

“Viva La Causa”

Cesar Chavez, interviewed by Wendy Goepel. 1963

When you mention union in California, most people think of AWOC, the Teamsters, or perhaps the ILWU. Here, there are nationwide super-structures; and it is assumed that one of these will eventually “reach down” and pick up the farm worker. Some say it will be the Teamsters because they control the necessary transportation link from field to cannery or retail store; others speculate that it will be AWOC because of its activity in the valley during the past five years.

But some observers feel that a little-known organization called the Farm Workers Association (FWA) is building a union in the real sense. FWA, with headquarters in Delano (Kern County), was begun by Cesar Chavez. Some people may be more familiar with his name than with the organization.

Cesar Chavez was one of the first staff members of the Community Service Organization (CSO), a political and social-action movement among Mexican-Americans in various California Communities. He became a skilled community organizer under the tutelage of Fred Ross of the Industrial Areas Foundation. He worked for CSO in San Jose, Oxnard, Stockton and elsewhere. As an organizer, he had to learn what unity and conflict meant, and how they came about. He was forced to figure out what people joined an organization or supported an organization.

It is difficult, he has found, to remain a leader of your own people, rather than to use your people as a vehicle for improving your personal position—for gaining a new social identity for yourself. Many minority group organizations have gained strength in their early days, have earned the awareness of majority groups, and have then sold out the original purpose of the organization for some immediate awareness and appeasement offered to them: either the group has been absorbed, or its leaders have been lured off into positions within the “mainstream” of social life. Chavez himself has turned down positions with the Peace Corps and others, to continue what he believes he must try to do and might be able to do.

The Farm Workers Association is almost two years old now. Chavez says, “If you look back, we’ve come a long way; if you look ahead, we have a long way to go.” He says there is nothing unusual about what he is trying to do now: “I’m just trying to do what everyone else has, and making a few changes where I know we’ve made mistakes before.” But the secret of his success—if there is to be success—will lie in certain unique techniques of worker organization upon which the Farm Workers Association is built.

Cesar begins by saying, “Some farm workers are bums just like some growers are. It’s a big mistake to begin by idealizing the workers because they’re the ‘down and outers.’”

And, “most farm workers are just human; they live, like all of us, from day to day; they want happiness and they want to avoid confusion and pain.”

Then he continues by asking questions: “The spirit of our Revolution; what has happened to it?” “Why do people belong to anything, or get excited about anything; what do they want; what keeps them going?”

“When I was 19,” he recalls, “I was picking cotton in Corcoran. A car with loud speakers came around. The speakers were saying: ‘Stop working. You’re not making a living. Come downtown to a rally instead.’ My brother and I left, with many others. 7,000 cotton pickers gathered in a little park in the center of Corcoran. There was a platform and a union leader got up and started talking to all the workers about ‘the cause’. I would have died right then if someone had told me how and why to die for our cause. But no one did. There was a crisis, and a mob, but there was no organization, and nothing came of it all. A week later everyone was back picking cotton in the some fields at the some low wages. It was dramatic. People come together. Then it was over. That won’t organize farm workers.”

“A couple of years ago,” he continues, “I was driving home from Los Angeles. I passed a Pentecostal church at night and it was full of people and I thought to myself, why do all the people come there so much. It must be because they like to praise God—and to sing.”

A Union is a group of people who have feelings for one another and a devotion to a common cause. During the first year, 1962, Chavez spent months just talking with people in various towns—in their homes, in places where they gathered at night, in the fields as they left their places at the end of the day. In the beginning, he says, it is important to let people know exactly what you are trying to do and what role they have in it. It is fairly easy to get people interested but it is important to find out which people are committed and are willing to work, and which are not really serious. Sometimes it is very hard to know this at first. In the beginning, he recalls, it was easy to get everybody excited. They were ready to join quickly, but they had unrealistic goals and ideas about what they would get. The biggest problem of all is to build a group spirit and to keep people involved and concerned—prepared to make demands, prepared to show their strength and their unity over a long period of time. You have to just begin this by finding the committed people in every little community; this takes time. You begin by talking to people; then you call back on people. You spend evenings having “house meetings”—talking to 3 or 4 people who want to spend an evening talking about problems and discussing what they see that has to be done. You build a core of people who keep coming back to talk. You find certain people who are respected as leaders in every community; and you find that some of them leaders are committed to the task ahead. A union, then, is not simply getting enough workers to stage a strike. A union is building a group with a spirit and an existence all its own.

