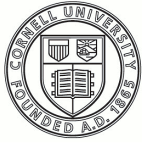

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Kate Bronfenbrenner
Cornell University, klb23@cornell.edu

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California Farmworkers' Strikes of 1933

Abstract

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All told, more than 47,500 farmworkers participated in the 1933 strikes. Twenty-four of these strikes, involving approximately 37,500 workers, were under the leadership of the Communist-led Cannery and Agricultural Workers Industrial Union (CAWIU). In a dramatic reversal of its previous record of repeated debilitating losses, twenty of the CAWIU-led strikes resulted in partial wage increases while only four strikes ended in total defeat for the union. The remaining strikes, including three spontaneous walkouts, two American Federation of Labor (AFL) led strikes and two led by independent unions, resulted in partial gains in four out of the seven conflicts.

Keywords

labor movement, strike, California, farmworkers

Disciplines

Labor History | Labor Relations | Unions

Comments

Suggested Citation

Bronfenbrenner, K. (1990). *California farmworkers' strikes of 1933* [Electronic version]. Retrieved [insert date], from Cornell University, ILR School site: http://digitalcommons.ilr.cornell.edu/articles/554/

Required Publisher Statement

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California Farmworkers' Strikes of 1933
Kate Bronfenbrenner

The spring of 1933 ushered in a wave of labor unrest unparalleled in the history of California agriculture. Starting in April with the Santa Clara pea harvest, strikes erupted throughout the summer and fall as each crop ripened for harvest. The strike wave culminated with the San Joaquin Valley strike, the largest and most important strike in the history of American agriculture.

All told, more than 47,500 farmworkers participated in the 1933 strikes. Twenty-four of these strikes, involving approximately 37,500 workers, were under the leadership of the Communist-led Cannery and Agricultural Workers Industrial Union (CAWIU). In a dramatic reversal of its previous record of repeated debilitating losses, twenty of the CAWIU-led strikes resulted in partial wage increases while only four strikes ended in total defeat for the union. The remaining strikes, including three spontaneous walkouts, two American Federation of Labor (AFL) led strikes and two led by independent unions, resulted in partial gains in four out of the seven conflicts.

Like their industrial counterparts, California farmworkers entered 1933 embittered by three years of steadily declining wages and living conditions. Although these workers had endured intolerable conditions for decades, their burgeoning frustration and bitterness was for the first time being channeled into a combination of ethnic consciousness and labor militancy. Aroused by outbreaks of urban industrial action around the nation and inspired by the appearance, albeit illusory, of a sympathetic administration in Washington, farmworkers looked to the CAWIU for the leadership and guidance needed to transform this seemingly inchoate activism into an effective labor movement.

Although the CAWIU had been involved in a series of major farmworker strikes since its inception in 1930, by 1933 it had little to show for its efforts. Despite a strong showing of workers' support at the onset of each conflict, in strike after strike workers had been forced by the brutal strike-busting tactics of the growers and local authorities to go back to work or flee the area without any of their demands being met.

The union had learned important organizational lessons from each of these failures and began 1933 with a corps of well-trained and committed organizers who had earned recognition and respect from farmworkers across the state. By the time the first of the 1933 strikes broke out in April, detailed strike plans had been developed based on careful research of wages, working conditions, and harvest schedules for each crop. A standard list of demands had been developed that included substantial wage increases, union recognition, an eight-hour workday, time and a half for overtime, a closed shop with a union-controlled hiring hall, abolition of labor contracting, no union or ethnic discrimination, and free transportation of workers to and from the fields. A network of farm committees, representing the multi-ethnic character of the work force, had been elected by workers at mass meetings in each local growing area. And perhaps most important of all, CAW1U organizers had learned by experience to focus their organizing appeals on improving farmworker wages, working and living conditions, rather than on loftier aims couched in revolutionary rhetoric.

Despite these preparations, the CAWIU's 1933 strike campaign got off to an inauspicious start on April 14, when a strike by 2,000 Mexican, Filipino, and white pea

pickers collapsed in just two weeks in response to a familiar pattern of violence and intimidation by growers and local authorities.

The next CAW1U venture, the El Monte berry pickers' strike, was to be an even more humiliating debacle. Under CAWIU leadership the strike was called by the approximately 600 Mexican berry pickers employed by Japanese growers in the San Gabriel Valley. Holding firm for their demand of sixty-five cents per crate, strike committee members not only rejected the growers offer of first forty cents and then forty-five cents per crate but also openly challenged the CAWIU leadership of the strike. With the aid of the Mexican consul, the non-Communist leadership was able to undercut the CAWIU's influence through appeals to ethnic pride and by portraying the Communists as outside agitators. They were aided in this effort by local authorities who systematically jailed most of the CAWIU organizers in the area. Leadership of the strike then passed to the Confederacion de Uniones de Campesinos y Obreros Mexicanos (CUCOM), which settled with the growers in mid-July for increases of twenty-five cents for men and twenty cents for women. But because most of the crop had already been picked by scab labor, the majority of the workers were unable to benefit from the settlement.

