

## Cesar Chavez On Money And Organizing 1971

“When we are really honest with ourselves we must admit that our lives are all that really belong to us. So, it is how we use our lives that determines what kind of men we are. It is my deepest belief that only by giving our lives do we find life. I am convinced that the truest act of courage, the strongest act of manliness is to sacrifice ourselves for others in totally nonviolent struggle for justice. To be a man is to suffer for others. God help us to be men!”

What I’m going to say may not make much sense to you. On the other hand, it may make an awful lot of sense. This depends on where you are in terms of organizing and what your ideas are about that elusive and difficult task of getting people together — to act together and to produce something.

Labor unions today have a heck of a time organizing workers. The church has a heck of a time organizing people. The government has a heck of a time organizing people. The Republican Party has a very difficult problem. So does the Democratic Party. So does almost any institution have a heck of a time organizing people. Why is it difficult? First of all, if these institutions hadn’t been successful, they wouldn’t exist. There were churches that were successful. There were unions that were successful. There were government departments that were successful. Someone had the right idea. But that’s in the past. Talking about those successes is like getting up and telling workers about the great and joyous campaigns in the 30’s to organize workers. And they say, “So what? What about us today?”

Organizing is difficult because in our capitalist society we believe the only way things get done is with money. Let’s examine this assumption by using the farm worker struggle as an example. Since about 1898, there have been many efforts to organize farm workers in California and other states. Almost invariably, at the end of each struggle someone would report, “The workers weren’t ready for it. They didn’t want the union. They didn’t do their share to get organized.” But every report of organizing attempts also included a more honest statement: “We had to stop the organizing drive, or we had to temporarily disband, because we ran out of money.” It’s a shame.

There isn’t enough money to organize poor people. There never is enough money to organize anyone. If you put it on the basis of money, you’re not going to succeed. So when we started organizing our union, we knew we had to depend on something other than money. As soon as we announced that we were leaving the Community Service Organization (CSO), the group that I worked with so many years, to organize field workers, there were people who wanted to give us money. In fact one lady offered us \$50,000 to organize workers. When I said, “No,” she was very hurt. I told her, “If I take

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\*Transcribed from a talk given by Cesar Chavez to a group of church people on October 4, 1971 at La Paz, the farm workers retreat center in Keene, California.

money now that would be the worst thing I could do. I don't want the money. Some other time I will, but not now." \$50,000 wasn't enough. The AFL-CIO had just spent a million and a half dollars and they failed. So why did we think we could do it with \$50,000. We started with two principles: First, since there wasn't any money and the job had to be done there would have to be a lot of sacrificing. Second, no matter how poor the people, they had a responsibility to help the union. If they had \$2.00 for food, they had to give \$1.00 to the union. Otherwise, they would never get out of the trap of poverty. They would never have a union because they couldn't afford to sacrifice a little bit more on top of their misery. The statement: "They're so poor they can't afford to contribute to the group," is a great cop-out. You don't organize people by being afraid of them. You never have. You never will. You can be afraid of them in a variety of ways. But one of the main ways is to patronize them. You know the attitude; Blacks or browns or farm workers are so poor that they can't afford to have their own group. They hardly have enough money to eat. This makes it very easy for the organizer. He can always rationalize, "I haven't failed. They can't come up with the money so we're not able to organize them."

We decided that workers wanted to be organized and could be organized. So the responsibility had to be upon ourselves, the organizers. Organizing is one place where you can easily get away with a failure. If you send a man to dig a ditch 3 feet by 10 feet, you'll know if he did it or not. Or if you get someone to write a letter, you'll know if he wrote it. In most areas of endeavor, you can see the results. In organizing, it's different. You can see results years later, but you can't see them right away. That's why we have so many failures. So many organizers that should never be organizers go in and muddy the waters. Then good organizers have to come in and it's twice as hard for them to organize.

We knew we didn't have the money. We knew farm workers could be organized and we were going to do it. We weren't going to accept failure. But we were going to make sure that workers contributed to the doing of this organizing job. That has never been done in the history of this country.

We started out by telling workers, "We are trying to organize a union. We don't have money but if you work together it can be done." 95% of the workers we talked to were very kind. They smiled at us. 5% asked us questions and maybe 1% had the spirit and really wanted to do something.

