

Vacaville, California, Tree Pruners' Strike of 1932

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Two days after the November 1932 elections, newly elected California congressman Frank H. Buck provoked a massive tree pruners' strike when he announced a wage cut for pruners on his ranch from \$1.40 for an eight-hour day to \$1.25 for a nine-hour day. Buck, one of the largest growers in the Vacaville fruit growing region, had raised wages to \$1.40 during his congressional campaign, promising farmworkers even higher wages if he won the election. Running under the campaign slogan "Give Government Back to the People," Buck garnered nearly unanimous support from farmworkers in the Vacaville area. Within days of his victory, after securing the agreement of other orchardists in the area, Buck announced that the 20 percent wage cut would go into effect starting November 14.

On the day the pay cut was to go into effect, 400 Mexican, Filipino, Japanese, and white tree pruners walked off their jobs. Unlike previous agricultural strikes in the region, this was not a spontaneous walkout. Unbeknownst to Buck, the Communist-led Cannery and Agricultural Workers Industrial Union (CAWIU) had been actively organizing workers in the area for several months. By the time Buck made his announcement, more than 250 working tree pruners had joined the union, and strike plans were well developed. The tree pruners' strike was to be the first deliberately organized strike since the CAWIU had started organizing California agricultural workers three years before.

The demands drawn up by the CAWIU were similar in nature to those they had made during earlier strikes: a \$1.50 daily minimum wage for a maximum eight-hour workday; no evictions pending settlement of the strike; no discrimination on the basis of gender, race, or union activity; free transportation to and from the worksite; free tools provided by the employer; and formal recognition of the CAWIU.

Local ranchers responded by offering \$ 1.20 for an eight-hour day, with no recognition of the union. The strikers rejected the offer out of hand and the union moved to solidify the strike by bringing in outside legal and financial support. The communist Worker's International Relief was mobilized to bring in food and supplies, and the International Labor Defense provided its legal services to strikers arrested during the frequent clashes with local authorities.

The first of these clashes occurred on November 21 when strikers set up barricades to prevent trucks carrying scabs to the orchards to pass through the center of town. Police attempted to arrest six of the strike leaders only to release them when a large mob of pickets surrounded the outnumbered officers.

The growers moved quickly to mobilize city, state, and county authorities as well as the local citizenry to ensure that this would not happen again. Local authorities were especially predisposed to aid strikebreaking efforts because the mayor of Vacaville was himself one of the largest orchardists in the region. Newspapers, local ministers, and government officials attempted to turn community sentiment against the strikers by exploiting racial antagonism and through fervent anti-Communist appeals, charging the CAWIU with promoting and practicing violent sabotage. On December 2, ranchers, businessmen, American Legion members, and other community leaders staged a mass rally to "protest against Communism." Speakers such as the Rev. A. F. Fruehling declared that "a real menace confronts this community which must be met in the good old

American way." A local judge then went on to explain that "the good old American way" meant nothing less than "the system that is used south of the Mason and Dixon line."

Just three days after the mass rally, lynch fever reached its peak when a mob of forty masked men, armed with the appropriate keys, dragged six strike leaders out of the Vacaville jail, drove them to a remote area twenty miles from town, and abandoned them after beating them with tug straps, shaving their heads with crude shears, and dousing them with red enamel. The local sheriff, who was absent when the kidnapping took place, claimed he had no idea who the vigilantes were or how they had gained possession of the keys to the jail.

During the first weeks of the strike, CAWIU picketers had been fairly successful in keeping scab labor out of the orchards. After repeated violent assaults from vigilantes, male pickets were replaced with women and children who courageously held the lines. But as time went on, the combined effects of continued vigilante attacks and dwindling relief supplies began to take their toll. A visiting delegation of American Federation of Labor (AFL) officials from the Sacramento Federated Trades Council helped turn the tide when they took the employers' side in the dispute. Many Filipino workers, after repeated violent attacks by local vigilantes, fled the region in fear for their lives. After two months of striking, with relief supplies severely depleted and attendance at strike meetings markedly declining, CAWIU members voted on January 20 to end the strike.

For the strikers, it was a bitter defeat. Not only had they lost all of their demands, but the growers had emerged from the strike better organized and more in control of their work force than ever before.

For the CAWIU the defeat was not as bitter. In Vacaville they learned important lessons in how to more effectively organize a multi-ethnic, migratory agricultural work force. Never again would they call a strike in pruning season, when the employers were under no pressure for immediate settlement. From that time on, CAWIU strikes would be targeted for harvest time, when growers would be most vulnerable to crop losses and most dependent on their work force. They had also learned that the more permanent family farmworkers, heretofore considered the most docile and least organizable workers, could become a solid and militant strike force, despite the fact that it took longer to mobilize them into action.

In January 1933, the CAWIU had yet to win a major strike. But under Sam Darcy's leadership they had developed a nucleus of dedicated and capable organizers who faced the turbulent months ahead with hard won recognition and respect from California farmworkers across the state.

References

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