For the CAWIU, their humiliation at El Monte was tempered by their simultaneous strike victory among 1,000 cherry pickers on twenty of the largest ranches in Santa Clara County. Although the larger ranchers organized an all out assault against the union, this time the violence served to mobilize the strikers rather than to break the strike. Unable to break the strike, and faced with the loss of their crops', growers reluctantly agreed to bring the pickers' wages up to the thirty cents an hour demanded by the union. Although still unable to win recognition, the union ended the strike on June 14, overjoyed with its first solid wage victory in three years of organizing.

Buoyed by their Santa Clara triumph, twenty-nine CAWIU delegates assembled at the union's first district convention on August 5 to engage in a serious round of self-criticism and to plan for the critical late-summer fruit harvests. A detailed organizing strategy was developed including commitment to build a strong integrated union apparatus throughout the state's important agricultural centers; more aggressive organizing of women and children; "boring from within" established unions to form contacts with dissident elements and win the organizations over to the CAWIU; and building alliances with unemployed agricultural workers.

CAWIU organizers left the convention to immediately embark upon a rapid succession of ambitious and mostly successful strikes. The late-summer harvest campaign began on August 7 and 8 with strikes involving 1,000 Mexican and Filipino sugar beet workers in Ventura County and 400 tomato pickers near San Diego. By August 14, pear pickers around San Jose and peach pickers near Tulare had joined the fray, with still other strikes soon spreading throughout the fruit growing districts of six San Joaquin Valley counties. With the exception of the Oxnard Sugar Beet **Strike,** almost all of these strikes resulted in significant wage victories for the union. Early in August the average farmworker wage in California had been approximately sixteen and a half cents an hour. By the end of the month the general agricultural wage was firmly established at twenty-five cents an hour. Supervised by CAWIU organizer Pat Chambers, the strikes were meticulously organized with leadership diffused throughout the work force so that it was more difficult for local authorities to break the strike by arresting the main leaders. The CAWIU also succeeded in conducting the strikes in the most law-abiding and

nonviolent manner possible, making it more difficult for the authorities to justify using violence to break up the strikes.

The only exception to this general lack of violence was the **Oxnard Sugar Beet Strike,** where the mayor of Oxnard, a sugar beet grower himself, used his authority to brutally break the strike. But with Oxnard the only loss, CAWIU leaders were increasingly confident of the inevitable triumph of militant unionism in California agriculture. This exuberance was quickly chastened when in early September they lost two major grape strikes in the San Joaquin Valley.

First in Fresno and then in Lodi, growers and local authorities broke the strikes by wholesale arrests of strike leaders and by violent attacks on picket lines. Although in Fresno part of the loss could be blamed on the lack of CAWIU discipline, the 4,000 grape pickers in Lodi were a well-organized group. But still they were no match for the growers, who were willing to go to any length to keep the union out of their vineyards. Hundreds of well-armed deputized growers, businessmen, and legionnaires under the command of Colonel Walter E. Garrison, a grower and retired military officer, viciously assaulted 100 unarmed strikers while the police stood idly by. Any strikers who did attempt to defend themselves were arrested by the police for "rioting." The attack continued throughout the day, with strikers and their families being run out of their camps with fire hoses and tear gas. When union appeals to state authorities went unheeded, the strike quickly collapsed and Lodi growers succeeded in keeping their vineyards non-union.

The CAWIU had little chance to mull over their losses in Fresno and Lodi for they had set their sights on the most important harvest of all—the October cotton harvest.

More than 15,000 workers picked cotton in the San Joaquin Valley. Three-quarters of this work force were Mexican, the remainder included southern blacks, Filipinos, and white migrants from the Southwest. Three years of depression had forced their wages down more than 75 percent. With the growers unwilling to pass on any of the 150 percent increase in the price of cotton from the previous year, the pickers were ripe for organization.

As tensions rose each side prepared for the ensuing conflict. Organizers spread through the valley building up locals and developing leadership. Alliances were made with liberal groups to help win public support for the struggle ahead. Demands were formulated including union recognition, a picking wage of $1.00 per hundred pounds, abolition of labor contracting, a union-controlled hiring hall, and no union discrimination. A general strike throughout the region was called for October 4.

