

FROM

THIS

EARTH . . .

... of the Delano Grape Strike

by Jon Lewis

Written and designed
By the photographer.
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We, in our work, can speak more than about our subjects –
we can speak for them.

We can more than speak of our subjects –
we can speak with them.

They, given tongue, will be able to speak with and for us.

Dorothea Lange

How did it take hold here,
this strike that will not be
broken? Why does it last?
Where can it lead? Men
with knowledge and
position will give you
reasons I would not
understand. But the huelga
came out of me and what is
my life. I know of that in
bones that have labored
and a heart that has pride.
I will tell you what I have
seen, and what is my hope.

That hope is of a
people who from far
days knew the touch
of earth to their hand.

My story starts in
the earth of this
valley, where the
land is good and the
going of a seed to its
ripeness I have felt
in my hands.
If you know this
fullness in its own
time, is it natural,
these long rows and
big squares that the
land became? When
the net of row crops
was thrown over the
land, it fell on us,
too. Like the land,
we took the shape
of that.

Our labor became a
money crop that is
harvested with the
season, then lies
barren. And my
people must swarm
down the rows in a
fever and go as
locusts to the next
crop.
Now the rhythms of
our lives are not of
the earth, but of our
wandering.

With a winter, we
draw together by the
edge of these valley
towns, and manage
the way we can.
There are two towns
for every name you
see on a map. But
the outer ones are
all one town,
wherever we live.

Farm workers
of all the races
have their way
of life in
common. It
separates us
from those
inner towns,
but it can
unite us in our
own.

And the
land, in
giving life
under our
hand,
teaches that
all things
have their
time and a
place under
the sun.

And the schools
of our children
are the same
school.

In
surviving,
we learn to
hang on
with the
strength
that is
behind all
strength.
And we
return
with the
year to the
fields
when first
greenness
is over the
land.

And one
day to
Delano
came a
man to try
his dream.

He was of the fields with us, and had the migrants' road for his school. He talked about how we could get together so things would be better. He had meetings in different people's houses at night, and a few would go and then tell others what they heard. They said he thought big but didn't talk big, and he wanted us to make a farm workers' union. But all the other unions in the fields had failed through the years. How could we try so big a thing? He said it had to start somewhere, and he talked about little things and he did them. He knew the laws and a worker's rights, and would go to the foreman about a man's deductions or to the traffic court for another. He showed us that by looking out for each other, we could claim our rights as men. So we trusted Cesar Chavez, and he was our leader.

It started little by little. We saw that some of the things we needed we could do ourselves. So we started group insurance, a co-op store for motor oil and tires, and a credit union, too. From the dues of \$3.50 a month we rented a building at the farthest edge of town, and we would go there after work for help with our problems. As more people joined, Cesar and his wife, Helen, would be there during the day to take care of everything that needed to be done. And as more things were done, more workers heard and became members.

So we built our community union, and it was the National Farm Workers' Association.

Our life in the fields went on as it always has. We knew it would be long years before we had a voice in our day's labor. Growers have all the power, so we started where we could. We were working together now, and seeing what we could do.

We were working for the day our daughters would not be at our sides in these fields ...

... and the sons of our sons would be as men on the land.

Maybe we had won even then, once we were together.

Then came the strike vote.

We had been building our union for over three years, and knew there was a long way to go before we came to our strength. But our Filipino brothers in the AFL-CIO union, A.W.O.C., called a strike against more than thirty grape growers in the area. We knew about sticking together and wouldn't cross their picket lines. Letters to the growers asking for talks came back unopened, and they wouldn't even speak to us. So by unanimous vote, we took a pledge of nonviolence and began our Strike of the Grape. That was September 16, 1965. We had \$86 in the treasury.

So they began, the long days of our picket line.

