

Cesar Chavez's 'Fast for Life'

PAT HOFFMAN

ON JULY 16, Cesar Chavez, president of the United Farm Workers, drove out of the Tehachapi Mountains where the UFW headquarters are located to Delano, California, where the union was founded. No one knew then that he had decided to begin a water-only fast to "identify himself with the many farm worker families who suffer from the scourge of pesticide poisonings in agricultural communities." Delano had been the site of Chavez's 25-day fast in 1968, a fast for nonviolence that had drawn together contentious and discouraged elements of the struggling union.

The union began in 1962 as a self-help organization, with monthly dues of \$3.50—not enough to support Chavez, the founder and director, who had left a well-paid position with the Community Service Organization to organize farm workers. Chavez and his wife worked in the fields to earn additional money, and the farm workers accepted the sacrifice of \$3.50 a month in order to build an organization of their own. When the now-legendary grape strike began in September 1965, workers also accepted the high price of walking out during the grape harvest, with no income and only a shaky organization to direct the strike.

At age 61, Chavez returned to the site

Pat Hoffman is on the board of the National Farm Worker Ministry and is the author of Ministry of the Dispossessed: Learning from the Farm Worker Movement (Wallace Press, 1987).

of that struggle, and returned spiritually to an acceptance of the weakness of the poor. His fast, which lasted 36 days, was, he said, for his own purification, and it was an act of penance "for those in positions of moral authority and for all men and women activists who know what is right and just, who know that they could or should do more, who have become bystanders and thus collaborators with an industry that does not care about its workers."

I visited Delano on the 12th day of the fast. Chavez was staying in a small bare room at the union's Agbayani Retirement Village, the first retirement housing for farm workers ever built in this country. He was dressed—but lying on a hospital bed equipped with an overbed table—and he was working. He asked if I would be staying for the nightly mass at the union hall.

That night 300 people, mostly workers with their families, attended mass. The farm workers had been up since before dawn and had put in a long day of work, and had then dressed their children to be at mass with Chavez. At the conclusion of the mass, Lori Salinas, a 13-year-old from the farming community of McFarland, sang a song she had written for Chavez. McFarland has been cited for its high incidence of childhood cancer, and that week Lori had gone in for biopsies on numerous tumors around her thyroid (which were later found to be benign). The song was this youngster's prayer of thanks to Chavez for his attention to farm worker illnesses linked to pesticides.

"You, Cesar Chavez, have given us a helping hand and have listened to our crying souls. Someday, I hope to march with you and tell the world how much you love us and care for us like our Lord, Jesus Christ. I listen to the feelings of your heart as I look into your eyes, I see the pain in your heart which we are suffering."

The national media exhibited a kind of fatigue about Chavez's fast until members of the Robert Kennedy family visited Chavez and joined one of the daily picket lines protesting grape sales at a Delano grocery store. On August 14 Jesse Jackson met with Chavez, and the two decided that the fast would be carried on by others.

Chavez decided to end his fast at a mass on August 21. More than 7,000 supporters attended the mass, and at least 80 percent of those were farm workers. The celebrative crowd gave boisterous welcomes to the Kennedys and cheers went up again when Jackson and a group of black politicians arrived. Actors and other entertainment personalities were warmly welcomed.

When Chavez was brought into the tent that Sunday morning carried by two of his sons, the thousands who had come to be with him stayed seated in silence, at Chavez's request. Following the Gospel lesson, Chavez's oldest son, Fernando, 39, read his father's brief statement, which concluded:

Today I pass on the fast for life to hundreds of concerned men and women throughout North America and the world

who have offered to share the suffering. They will help carry the burden by continuing the fast in front of their local supermarkets. . . . The fast will go on in hundreds of distant places and it will multiply among thousands and then millions of caring people until every poisoned grape is off the supermarket shelves. And the fast will endure until the fields are safe for farm workers, the environment is preserved for future generations, and our food is once again a source of nourishment and life.

Jackson asked for a show of hands of people who would fast for one to three days. Hundreds of hands went up and monitors walked through the tent passing out pledge sheets to those willing to carry on the fast in front of their local stores. Signed pledges were collected in grocery bags and brought forward; the bags lined the width of the large stage.

Marion Moses, one of the doctors monitoring Chavez during the fast, reported that Chavez lost 33 pounds—19 percent of his body weight—and that he had endured nausea that made it difficult for him to consume water essential to keep his kidneys from failing. She also reported that he suffered intense stomach cramps.

WHY DID Chavez put himself through this? Detractors among the growers said the fast was a bid for publicity. Some journalists suggested it was an attempt to revive a dying union. But as *Los Angeles Times* editorial writer Frank Del Olmo said, "It's hard to argue with someone who is willing to risk death to make a point."

Chavez was not just making a point. He was turning to a revered spiritual practice of action by inaction. Chavez and the UFW have been criticized for years for being power hungry. The union has been called too much a movement; it's been labeled as too militant and too passive. In the '60s the UFW was criticized by the far left and many other unions for its nonviolent stance. Later it was criticized for random incidents of rock throwing on picket lines.

