Students urged to support Valley farm workers’ strike

By BARRY KAPLAN

"Actions speak louder than words," they say, and if the actions of the vegetable growers of the lower Rio Grande Valley are any indication, there is a harsh and cruel injustice being perpetrated upon nearly 200,000 of our fellow Texans. Working in an industry, agriculture, which is not construed as interstate commerce in the eyes of Texas law, the workers have only a twenty-five year old State minimum wage law set at 40 cents per hour as a guarantee that they will be paid anything at all.

This insult to the integrity of Texas was brought to the attention of the Rice community Tuesday night, along with an appeal for aid of the strikers attempting to bring the farm owners to the bargaining table.

Twenty-six interested students and faculty heard Linda Lewis of the United Farm Workers Organizing Committee, AFL-CIO, outline the political conditions existing in Starr County and the steps taken by the strikers and their supporters in the rest of Texas to bring about the settlement of the strike.

The Starr County government, however, provided a community service for the residents of Rio Grande City. There is a park in the town, a concrete plaza with benches. No shade to protect from the hot daytime sun, and no lights to encourage evening gatherings, the park stays empty the day around, day after day. More necessary facilities, such as hospitals, do not exist anywhere closer than 40 miles distant, and the chances of a vegetable picker being able to afford the most minor medical services are slim indeed.

With a job subject to the whim of an often self-seeking foreman, and living conditions not suitable to maintain the vigor of a roadrunner in the harsh subtropical desert, the workers had very little to lose and everything to gain in declaring the strike against La Casita Farms and other growers in the region. The failure of the strike would mean at least another generation of intimidation by the establishment of the region and huge and unstable influx of migrants and wetbacks into an already unstable region.

Success would mean the integration into the society of the State a group of people who can contribute much to the economy. It will mean schooling for a people formerly held in ignorance and votes for a people formerly disenfranchised. It will mean steady meals for a people who once starved, and medicine and sanitation for a people once below all national norms.

Success is essential, and the strikers know it. Their banner says “Viva la huelga!” (long live the strike), and they are grimly determined not to falter.

(next week: The Rangers and the Roma Bridge)