A union must be built around the idea that people must do things by themselves, in order to help themselves. Too many people, Cesar feels, have the idea that the farm worker is capable only of being helped by others. People want to give things to him. So, in time, some workers come to expect help from the outside. They change their idea of themselves. They become unaccustomed to the idea that they can do anything by themselves for themselves. They have accepted the idea that they are “too small” to do anything, too weak to make themselves heard, powerless to change their own destinies. The leader, of course, gives himself selflessly to the members, but as must expect and demand that they give themselves to the organization at the same time. He exists only to help make the people strong.

A union must have members who pay dues regularly. The only people which the Farm Workers Association counts as members are those who pay their \$3.50 a month, every month. Chavez says that farm workers who are committed can afford to pay \$3.50 a month in dues, even though they have low incomes. He feels that the members commit themselves to the organization by paying dues regularly. He feels that because they pay so much, they feel they are the important part of the organization; that they have a right to be served. They don't hesitate to write, to call, to ask for things—and to reaffirm their position in the association. Members enjoy certain concrete benefits, and are offered assistance with social economic, and legal problems which they might have. These benefits can be, and are, used continually by the members. To many, the breadth of services And programs available to association members is new, and is most welcome. And the idea that the members are, alone, paying the salary of a man who is responsible to them is very important, both to members and to Cesar Chavez. “Of course,” he says, “it is very hard to limit assistance and service to members: many people come to your door because they know that you might be able to help them out with some problem. But helping everyone who come would take up all my time—and more. Then I would have none left to work with the other members. People must come to see assistance to one another as the purpose of the organization, as its very reason for being.” Cesar has also learned that you do not build a strong, on-going organization by simply performing services for any person who has a crisis, and needs help. People must come to realize that they join and are associated with a group that they will help, and that will help them, if they ever need it. The people together are not too small.

The people together must learn to show their strength. One way which Cesar feels is very important is through concern with legislation. Part of the “training process” which the membership goes through is to learn how legislation is passed, and why certain kinds are often not passed. One of the requirements of membership is to pledge to work on legislation. This is done through letter writing campaigns, for example. Delegations to Sacramento are also part of the program: about 40 of the members went to the Governor's hearings on farm labor, and those who had never been to Sacramento before went of a four of the Capitol. “Legislation will not solve the problem,” Chavez says, “but it can certainly make the road smoother.”

In the Farm Workers Association, a single membership covers a whole family. Membership fluctuates some, with the fewest members during the time when there is the most work available. During this period, people are too busy to remember to pay dues, and they just aren't as concerned with their problems as they are during the slack season. In spite of seasonal fluctuations, the organization has continued to grow every month since it began. Today, the Farm Workers Association is no longer Cesar Chavez. There are local leaders, Farm Workers Association representatives, who work with one another, and with Cesar. Local leaders are responsible for the members in their own town—for helping them with the problems they may encounter, for keeping the local group together, for encouraging people to understand and to use the services available to them as members, for collecting dues, for recruiting new members in the community. At the present time, there are local leaders, and local groups, in 67 different areas in 8 valley counties. The greatest number of local groups is in Kings County, followed by Kern, San Joaquin, Tulare and Fresno counties.

In every community, there are certain types of farm workers who are not potential members of the association. That group of workers who has recently arrived from Mexico are, for example, very hard to organize. They tend to think they are better off here than they really are. For one thing, it is difficult to explain American-style unionism to the "emigrado." Mexicans tend to assume that the United States Constitution forbids workers to cross a picket line, and that it should therefore be fairly simple to organize a strike, and a union. "The Mexican revolutionary constitution is," Chavez says, "kinder to the working man than our own."

