to buttress farm workers. He stated, “Secondly, this committee is broad enough to recognize and support efforts on numerous fronts: labor union organization, job training, health care and education.” Rosenberg, also felt that government employees were more open for partisan attack, and argued that it would require private citizens to present their arguments. He continued, “Finally, the Ad Hoc Committee will put in the forefront private citizens.” This group was connected to FLAC through Cormier who also belonged to the Ad Hoc Committee. Rosenberg called for a meeting of interested contributors. Catholic organizations donated resources to mobilize the local farm worker movement. Rosenberg received the approval from the Catholic Charities to use their offices in Kokomo, Indiana. The leaders of the meeting were most concerned with issues other than poor camp conditions. Apparently, there was a surfeit of complaints on this issue. The committee was most concerned with finding additional complaints such as worker’s compensation or problems with camp access.⁷⁸

FLAC contacted Rosenberg in order to gain an understanding of the local laws and regulations pertaining to farm workers in Indiana. On August 16, 1971, Rosenberg sent Cormier a list of these laws and gave him advice on how to protest them. He asked Cormier to always have the complaint notarized and refer to specific laws in which the complaint is targeted. Benito Lopez, under FLAC’s direction, filled out a similar report to what Rosenberg had suggested. He complained of the poor conditions in the farms throughout Grant County, Indiana, pointing to the problems in living spaces and working conditions.79

Documented complaints about the living conditions in migrant camps in Indiana, such as Lopez’s, spawned new, favorable migrant worker legislation in the Indiana government. FLAC and other farm worker organizations in the state initially supported the legislation. House Bill 1107 provided for camp operators, increased space requirements, and closed loopholes regarding heating in the housing. They accounted for the enforcement of this bill by providing for random, unannounced visits to camps and investigation of complaints. FLAC released a memo in support of the new legislation arguing that the bill would “substantially improve the living conditions of the men, women, and children who work in the fields of Indiana.” The FLAC memo continued, “Inspite of the existing state laws which are supposed to set standards for these camps…we have found that the majority of labor camps do not meet basic human needs. Simply put, many are dumps!”80

The Ad Hoc Committee for Migrant Legislation also shared a memo that showed their support for HB 1107. The committee distributed the memo to influence people into writing their

79 Ibid.

80 Appraisal of H.B. 1107, unknown date, IUK archive, box #5 Political Issues.; H.B. 1107, Indiana State Archives, Indiana Commission of Reports.; Unspecified Letter from FLAC, 30 December 1971, IUK archive, box #5 Political Issues.
representative and ask to pass the bill. Their arguments were straightforward and appealed to the reader’s help in “correcting many of the injustices which exist in the State’s migrant labor camps.” They closed by thanking the reader for their “attention to the farm workers’ cause.”

But all of the support for this legislation soon began to change, as legislators altered the contents of the bill.81

When the bill went before the state legislature, it contained regulations that pertained to farm labor organizing. The bill gave the Indiana Commissioner of labor the power to conduct elections for labor representation. If seventy-five percent of the employees ask for representation from a labor group, then the state could grant the workers a union. The bill continued by stating, “Under no other circumstances shall a certification be issued by the Commissioner.”82

FLAC and other organizations in Indiana opposed the idea of legislation that restricted union organizing in the fields. The Ad Hoc Committee on Migrant Legislation stated, “[We] as well as numerous other interested organizations and persons oppose 1107.” And they also argued that the enforcement of the laws would also be unstable as “1107 does not create one administrative body to give its broad guidelines specificity and uniformity.” The amended form of the bill went before the legislature, and the bill failed to pass in two counts. The first count was 48 nays to 44 yeas, and the second attempt lost 49 to 45.83

Encouraged by this victory, Benito Lopez planned a march from Marion, Indiana to the state capital in Indianapolis. He designed the march to “focus attention on what it considers

81 Unspecified Letter from the Ad Hoc Committee for Migrant Legislation, 31 December 1971, IUK archives, box #5 Political Issues

82 “House Bill No. 1107,” March 12, 1971, Indiana State Archives, Indiana Commission of Reports.