We didn't have any money for gas and food. Many days we left the house with no money at all. Sometimes we had enough gas to get there but not enough to come back. We were determined to go to the workers. In fact at the very beginning of the organizing drive, we looked for the worst homes in the barrios where there were a lot of dogs and kids outside. And we went in and asked for a handout. Inevitably, they gave us food. Then they made a collection and gave us money for gas. They opened their homes and gave us their hearts. And today, they are the nucleus of the union's leadership. We forced ourselves to do this.

We kept telling ourselves, “If these workers don’t get organized, if we fail, it’s our fault not theirs.”

Then the question came up, how would we survive? My wife was working in the fields. We used to take the whole family out on Sundays and earn a few dollars to be able to survive the following week. We knew we couldn’t continue that way. And we knew that the money had to come not from the outside but from the workers. And the only way to get the money was to have people pay dues.

So we began the drive to get workers to pay dues so we could live, so we could just survive. We were very frank, very open. At a farm worker’s convention, we told them we had nothing to give them except the dream that it might happen... But we couldn’t continue unless they were willing to make a sacrifice. At that meeting everyone wanted to pay \$5.00 or \$8.00 a month. We balked and said “No, no. Just \$3.50. That’s all we need.” There were about 280 people there, and 212 signed up and paid the \$3.50 in the first month.

90 days from that day, there were 12 people paying \$3.50. By that time we had a small community. There were 6 of us—four of us working full time. There were a lot of questions being asked. Some said, “They’re very poor and can’t afford it. That’s why they’re not paying. And a few of us said, “We’re poor too. We’re poorer than they are. And we can afford to sacrifice our families and our time. They have to pay.”

I remember many incidents when I went to collect dues. Let me tell you just one. I’d been working 12 years with the mentality that people were very poor and shouldn’t be forced to pay dues. Keep that in mind. Because that comes in handy in understanding what you go through when you’re not really convinced that this is the way it should be.

I went to a workers home in McFarland, 7 miles south of Delano. It was in the evening. It was raining and it was winter. And there was no work. I knew it. And everyone knew it. As I knocked on the door, the guy in the little two room house was going to the store with a \$5.00 bill to get groceries. And there I was. He owed \$7.00 because he was one full month behind plus the current one. So I’d come for \$7.00. But all he had was \$5.00. I had to make a decision. Should I take \$3.50 or shouldn’t I? It was very difficult. Up to this time I had been saying, “They should be paying. And if they don’t pay they’ll never have a union.” \$3.50 worth of food wasn’t really going to change his life one way or the other that much. So I told him, “You have to pay at least \$3.50 right now or I’ll have to put you out of the union.” He gave me the \$5.00. We went to the store and changed the \$5.00 bill. I got the \$3.50 and gave him the \$1.50. I stayed with him. He bought \$1.50 worth of groceries and went home.

That experience hurt me but it also strengthened my determination. If this man was willing to give me \$3.50 on a dream, when we were really taking the money out of his own food, then why shouldn’t we be able to have a union—however difficult. There had never been a successful union for farm workers. Every unionizing attempt had been defeated. People were killed. They ran into every obstacle you can think of. The whole agricultural

industry along with government and business joined forces to break the unions and keep them from organizing. But with the kind of faith this farm worker had why couldn't we have a union?

So we set out to develop exactly that kind of faith. And by the time the strike came, we had that kind of resolution among members. Only a small percentage of the workers were paying dues. But it was ingrained in them that they were going to have a union come hell or high water. That's the kind of spirit that kept us going and infected other farm workers—this little core of people who were willing to stop talking and sacrifice to get it done.

That was seven or eight years ago. We had different problems in the Union then we have today. But the kind of problems we had then were problems like not having enough money to pay rent. We told the workers, "If you're buying a house, leave it. Better get a smaller house where you pay little rent because we can't pay much rent." It was a lot of sacrifice and they did it. And we won the strike.

