

Success in Organizing, Failure in Collective Bargaining: The Case of Pickle Workers in Wisconsin, 1967-68

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Working Paper No. 11

August 1991

ABSTRACT

Wisconsin is one of several states in the Great Lakes region specializing in a variety of cash crops that historically require great influxes of migratory labor for brief periods of cultivation, harvesting, and processing. Successful organizing of migrant pickle workers by Jesus Salas in 1967 led to the certification of his union, Obreros Unidos United Workers, as the workers exclusive bargaining representative. Despite the successful organizing efforts however, the end result of the collective bargaining efforts was the elimination of bargaining unit employee jobs by mechanical harvesting before a contract was ever signed. The theoretical frame of reference developed by Craypo (1986) is used to explain the union's organizing success and failed collective bargaining. The model shows that the sources of union bargaining strength were established initially, but because of the changing bargaining environment they were not maintained long enough to successfully negotiate a single contract. The shirking of farm-worker collective bargaining occurred through changes in the company's organizational structure, technology, and the policy of the state's legal apparatus. All combined to erode the union's bargaining power and caused the union's eventual demise. The analysis also shows that agricultural production via contract farming is a significant determinant of migrant field labor collective bargaining structures and outcomes.

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Dr. Rosenbaum has a Ph.D. in Economics and is a Post-Doctoral Fellow with the Julian Samora Research Institute. His ongoing research while at the Institute is in Latino economic issues, including the unionization and collective bargaining of Latino workers; the economics of Latino businesses; and the international commuter worker phenomenon as an economic feature of the U.S. border economy.