83 Summary of H.B. 1107, unknown date, IUK archive, box #5 Political Issues.; The Case Against H.B. 1107, unknown date, IUK archive, box #5 Political Issues.
inferior living and working conditions for the migrant workers who come to Indiana each year primarily to pick tomatoes.” The march included members from South Bend and Kokomo, and consisted of members from FLAC and the Ad Hoc Committee for Migrant Legislation. The marchers carried signs in Spanish and English, and some members even brought UFW flags to display. The marchers made it to Indianapolis in five days, despite rain delaying their progress, and presented their complaints in front of the State Legislature. State Senator David Rogers, the Senate minority leader, met with the marchers, and called for legislative study committee to investigate Indiana migrant camps. This spawned a commission led by State Senator Earl Wilson, State Congressperson Wilma Fay, and State Congressperson Glen Hardon, which traveled throughout the state inspecting labor camps.84

After visiting four migrant worker camps in the state, Earl Wilson argued that the migrants lived in poor conditions because they did not want better housing. “Generally speaking, the deplorable conditions were much of the workers’ own doings. You can’t make a silk purse of a sow’s ear.” The State Senator pointed to a few reasons why he came to this conclusion. He argued that migrants would not flush the toilets creating a foul odor and punched holes in the walls in order to prevent having to go to the urinals at night. Wilson continued by stating that most migrant workers in Indiana were happy with the conditions because they were better than what they experienced in other states.85

The Ad Hoc Committee called for a meeting in Kokomo. Rosenberg argued that the state legislature might use the commission as a vehicle for hurting migrant workers. But he remained


85 “Migrants Blamed for Housing Ills” in Fort Wayne News-Sentinel, 26 October 1971, pg. 9a.
optimistic, “the cause of the migrant worker has gained momentum from a number of favorable developments. If we act now, we can use this momentum for further victories. If we hesitate now, however, today’s opportunities may become tomorrow’s millstones.” His hope was to point out the sense of urgency in the situation, and he had Wilson’s committee in mind. He continued, “For example, a Legislative Study Committee on Migrant Labor has recently been appointed. If certain actions are not taken soon, that committee could become a vehicle for stopping migrant progress in the years to come.” The committee could not bring in much of a crowd to its side. In its first meeting, only twenty people attended. But optimistically, Rosenberg reported, “much work was done.”

Members of FLAC followed suit with this sort of emphasis and created a similar organization to the Ad Hoc Committee on Migrant Legislation called the Farm Worker Legal Rights Project (FWLRP) in Fort Wayne. This project also focused on changing, “through legal means, certain economic and legal practices which are contrary to the interests of migrant farm workers.” They focused their efforts on the “seven counties around Fort Wayne.” But the project also became involved in denouncing Wilson’s inflammatory comments.

FLAC responded to the article in the *Fort Wayne News-Sentinel*, the newspaper that published Wilson’s comments. FLAC wrote, “How does he explain the flimsy, dingy shacks, the open cesspools, the unscreened doors and windows found in these labor camps before the workers arrive?” They also addressed what they considered to be Wilson’s usage of the “dirty Mexican” stereotype. Stating, “we prote[s]t his blatantly racist comments and demand from him

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86 “Ad Hoc Committee for Migrant Legislation,” unknown date (between September 18 and October 11, 1971), IUK archives, box #4 Legal Issues.

87 “The Farm Worker Legal Rights Project, A Detailed Description,” Unknown date, IUK archives, box #4 Legal Issues.
a formal apology to the Mexican American citizens of Indiana and migrant workers in general.”

In fact, it did seem as if State Senator Wilson was employing pre-conceived stereotypes of Mexican lifestyle. While speaking about illness in the migratory camps, the *Fort Wayne News-Sentinel* reported Wilson as saying, “workers are probably immune to most diseases associated with unsanitary conditions, I can’t see but…they are probably as healthy as the average Hoosier.” FLAC retaliated, “Wilson obviously did not examine many workers and their children very closely. The records of farm worker clinics in this state show the opposite to be true—unsanitary living and working conditions strongly affect the farm workers’ health. State and federal reports have clearly documented this fact.” The *Fort Wayne News-Sentinel* reported FLAC’s objections to State Senator Wilson’s comments on 1 November. But Wilson never apologized for his comments despite FLAC’s insistence. This confrontation exhibits the strategy of FLAC to attack local farm worker issues while maintaining focus on UFW activities in California.