A few months ago, a local union from San Francisco came to ask us to help organize people from a couple of factories that are moving from the Bay Area to the San Joaquin Valley and running away from their contracts — run-away snobs. They offered us money. We told them we didn't need money. All we needed was a telephone and a little money for gas and for food to eat on the picket line. We got that. But we said we needed someone from their union to direct us because we couldn't direct the drive. We wouldn't want to commit mistakes. It wouldn't be fair for us to do all the work for their union. But we told them we'd do everything if they provided the director. You know what? We assigned ten people to that drive. How much does it cost to be on the picket line? The way we eat? Nothing, you know. We've come from the struggle. And how much gas? A dollar and a half per car each day. Four cars at a dollar and a half a day. You know what? They couldn't put an organizer in the field for that job. You know why? Because they didn't have the money. It's too expensive to do it. It's too damned expensive for a guy earning about \$22,000 a year including fringes. We told them "Look. Bring him anyway—not knowing, you know. We'll get him a place to sleep with the workers. And we'll find a home that will feed him." And they said, "Our organizers won't do that. They have to have motel and all those things." I said, "You won't have a union then." And they said, "That's right." In that union those two or three plants represented about 25% of their membership. They won't increase their membership anymore. They can't organize because they depend on money.

When we had that big fight with the Teamsters in Delano, we beat them with the numbers game. Every time they brought in an organizer, I think they get \$35,000 a year in some cases, we got ten workers and told them, "Your job is to keep that guy from gaining any ground with the workers." The Teamsters brought in a lot of organizers but after a while it was too expensive. All we needed was just enough to eat and a little gas. We don't have to worry about money. That's how things got done.

The corporations do it differently. They pay very good wages. Then if their top people don't produce, they have carcasses all over the place. If they don't produce in a month, they say, "Look Brother, you're not cutting it. We're paying you a lot of money because we want results." The other way is not to pay anything. If you try to be in between, you're not going to get anything done. I'm convinced that's how these things work. In unions and in churches and in groups that are made up principally of people, you don't fire people for non-performance like they do in the big corporations. However, we know you have guys who are not that effective—guys who won't do the work. They don't get fired. If you get a job in the church or in the unions you're in for life, brother, whether you can cut it or not. Very, very seldom does someone get fired. That's true even in our union. When a strike is called everybody comes in to work. Then after a while we begin to see that some guys aren't cutting it. We actually haven't hurt the growers that much by taking them out on strike. And we have a very difficult time trying to get them to understand if they're going to organize workers they've got to work.

Money is not going to organize the disadvantaged, the powerless, or the poor. We need other weapons. That's why the war on Poverty is such a miserable failure. You put out a big pot of money and all you do is fight over it. Then you run out of money and you run out of troops. It's just like those revolutions. If you haven't got the money you haven't got the troops.

We didn't worry about money at the beginning. Now we're beginning to feel a little of that coming. And I'm very worried. For instance, we gave a \$5.00 weekly allowance and we still do, though it's more than that when you consider rent and food. But now, some don't think \$5.00 is enough. They'd like to get \$10.00. Maybe they should get \$10.00. But there has to be some point where you say, "If you want to make money, go back to the fields. When we started the strike workers were getting 95 cents an hour. Now people packing grapes during harvest, at piece rate, average \$3.00 and \$3.50 an hour plus some fringe benefits. Those are very good wages. In lettuce, the piece rate wages went up almost 300% in the first contract. So we tell the workers, "If you want to make that kind of money, go back. That's where the money's going to be. Not here."

We'll organize workers in this movement as long as we're willing to sacrifice. The moment we stop. Sacrificing, we stop organizing. I guarantee that. There are workers in Florida, in Texas, in New York and in the Southern states who are going to be very difficult to organize. But they have to be organized. We have to help our brothers in other countries too. We got a letter from Guatemala a couple of days ago. People there are having a devil of a time organizing because the government is very repressive. Since their struggle is against American companies, they feel we could boycott them here to get them organized there. And I know that's true. But we're not going to do it by paying wages. We can't. When we first started talking about a boycott, everyone told us "You'll never do it. Boycotts never work." Every single union told Jim Drake, the first organizer of the boycott, "It can't be done. We've tried it and we are a bigger union. And we have a lot of

money.” We told ourselves that’s one more reason why we should try it. So we put a lot of manpower into cities around the country. At one time we had about 500 full-time people on the boycott not counting a tremendous number of supporters. You know why we were helped? Because they knew our guys weren’t getting paid. So they didn’t mind doing the same. But you do mind helping if you know that the other guys are getting a big fat salary.