Growers held firm to their offer of a twenty-cent increase or sixty cents per hundred pounds and began to mobilize anti-union forces to break the strike. They organized themselves into agricultural protective associations with the somewhat ingenuous motto of "strikers work peacefully or leave the state of California." As soon as the strike began, the protective associations moved quickly to evict strikers from the camps.

But breaking up the picket lines proved more difficult. With a strike area more than a hundred miles long and thirty to forty miles wide, the union sent out roving truckloads of pickets instructed to stop and picket only where they found workers in the held. The growers could then only break up picket lines when and where they found them.

The first major altercation occurred in Woodvile, where, by violently attacking picketers, the growers served only to unite the heretofore ethnically divided work force under the leadership of rank-and-file leader "Big Bill" Hammett and his multi-racial general staff.

By the second week of the strike, violence had greatly escalated as roving bands of armed growers moved through the region attacking all strikers who refused to return to work or leave the area. Law enforcement officials cooperated by arresting all those they thought to be strike leaders. Growers also applied pressure to local merchants, threatening to boycott all stores that did business with striking workers. State labor commissioner Frank C. McDonald joined in the public outcry, denouncing the boycott threat as a thinly disguised effort to "starve out" the strikers and appealing to both sides to allow state mediation of the conflict. Although the union quickly agreed to state intervention, the growers refused and the violence continued.

Despite the growers' efforts, the strike grew to encompass 12,000 workers across Tulare, King, and Kem counties, with most of the cotton crop remaining unpicked in the fields. The violence reached its peak on October 10, when, in the small town of Pixley, a caravan of forty armed growers fired on a large group of unarmed strikers and their families who were gathered in the center of town to protest the arrests of strike leaders. The growers killed two and wounded at least eight more strikers while a group of highway patrolmen watched from a safe distance, refusing to intervene.

Soon after the Pixley attack, growers in Kern County fired on a group of unarmed pickets killing one and wounding several more. After the shootings, the local authorities arrested some of the strikers for rioting and allegedly murdering one of their own people.

Because of the public outcry after the shootings, Tulare County officials were pressured to arrest eight of the growers involved in the Pixley incident. But to placate local growers, they also arrested strike leader Pat Chambers on criminal syndicalism charges.

In response to public pressure, the federal relief office directed the governor to distribute relief to all of the striking farmworkers marking it the first time in American labor history that the federal government offered relief to striking workers.

Federal involvement did not stop there. New Deal administrator George Creel intervened in the conflict, arguing that although agricultural workers were excluded from Section 7(a) of the National Industrial Recovery Act (NIRA), industrial disputes in agriculture were under the jurisdiction of the National Labor Board, which he represented.

Creel came prepared to impose a "fair settlement" on both parties by threatening revocation of federal relief if the union did not agree to fact finding and by assuring growers that without relief strikers would immediately return to work at sixty cents per hundred pounds pending the outcome of the fact finding.

Seriously disturbed by the specter of militant communist unionism which he found antithetical to the New Deal's paternalistic labor relations ideology, Creel's intent was to eliminate the CAWIU's influence in agriculture by undermining its hold over the strikers. But in doing so he seriously underestimated the commitment of the cotton pickers to their strike and to their union. Government threats to condition relief on a return to work failed to sway the majority of the strikers, and the fact finding hearings began on October 19 with the cotton strike still in full swing. After two days of testimony

from growers and a succession of workers, the federal fact finders proposed a seventy-five-cent increase to settle the strike. To induce the growers' cooperation Creel promised that if they granted the seventy-five-cent increase, all federal relief would be immediately cut off and workers returning to the fields would be given full protection from the strikers.

The strikers remained adamant, holding out for eighty cents and union recognition. But on October 27, the CAWIU Central Strike Committee, arguing that the strike had already dragged on long enough, convinced the strikers to go back to work at the seventy-five cents per hundred pounds, without union recognition.

The most dramatic and significant strike in the history of American agriculture ended with no clear victor but with all sides—the growers, the union, and the federal government—claiming victory. Twelve thousand farmworkers under the leadership of some of the CAWlU's most dedicated and experienced organizers had brought the most powerful and determined growers in California to a standstill. What the strike had ultimately made clear, in the words of labor historian Cletus Daniel, was "the irreconcilable conflict between the CAWIU's militant unionism and the federal government's new rational and paternalistic labor policies. . . . "

The union had proven itself in the 1933 strikes, but it had never won recognition. And when the dust settled, little of the pre-strike union organization remained intact. The CAWIU would continue to organize, but it would be unable to overcome the combined forces of the Roosevelt administration and intense grower opposition.

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