While paying attention to the legislative activity in Indiana, FLAC moved to uphold the other part of their strategy—publicizing the UFW struggle in Indiana. In fact, the committee became involved in the United Farm Workers’ campaign against the American Farm Bureau (AFB). In 1971, the AFB attempted to pass through federal and state governments, legislation that “guarantee[d] secret ballot elections for farm workers, and [prohibited] the secondary boycott for agriculture as it is presently prohibited in industry under the National Labor Relations

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Act.” The UFW disagreed with the AFB’s stance because it felt that the legislation greatly impaired the farm worker’s advantage over the farmer and favored agribusiness. 90

Although there is no concrete evidence of the AFB employing racist policies, FLAC articulated their complaints against the AFB along the lines of race. The committee argued, “[Farm Bureau] is racist in its operating policies, and it breaks the law by using tax exempt money to attack the farm workers’ union led by Cesar Chavez.” FLAC felt that the racist argument was the best means in which to acquire sympathy for the UFW. They continued their denunciations against the AFB by unabashedly claiming that the Bureau operated under racial tendencies. The committee argued, “The Farm Bureau is attacking the United Farm Workers because it is an organization of minority workers, Black, Chicano, and Filipino. The Farm Bureau has long been committed to the de facto preservation of racism in rural America.” FLAC also expressed their discontent with the AFB in class terms. The committee argued that the AFB used its, “vast wealth and power to crush the attempts of American migrant workers to improve their way of life.”91

The local Fort Wayne newspaper picked up the story of FLAC’s objections in their May 9, 1972 issue. The paper stated 20 picketers that began their rounds of the Fort Wayne Farm Bureau at noon as “part of a nationwide picketing by Cesar Chavez’s United Farm Workers Union against the American Farm Bureau Federation.” FLAC perpetuated Chávez’s claims of racist discrimination by the Farm Bureau, as the newspaper continued that the picketers were a part of Chávez’s desire to expose the Farm Bureau’s racist policies.92

90 American Farm Bureau Federation, unknown date, IUK archive, box #5 Midwest Migrant Workers.
91 FLAC Press Release, 9 May 1972, IUK archive, box #5 Midwest Migrant Workers.
92 “Union Supports Picket at Bureau,” The Fort Wayne Gazette, May 10, 1972, pg. 2c.
FLAC continued their publicity campaign of the UFW by denouncing the actions of the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB). The advocacy group claimed the NLRB was attempting to bring the UFW under the restrictions of the Taft-Hartley Act, but give the union none of its benefits. The Taft-Hartley Act of 1947 amended the Wagner Act which was part of the National Labor Relations Act passed in 1935. It prohibited the secondary boycott, but it specifically exempted agricultural workers. However in 1972, the NLRB of Los Angeles, under the lead of a Richard Nixon appointee Peter Nash, moved to include the UFW in the Act’s constraint of the secondary boycott.93

FLAC’s reaction to this act by the NLRB was to blame the Republican Party. And Cormier was not shy in arguing that what the party was doing through the NLRB was “both illegal and immoral.” On 24 March 1972, FLAC met with Orvas Beers, who was the Allen County, Indiana Republican Party Chairman, to discuss this NLRB action. Beers responded that this issue was “not relevant to Allen County (where Fort Wayne is located).” FLAC disagreed with this statement and argued that the 10,000 migrant workers in Indiana “will certainly be affected if the NLRB action succeeds. Their hopes for self-determination through a strong labor organization of their own will be greatly thwarted.” FLAC combined the two-pronged strategy in Indiana with this argument. Not only did the committee support the UFW’s fight against the NLRB, it also articulated its support along the lines of an eventual expansion into Indiana. FLAC’s immediate reaction to the NLRB’s decision was to picket the Republican Party Headquarters in Fort Wayne. But they also moved to push forward their hopes of preparing Indiana farm workers for UFW representation. Plans were under development to spread the

Committee throughout Indiana. FLAC hoped to expand into seventeen Indiana cities, and as far south as Evansville, which is on the southern border with Kentucky.\footnote{Farm Labor Aid Committee News Release, 24 March 1972, IUK archives, box #4 Legal Issues; FLAC Expansion Plan, unknown date. IUK archive – Box #7 Midwest Boycott Activity}

The committee showed signs of attempting to organize local migrant workers when they were distributing literature about the United Farm Workers at one of these migrant camps. David Cormier and two other FLAC members went to Bernacchi Farms in Northern Indiana and began to talk with the local farm workers there about the California union. When the growers discovered the FLAC members, they forced them off the property with the help of local police and “threatened violence.” FLAC retaliated with a lawsuit against Bernacchi Farms, feeling that one should be able to visit these migrant camps as the migrants have the right to decide who may enter their living premises.\footnote{“Ex-N.D. Student, 2 Others Sue Farm Operators,” in The South Bend Tribune, unknown date, IUK Archives, box #7 Midwest Boycott Activity.}