The workers who are hired year-round on one farm have a loyalty to the grower and are not willing to lose their security for an improvement in their conditions; they feel they would jeopardize their jobs by joining the association. Another group which usually won't join consists of the "old hands" among the local, temporary workers. These are the workers who have been in one area about 20 years—long enough to know where all the seasonal jobs in a three or four county area are. These workers have a fairly regular circuit of jobs, in and out of agriculture. When there is no work available, during certain periods, these workers can draw unemployment insurance from the cannery and other "covered" jobs which they have had. But it is not uncommon for them to collect unemployment insurance and do temporary farm work at the same time to supplement their income. These workers have something to lose by joining an association which would change the system.

Thus, there are different kinds of farm workers in any small community, and there is a certain amount of friction, overt or covert, between groups of workers. It is the seasonal farm workers who have been in the United States for some time but who have not been able to find a full year's employment who are most likely to be interested in joining the association, and in seeing an eventual union of farm workers. Chavez notes that there will probably be real conflict in many little communities before the problems are finally

resolved, because of the vested interests which certain workers think they have in the status quo.

The agricultural workers who are FWA members may, then be characterized as local families who depend on seasonal farm work. Most of them live, year-round, in the southern San Joaquin. Almost all are family men. They are a stable group to work with, and they are capable members of an ongoing organization.

The biggest problem is keeping the local groups, all the people, united and ready to engage in “direct action” when the time comes. There are not many general meetings of the Farm Workers Association. Chavez observes that people do not like to go to meetings endlessly. If nothing important happens when they do go, they may become discouraged about the organization and the movement, on the basis of the meeting. Too many meetings also give the appearance that nothing important is happening, that there is no progress. When a group must be built to work for a goal which is several years away, it is the most difficult to build and keep a group together. If a group has not grown to the point where some direct action can be taken against some outside person or some problem then there is a dangerous tendency for the group to weaken or splinter and for in-group factions or group disorganization to take place. So, it is very important during the growth period of a group to tackle small problems which individual members have and which the members can work out with the help of local leaders of the organization. The task of confronting some person or some problem which the group feels is important, and the success which is obtained when the people work together gives individual members a sense of control over their own lives. It teaches them more about the complexities of modern society, and it gives them an opportunity to work constructively in small, functional units. It gives the group a continual reason for being.

The few large meetings which are held, to show and feel the size and unity of the association, are carefully planned. There is appeal to pageantry and a display of the “signs and symbols” which are part of the association. There is a Farm Workers Association song, written by Mrs. Rosa Gloria, a member from Madera, which is sung at meetings. There is a symbol, which Chavez admits is a bit “flashy”: a thunderbird on a red and black field. And there is a slogan “Viva la Causa”, which is the unity to which workers pledge themselves. These artifacts are used in the meetings, in greeting one another and on the association’s letterhead stationery. But these large meetings have a limited function. The hard work is done daily, in the communities, by the leaders and members.

Of course, the biggest temptation is to “do something dramatic.” This would be easier and quicker than working day to day on small problems and keeping people together. “I figure though”, says Chavez, “that even if we had a 50-50 chance of carrying off a successful strike, the gamble would still be too great. You stand always to lose more than you gain by drama when you are working with people. Thirty men may lose their jobs as a result of strike. You lose 30 members, and you gain 30 ‘disorganizers’. So we must work on immediate goals—helping the members get a little better living through using the

facilities of the association, through getting what they are entitled to, through learning how to participate more fully in social life. And the hard work of gaining official recognition, including strikes if necessary, will come.”

Chavez says that he is not concerned that his organization be the core of a union for farm workers. He says that his membership is ready to unite with any other union, if any other succeeds. He, personally, doesn't want to be the one at the bargaining table.

Chavez conceives his real job to be education of the people. “You cannot organize a strike or build a union, until the members who must do the real work understand what all this means, what kind of activities are involved. They must, first, be able to articulate their own hopes and goals. He would like very much to hold short-term schools where the leader-members could discuss and study union organization together. Whatever the outcome of the Farm Workers Association, it is certain that the individuals who have learned and have profited from being members will be a lasting asset to their communities and to society at large.

Cesar says, finally, “even if our work succeeds, I don't want to hang on forever. What I would really like is to be alone somewhere—in Mexico, or in the mountains—and have time to read all the classics that there are in English and Spanish.”

Taken from FARM LABOR, Vol I, Number 5, April 1964, pp.23-38