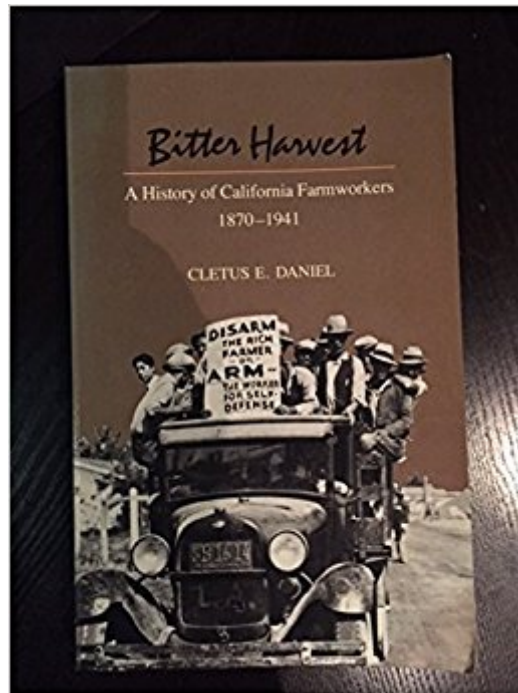




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Bitter Harvest: A History Of California Farmworkers, 1870-1941



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Customer Reviews

This is a very readable book on the California farm workers. Daniel uses an impressive array of primary sources from the period studied to show the powerlessness and misery of California farm workers (whose many problems of the 1930's remain today). He begins by describing the last gasps of Californian agrarianism in the late 19th century and the racist ideology constructed by growers about their use of Chinese immigrant labor. An interesting part of the book is the section dealing with the California Housing and Immigration Authority. This Authority, created in 1913 in response to worker unrest on California farms, investigated farm working conditions and of course found them to be horrendous. Workers lived in ramshackle mud and wood huts, were paid below starvation wages, and so on. One of the leaders of the Authority peppered his written investigations with very learned Freudian analyses describing how the misery and hopelessness of farm worker life created all sorts of complexes in the victims. Daniel describes how the Authority tried to undermine any signs of unionism among California farm workers.. The Authority engaged in extensive spying operations against the IWW, gathering material the federal Justice Department made use of during the World War I era Red Scare. The Authority, according to Daniel, coaxed some growers to modestly improve conditions of workers but such improvements were beaten back during the ultra-free market, anti-union climate of the 1920's. Daniel describes the half-assed and half-hearted effort of the A.F of L to try to organize California farm workers before World War one along with a highly inept effort by the IWW. Daniel does an excellent job describing the lukewarm attitude the New Deal progressives had toward unionization. While some officials were sympathetic to the farm

workers plight, the Roosevelt government on the whole was extremely reluctant to offend agribusiness interests. Farm workers were specifically excluded from laws protecting union organization, first under the laws of the National Recovery Administration (NRA) (1933-35) and then the Wagner Act of 1935. Administration officials concerned about providing stability for California agriculture were confronted the rise of the active and militant Cannery and Agricultural Workers Industrial Union (CAWIU). The CAWIU was the creation of the American Communist Party. Its courageous white organizers, such as Pat Chambers and Caroline Decker, were sent into a workforce which was so poor it had great difficulty affording very modest union dues and where employers and local officials had no restraint in employing violence against union organizers. The workforce was divided along racial and linguistic lines. A majority of the workforce was Mexican but there was a large Filipino minority along with some white and black workers fleeing the dust bowl further east. Daniel laboriously describes the CAWIU's strikes of 1933-34 and notes the violence from the growers and local authorities that attended them. After 1933, profits started to pick up for agriculture but growers kept wages down at Depression era levels. Picketers were often attacked by vigilantes and local police, suffering serious physical injury. For example in June 1933 CAWIU organizer Pat Callahan was lured into a meeting with a farm foreman and then knocked to the ground and set upon by deputy sheriffs, one of whom broke Callahan's jaw with a rifle butt. Three unarmed Mexican workers were shot dead by farmer vigilantes in October 1933. In early 1934 workers were locked into a CAWIU meeting hall by local police who proceeded to send tear gas into the building as the workers tried to smash windows to escape the gas. The police then invaded the hall and smashed CAWIU typewriters, mimeograph machines and other equipment. An ACLU attorney investigating the disturbances in Imperial Valley California,, AL Wirin, was kidnapped by vigilantes, including a uniformed highway patrolman beaten, driven out and left in the desert. When he trudged many miles back to his hotel a vigilante mob was waiting for him. The police told him they would protect him from the mob only if he agreed to leave the area. Another defense attorney from the leftist International Labor Defense (ILD) was attacked by a mob outside a courthouse while deputies stood by observing. The growers and local authorities also made use of California's anti-syndicalism law to arrest strikers. Daniel deftly describes Roosevelt administration efforts to intervene in the crises. He quotes the private correspondence of George Creel, the NRA's Western director (and former government propaganda head during World War I), where Creel encouraged repression of the CAWIU. Creel hoped that perhaps with the CAWIU out of the way farm employers would consent to some sort of arrangement where farm workers could air their grievances. Daniel portrays Creel's statist paternalism toward the farm workers in vivid detail. The

next administration envoy, retired general Pelham Glassford had much the same aims as Creel. Glassford travelled around California beginning in April 1934 denouncing the CAWIU as communist and giving other aid and government to the growers. Daniel quotes the general's private correspondence to show that Glassford had the strategy of getting on the side of the growers on the CAWIU issue in order to elicit concessions for farm workers on other issues. But no such concessions were forthcoming, ACLU attorneys continued to get physically assaulted. Glassford issued a public statement before he left the state which declared that the farm growers, under cover of an anti-communist hysteria, were with local police backing conducting a campaign of terror and intimidation. He admitted that union organizers were in jail on trumped up charges. The CAWIU made an effort to encourage rank and file participation in the direction of the strike. However the CAWIU was eliminated when the CP line changed in 1934 with orders for party members to join existing bourgeois unions as part of the "Popular Front" policy. No serious organizing force among California farm workers emerged for decades.

Daniel's writing and depth of detail make Bitter Harvest one of the best sources for an historical account of farmworkers and the agricultural labor industry in California. Daniel's analysis includes citations from a plethora of sources that makes Bitter Harvest one of the most comprehensive narratives on the topic. Furthermore, he does an outstanding job of relating his insightful historical analysis to current issues facing the American public. For anyone interested in the economic history of California and farmworkers in America, Bitter Harvest is an essential source of information.

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