The UFW is far from perfect, but it has an idealism that is almost an affront to our society. How do we understand a union that has been around for 25 years and doesn't pay salaries; a union in which all the top leaders live in a simple, small community with a few little frame houses and a lot of trailers; a union whose leaders gather for worship each Sunday morning? The union has done what no union or organization had ever been able to do—successfully organize farm work-



Cesar Chavez

ers and obtain contracts with growers. It has 80 contracts in place, mostly with tree-fruit, wine-grape and vegetable growers. It has about 30,000 dues-paying members. The union has given thousands of farm workers a chance to be public speakers, organizers, computer experts, administrators, lobbyists and attorneys. It has made it possible for poor farm workers to have confidence in their own stories and experiences. It is a union whose president fasts not to lose weight but to gain inner power. Can we believe in such a union?

Many people do not understand why consumers are being asked again to boycott grapes. There's mumbling that Chavez and his union must not have their act together if they haven't resolved their situation by now. After all, in the 1970s 17 million Americans went without grapes to pressure growers into signing contracts. What happened?

In 1975, after a decade of bruising strikes and boycotts, the California legislature passed the Agricultural Labor Relations Act. The law stipulated that a union representation election be held on any ranch where a simple majority of farm workers petitioned for such an election, and that the election be supervised by the Agricultural Labor Relations Board. It also banned such practices as firing or harassing union supporters. The law spelled out procedures for evaluating charges by workers, unions and growers, and the ALRB was entrusted with the responsibility of redressing violations.

The law worked reasonably well under Democratic Governor Jerry Brown. But in 1982 Republican George Deukmejian was elected governor with the heavy financial backing of growers and grower

organizations. Deukmejian had dues to pay. He appointed David Stirling, who had previously represented some major growers in the state, as the ALRB's general counsel. In addition, funds were cut for administration of the law. The UFW said that the complaints it filed were being buried in piles of unprocessed claims, or were being arbitrarily thrown out without investigation.

By this time, grower opposition to unionization of workers had become more sophisticated. Growers used public relations firms to characterize the UFW as a union that had done good things in the '60s and '70s but whose time had passed. They claimed that the union was out of touch and no longer represented workers' true interests. Growers hired attorneys who manipulated the ALRA to slow the union's ability to obtain contracts. Some representation elections were decertified and some new elections were lost. Whether some of those elections were lost because of grower intimidation was a moot point, since virtually no legal recourse was available to the union.

Realizing it could no longer rely on the provisions of the ALRA, the union announced a boycott strategy in 1984.

When Deukmejian was re-elected in 1986, the union decided it would have to intensify the boycott effort to gain its demands, which include a ban on the five most dangerous pesticides used in growing grapes; an industry-wide agreement between the union and grape growers; and a joint UFW-grower program for testing poisonous residues of grapes. The union was no longer in a position to send hundreds of fully supported volunteers to cities around the country to picket in front of stores and go to organizations and churches and make direct appeals. But in the fall of 1986 it sent its top leaders to key cities to organize support. This was supplemented by a direct mail campaign, using the technology the UFW had developed in the early 1980s to serve farm workers and to do fund-raising.

Though a lot of people privately stopped buying grapes, there was a sense that the boycott wasn't going anywhere. People weren't talking about it and they weren't fervent about it. Chavez's decision to fast gave the struggle an infusion of spiritual energy. Well-known people have continued the fast and attract media attention: Jesse Jackson; Joseph Lowery, president of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference; and actors (and people of faith) such as Martin Sheen,

Edward Olmos and Lou Diamond Phillips. The San Francisco Board of Supervisors is fasting, and Atlanta mayor Andrew Young has pledged to fast and to invite other mayors to fast. Labor leaders and leading members of the Chicano community are also fasting. All these fasts serve to highlight the UFW's boycott of table grapes, especially at three targeted supermarket chains, A & P, Safeway and (in the West) Ralph's.

Official church response has been spotty so far. Except for the eight Catholic priests who concelebrated mass and a group of nuns officially representing the National Association of Women Religious, the only other representatives of church bodies that I saw at the August 21 mass were Bob Lehman of the Unitarian Universalist Association and John Moyer, executive director of the Northern California Ecumenical Council. Moyer began a fast that Sunday and con-

cluded its three days later. The ecumenical council has had people picketing regularly at a Safeway store. When asked why he was engaged in this way he said, "I've personally been in support [of the UFW] for 20 years, and this council has, as well. We see that only about 2 percent of farm workers are organized. And what is needed is unionization to bring economic justice. Here we are in a country that produces food for the whole world and farm workers are still going hungry."

In recent weeks the *United Methodist Reporter* has published letters from Methodists upset that their Board of Church and Society has come out in support of the UFW's table grape boycott. One woman from a rural part of California wrote that the church was "stressing socioeconomic problems and neglecting the spiritual well-being of our population as well as our members." Her observation suggests how little consistent en-

couragement the church has given members to experience the spiritual renewal that can come from solidarity with oppressed people.

Lynne Halpin is another United Methodist, and the chair of her Conference Board of Church and Society in Southern California. She drove to Delano for the third weekend of the fast, participated in the afternoon picketing at a grocery store and helped with other tasks at the National Farm Workers Ministry office. When asked what this participation meant for her she said, "It's meant putting feet to faith. Believing in justice is one thing, but going to Delano was another. Participation was important—meeting some of the people involved and helping in specific ways." Then she added, "People cannot be dying to put food on my table without that being called into question. . . . By the way," she said, "I'll be fasting when I return to Los Angeles." ■