By July 17, 1972, Bernacchi Farms came to an agreement with FLAC in regards to the lawsuit. They signed a consent order that recognized “the right of FLAC to visit and speak with farm workers living in Bernacchi camps.” FLAC was indeed attempting to organize these workers as revealed in their July 19, 1972 press release. It stated, “This is the first step in opening all the labor camps in Indiana to the lawful activity of union organizing. FLAC feels that the question of camp access, as far as migrant labor camps is concerned, is one of whether the basic constitutional rights of both the organizers and the camp residents to exchange information freely should be controlled by the grower or camp owner.” This proved to be a triumph for the second prong of FLAC’s strategy. But despite this legislative victory, it seemed as if the Indiana based Aid Committee was on its last leg of activity.\footnote{FLAC Press Release, 19 July 1972. IUK archive – Box #7 Midwest Boycott Activity}
FLAC never operated as closely with Notre Dame as the SJCGBC, but the movement started by the Catholic students propelled the boycott activity in Northern Indiana and led to the creation of FLAC. From there, the group refocused their message and moved to enlarge the goals of the group in hopes of expanding the largely Catholic UFW movement into Indiana. Graduating from Notre Dame, David Cormier moved on to New Jersey and worked on the UFW boycotts on the east coast. Without its major contributor, FLAC was never able to create any sort of union apparatus, or help spread the UFW’s movement into the Midwest. The committee stayed active in the lettuce boycott until the group dissolved in 1974. But the activity started by Benito Lopez continued into the late-1970s. Now, however, it was under the direction of the Farm Labor Organizing Committee.  

Conclusion

The UFW, under the leadership of César Chávez and Dolores Huerta, created a romantic idea of supporting an underprivileged group in U.S. society. Student activists and Civil Rights supporters desired to be a part of this seemingly benevolent cause. A very important sector of support for the farm worker movement, the Catholic Church, provided supporters, resources, and networks of communication for the movement, as one sees in the UFW and FLAC. Although the American Catholic Church, as a whole, never endorsed the UFW, many of its clergymen and laity felt compelled to participate in the struggle. Some of this fervor can be attributed to liberation theology, which emerged from the climate of Vatican II in the early 1960s, and the

97 “The Midwest Migrant Farm Worker Archive Collection will become part of IUK’s Library Archives,” April 8, 1996, IUK archives, box #7 Archive Collections.
atmosphere of social activism of the time. This is not to ignore the efforts of the Mexican-American grassroots organizers that managed to better their working conditions through their own actions. The UFW was a union made up of and led by a majority of Mexican American farm workers. Therefore, one must assign most of the credit to them. But it is important to explain how the UFW was able to garner enough appeal from outside supporters to succeed in its boycott efforts.

Although it is clear that Catholicism played a major role in the creation of the boycott effort in Northern Indiana, the exact workings of Catholic supporters still requires more research. Many questions remain. For example, what were the roles of Catholicism and migrant workers, historically, in Indiana? How did Indiana Catholic parishes view Liberation Theology? And did the activity in the late-1960s and early-1970s of Catholics toward migrant workers stand apart from other eras? One would also consider what sort of tensions existed within the Catholic institutions of Indiana concerning the boycott. Regardless, FLAC is an interesting case study because it illuminates the grassroots activity of this national campaign. The boycott and the weakness of the UFW nationally necessitated the activity of local supporters throughout the nation. FLAC emerged in Northern Indiana to fill this need. And what spawned this activity was Chávez’s affiliation with the Catholic Church’s practices and imagery. FLAC shows how UFW supporters, far removed from the farm worker community, became involved in the boycott movement. White Catholic supporters like Cormier felt compelled to donate their time in pushing forward the UFW’s agenda in Indiana. Despite the racial differences between Cormier and the largely Mexican-American farm working community, he spent much of the late-1960s and early-1970s contributing to the movement. The main impetus for this racial cohesion was the Catholic Church. The SJCGB, under Cormier’s direction, moved to employ the assistance
of Catholic University students at Notre Dame. But as the organization expanded into a larger farm worker advocacy group, FLAC, the emphasis moved away from Catholic student support to local migrant workers. Nevertheless, the organization continued to court the assistance of local Catholic and Protestant Churches. FLAC leadership felt that in order to enact their two-pronged strategy of expanding the UFW into Indiana, it had to focus its attention on the local farm working community. But the need for Catholic support, for meeting places, outside assistance, and an already existent network of leadership continued.

FLAC and other Indiana based farm worker advocacy groups were not the only committees designed to aid the United Farm Workers in California. But the story of FLAC is compelling since it highlights the connection between a national movement, and its regional supporters. It points out how a farm worker movement in California was able to garner the support of those far removed from its center. It also illustrates how, through the Catholic Church, the UFW was able to bring in the assistance of supporters with no ethnic or vocational ties to an underprivileged group outside of its immediate vicinity.
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