When you sacrifice, you force others to sacrifice. It’s an extremely powerful weapon. When somebody stops eating for a week or ten days, people come and want to be part of that experience. Someone goes to jail and people want to help him. You don’t buy that with money. That doesn’t have any price in terms of dollars.

Those who are willing to sacrifice and be of service have very little difficulty with people. They know what they are all about. People can’t help but want to be near them—to help them and work with them. That’s what love is all about. It starts with you and radiates out. You can’t phony it. It just doesn’t go. When you work and sacrifice more than anyone else around you, you put others on the spot and they have to do at least a bit more than they’ve been doing. And that’s what puts it together?

These observations tie in directly with the whole question of organizing. Why do we have leaders? We put some people out in the fields and all of a sudden they hit, they click. Everyone’s happy with them and they begin to move mountains. With other people there are problems and heartaches. They just don’t go. When we look and see what’s happening, almost invariably the differences are along the lines of willingness to sacrifice and work long hours.

We didn’t start out knowing these things. We have discovered them. During those six years of strike and boycott it never seemed like that much of a struggle. We accepted it as a fact. Now that we’re over that big hurdle, we look back and say, “My God. People really sacrificed. And the things that I asked them to do! Did I really ask them to do that much?” I asked them to do it to the maximum and they did it.

Question: What’s your dream for the farm worker’s union?

Answer: My dream is that farm workers will someday have enough power to take care of themselves. And if they gain that, that they don’t become selfish—that the movement doesn’t go to hell in other words. And that’s difficult. We’re already beginning to see a few danger signs.

Only when we have a union that isn’t selfish can we help other people. The first step in building a union is to help yourself. You sacrifice for ten years to have a union. You get better wages. So what? It’s nice. But the real trick is to have a union, to have that power, and to selflessly help brothers completely unconnected with you. In order to get there, the

movement has to be guided by some kind of philosophy. Everything comes back to how you deal with money.

Let me extend my dream. If the workers in California get organized, they can assist the organizing of people in Florida. The people in California and Florida together can assist the organizing of other workers. With a boycott they can help organize farm workers around the world. My God! There just aren't any other unions for farm workers in the rest of the world. One of the greatest miscarriages of justice is that the people who provide food for all the world don't have enough food for themselves. It's horrible. I just can't understand it. Take the Philippines for instance. There are no unions there. They import people to work just like we do here. And they move them from island to island, from province to province. In West Germany; they bring in farm workers from Spain and Portugal. In Mexico, they can't get Mexicans to work in the hemp so they import workers from Guatemala and treat them like braceros. They're exploited just as the Mexicans are in this country. The damn exploitation of farm workers is consistent.

Imagine what could happen with one selfless act on our part. We could take on the Philippine sugar industry and knock the hell out of them with a boycott. It could bring a union to Filipino farm workers. Then we'd say to them, "Take care of yourselves first. Organize your union. And when that's done, we want you to help Malaysia or the rest of Asia." Same thing with Latin America. That's the dream. Frankly, we're not going to do that now. We have so many problems ourselves. More people are out to destroy us than ever before. The right wing is spending hundreds of thousands of dollars to get us.

And we have other problems. When we started the movement, no one questions the \$5.00 per week. Now some people who have worked and sacrificed for a long time want a little more security. No one can blame them. But we are still in a giant struggle and workers in Florida and Texas are still going hungry. How can we be making money! I'm just talking about the staff now. With the workers? That's a tough one! To reverse that trend is going to be very difficult. It's going to take a long time. We'll have many fights with them—many arguments. We may not be here if we argue too strongly. Look for a minute at how difficult it is: we start telling workers, "Now look. You've got a lot of money. You shouldn't get more money." Then they say, "Why not? The employers are making more profit." And what do we answer? "We're going to get less money so the employers can make more money so we can help our brothers?" It's a very difficult question... The workers get strong. I don't know if that's going to change the employers. I don't think so. But it doesn't have to start with the workers. If the staff and the leadership of the union stick to the style of sacrifice and service then the workers who are in leadership positions may begin to get the idea of self-sacrifice... Then we will really have something. Like everything else it has to begin in your own life and in those people who have given their lives to build the union... but it's hard and we have a long way to go.

Dup. National Farm Workers Ministry  
1430 West Olympic Boulevard

Los Angeles, California 90015  
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