The growers and their armed guards couldn't scare us. They were there with their shotguns and their dogs. They shoved us and hit us and called us every name. They drove tractors in front of the picket line to cover us with dust and drown out our pleas to the workers. Some sprayed us with sulfur. But we were nonviolent, and we kept on and were not silenced. Then the police started arresting us for calling "Huelga" to the workers. This was disturbing the peace, they said, so we disturbed the peace and went to jail. One day they arrested forty-four of us at once. But we were there the next day, and all days.

The days went into weeks, and we kept on.

We talked to the men in the fields, and we were heard.

Most of them didn't know what a union was all about – but they knew what their life was, and they wanted it better. They came out on strike by the hundreds, and the fields were nearly empty. We thought it would be just a few more weeks for the strike to win.

But it was not so simple. The growers started bringing in strike-breakers to take our jobs. Now when we brought a crew out of a field, it was full again in a few days. The growers had to go as far as Texas and Mexico for workers, but the grapes were being picked.

We saw that the unity we found in the N.F.W.A., most a Mexican-American union in one small town, was not with farm workers all over the country. Growers have been turning people against each other for years, housing them in separate camps and giving some the better jobs or more money for the same work. In this soil the seed of a union, people getting together, has a hard time growing. We believed it could some day, and we kept on.

It was not fear or mistrust among workers that brought in that harvest. We talked to the men in the fields day after day, and we did more to overcome this than was ever done. They respected us in our struggle, and they were for us.

It takes a special man to walk off the job. He has been trucked hundreds of miles and signed a contract that he will work for so many weeks. He wasn't told there was a strike in the area as the law says. His way back will not be paid unless he works out his time. Some bosses said he would be arrested if he broke his contract. He was caught in the middle, hearing things from all sides. Could we blame him for not knowing what to do, with a big family back home and better money here because of our strike? It takes a special man to throw down his tools and leave the camp. To stand on a strange road, with all that he has carried in his two hands that have no work. It takes pride to do that.

We saw them step out on that road with their ragged bags and their great pride. We couldn't help them much, we were so few and with no money. But what we felt then is with us still. It made us want to build a union so strong, that no farm worker would ever again stand in the dust with his bags in his hands.

We kept our strike going somehow, and just by holding on we lasted until people knew of our struggle. And they came to walk the picket lines with us and to eat in our strike kitchen and to sleep on our floors. Donations and food and clothes started coming in from all over, from churches, from unions, from colleges, and from anybody that cared. Walter Reuther came to Delano. Robert Kennedy was with us. And the students.

We found we were not alone and forgotten as it had seemed all the years. And knowing people cared gave new strength. Now we were doing things farm workers had never done before. We went to picket the Governor and tell him what we thought. We followed the grapes to the produce markets of San Francisco and Los Angeles, and picketed on the docks. Things were moving again.

We knew by now we couldn't win the strike just in the fields of Delano. With all the support we were getting, we decided to take our strike to the whole country. So we called for a boycott against Schenley Industries, the second largest grower. A dozen volunteers were given any money we could spare and assigned a city to organize. In old cars or by hitchhiking, they got there somehow. Before long we heard about picket lines in New York, in Chicago, in Boston, then it seemed everywhere. Volunteer groups came up wherever we had friends to work for the cause. And our cry of "Huelga" was over the land.

The
months
came, and
we lasted.

Then there was winter, and the fields were empty. With no picketing, maybe things would slow down and couldn't be started again for the next harvest. But Cesar carried a dream over his years in the valley, and he wanted us to try it now. A handful of men striking over four hundred square miles couldn't win just by picketing. But what if that handful walked three hundred miles to the capitol to seek justice? Could the force of so few be multiplied by this hardship, to let the world know we didn't mean to quit? The Peregrinacion is part of the Mexican heritage. It is a pilgrimage at holy times to do penance for our sins, and to ask the help of our patron saint, the Virgin of Guadalupe. Cesar wanted to combine this with civil rights marches of this country, and reach Sacramento on Easter Sunday. He believed farm workers all up the valley would help us on our way. If they would join with us, and take a few marchers into their homes each night and feed them, we could make it. It would be a long way and hard, but we would follow Cesar up the valley.

So we
began

The banner of our Virgin led the way, and the miles began.

We were walking the paths of our
people's long wandering in this valley,
through the endless fields of our labor.

Only now, instead of keeping
on the outside of these valley
towns, we walked up their main
streets for all to see our day was
coming.
As we kept on, the people saw
and they came.

They came with food and shelter and music and hope.

They came to our rallies in
the evenings and heard the
Plan of Delano, calling for
all farm workers to join
together to claim our rights
as men. They sang with us
the songs of our strike and
laughed as our Teatro gave
skits showing the farm
worker's life.
And our "Vivas" echoed
from these towns and filled
the valley and we were one.

We went on and would not be stopped. The people came, and we went on.

Then three days before Sacramento, the announcement was made. Schenley had recognized our union, and we would start talks for a contract within thirty days.

After seven months of the strike, here was our first victory. It was so sudden, we didn't know at first what we had done.
Can these things happen, a little handful of men going on day after day, making a big company in New York give them a union?
After all the broken strikes of this valley, were these men and women around me the ones to do this thing, winning the first farm workers' contract in all our history?

We looked at each other, and knew from our eyes and how we stood that we were the ones.
We had lasted, and our union would live.

Many who had given life to our cause came to be with us in the hour of our victory, and the line of our march was long on the road that day.

And we were 10,000 at the capitol on Easter morning, after three weeks and three hundred miles.

The Governor wasn't there, but it seemed everyone else was. The cheering that day told all the world what we knew then, that our cause was only beginning.

But our march was not over. The Virgin, who had been passed from many hands along the way, had another mile to go. We returned her to where she came to us from, the Church of Our Lady of Guadalupe.

And there, in the silence, our pilgrimage ended.

We went back to our picket line, and the valley wasn't as big as it was before.

We took on giant DiGiorgio next, scourge of the unions. DiGiorgio, who had been breaking strikes since our fathers' time, on his ranches strung out from the southern end of the state to north of Sacramento. We knew it would be a death struggle, but if we could win against him, there wasn't a grower in the valley we couldn't stand up to. We called for a boycott of his S&W Fine Foods and threw everything we had into the battle. We put up a shrine to the Virgin outside his ranch, and kept vigil there twenty-four hours a day with burning candles. We faced this giant, and the fight began.

His first blow almost finished us. After Schenley recognized us, DiGiorgio said he would give his workers an election to see if they wanted a union. While we talked about how there could be a fair election, the Teamster's Union started coming around. They got into the camps to talk to the workers where we couldn't. Then even the bosses started talking for the Teamsters. Here was one of the strongest unions, and it had helped us before. Now was it going through our picket lines to make a deal with the company? DiGiorgio denied this, and talks were still going on when the blow fell. He announced an election between us and the Teamsters in two days. We had no say in how the election was held, but we gathered outside on the road by the hundreds and called to our supporters not to vote.

With our own eyes we saw most of the workers stay on the trucks, and heard their foremen threaten them if they didn't get out and vote. We stood there for twelve hours as they brought some of the crews back two and three times to try to get them to vote. But the workers were with us, and most of the people that voted were maintenance men and office helpers and not farm workers.

When DiGiorgio gave out the results of his phony election, he said it was 283 votes for the Teamsters and 6 for the N.F.W.A.

Was that it? Did it end this way? We went up against two of the strongest opponents there could be, and didn't even get a fair fight. Now all they had to do was announce their sweetheart contract, and it would be just a matter of time for us. Whenever we put pressure on a grower, he could make a deal with the Teamsters, and our union would waste away.

But we would fight to the end, and went to the Virgin for our strength.

Our prayers went into the heavens that night, and with the dawn new life was there.

Churchmen came from all over the state to investigate the election. They talked to the workers and heard all the ways DiGiorgio tried to force them to vote for the Teamsters.

Now someone besides us knew what DiGiorgio meant when he talked about "free" elections in full-page newspaper ads.

So the ministers and priests and rabbis asked the Governor to do something. He must have gotten pressure from all over, because he brought in the American Arbitration Association to investigate. And the A.A.A. called for a new election in two months, which it would supervise.

We had heard from DiGiorgio what his workers wanted all these months. Now they would speak for themselves.

If we didn't make it this time, we would really be finished. With everything riding on that one day of the election, we took a big step into the future on our faith in victory.

We voted to merge with A.W.O.C. in a new AFL-CIO union, the United Farm Workers' Organizing Committee. This meant someday we could be one national union of all farm workers, and it would be strong as we were strong.

For that to be, we had to win long life for the union in the election coming up.

We decided our biggest effort would be trying to find the workers who left DiGiorgio in support of the strike and get them to come to Delano and vote. There were hundreds of them spread all over the Southwest and into Mexico, but if we could reach them in time that could make the difference.

We went door-to-door through the valley towns, asking if anyone had worked for DiGiorgio. We had radio announcements telling about the election and who could vote. Wherever we got a name and address, one of our members went there and built our support. Months before when these workers walked out of the fields, we could do nothing for them. Now things would be different. We had a food caravan from Sacramento to Delano, for all the voters that would come. Those same farm workers who helped us march up the valley went to their cupboards again. They gave ten tons of food for Delano.

Now we could go into DiGiorgio's camps at noon and after work to talk with the field crews. The Teamsters were there in fancy trucks, giving away free sodas and their plastic key chains. They poured all their power into Delano and threw their weight around. A few of us faced them each day by those roadsides, while our main work went on up and down the state and beyond. They had the money and the growers with them, but we were not alone. The AFL-CIO sent a handful of their best organizers. The man who got Cesar involved in community work years before came to direct our campaign. And nonviolence was on our side.

The Teamsters had their muscle men to work us over. They could break a nose or a camera, but they couldn't break our spirit. One of us sitting and talking to a group of workers was suddenly hit in the face with a beer can. He didn't fight back and was attacked. When we pulled the Teamster goon off of him, he said: "Is this the kind of union you want?"

The workers heard, and were not fooled.

And the workers came. Some from just across the ranch. Some from 1,000 miles away in Mexico.

And they were heard.

We had a union then,
and it had life and
would live after us for
all farm workers.

We started by getting together with only a
dream for our grandchildren, and had it
come to us in our days.

There have been other
elections and more victories
since that day.
The biggest victory has
been in the support of all
races as our union grows.
The Delano Grape Strike
still goes on in this one
valley, and I cannot count
the valleys or the crops of
this country. The union will
be a long time coming to
those far places, but now
hope has gone before it to
prepare the soil. And the
seed will pass from our
hands to others when its
time is on it.

Just a year after our
pilgrimage we celebrated
with another march, this
time only two miles out of
town. Here are forty acres
the union now owns, and
we dedicated the land where
our national headquarters
will be.
Not in some big city, but on
this earth, where our union
was built and survived and
will grow across all the land.

With our own hands we will build here the main offices of our union, and a clinic, a gas station, a co-op store, and our meeting hall.

And they will be of Spanish architecture, with brown adobe brick and roofs of red tile. One day trees will have root in this soil, with water flowing by the walkways, and sunshine and laughter will be on the avenues.

This I saw and knew would be, that Easter morning – rising from this earth.

This volume bears no union bug as it was shaped by one hand, from photography through presswork. An edition of 500 copies represents a master's thesis at San Francisco State College.

After completing B.A.'s in Journalism and the Social Sciences, Jon Lewis spent a year in Delano working for the strike. From his darkroom put together with a borrowed \$150-, he produced prints for the union's newspaper and boycott centers.

Lewis is now making a film in Spanish from his photographs, financed with proceeds from this volume. He hopes the present work might lead to a grant to return to the fields as a cinematographer.