

Cesar 1968

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Chapter IV

Afterward – My Prophecy

Cesar is dead and buried. So what does the future hold for his farmworker movement?

It's very simple, really. What Cesar was unable to accomplish during his lifetime, i.e., building a national farm worker's union, will be accomplished over a period of decades through his death. But, in my opinion, this larger victory will be won from the "outside-in", just as the table grape contracts were won through consumer boycotts waged thousands of miles from Delano. It will not come about not because of any strike or boycott activities planned by the current union leadership but because Cesar's life, through his death, will take on proportions that far exceed anyone's expectation and certainly far, far beyond the bounds of the union.

This will be threatening and confusing to the union leadership, especially because the "public" and the media will expect Cesar's wife, Helen, and the other children, to speak in Cesar's stead. To attend memorials, participate in dedications, open ceremonies, etc. The union, which after all has declined in recent years, will recede further into the background. It will become more like the stage backdrop behind the development of Cesar's larger-than-life image. Their first, and understandable reaction, will be to bottle the genie Cesar up so that he can be let out as needed.

It is a paradox. Cesar's mystique will grow exponentially larger and larger in the public consciousness - not only in North America but throughout the entire world - and the union's will grow smaller and smaller. And as Cesar's public legacy grows in public opinion centers of urban areas, outside the agricultural hinterlands, it will set the stage for farmworkers themselves to light the matches which will cause wave after wave of crippling agricultural strikes to protest their oppressive working conditions and to manifest their determination to have their own union. It is precisely at these flash points that the farmworkers union must be prepared to intervene and provide leadership, support, direction and the know-how to represent these workers.

I compare this readiness of farmworkers to act spontaneously with the John F. Kennedy aura in East Los Angeles in May of 1968 during Bobby Kennedy's campaign for president. Our presence for "Robert Kennedy For President" in these barrio neighborhoods was all that was needed for people - poor people, working class people - to join our campaign to work and vote for Kennedy. It was almost impossible for us to find enough campaign

work for people to do. As for, "get out the vote", forget it! Many precincts had almost 100% turnouts. It wasn't any special campaign activity that "we" concocted that made the difference. It was simply the fact that people at this level were responding to the Kennedy brother of their slain hero. They wanted to be part of that special mystique.

How much more so with Cesar! A person who spent his lifetime working on behalf of farmworkers who were defenseless and without a voice. A person who sacrificed all his material possessions, lived in voluntary poverty, and disciplined himself and his movement with month-long fasts - a person who preached with his deeds.

For those who think I exaggerate or find this far-fetched, consider this: Cesar has not even been buried yet 30 days and already his life and death are taking on a life of their own in California.

High school students at Fremont High School in Oakland have turned in 1,400 signatures to the school board to change the name of their high school to "Cesar E. Chavez High". Parents in Union City are lobbying to name their middle school after Cesar. An Oakland City councilman wants to rename a major city street after Cesar. San Jose officials want to rename Plaza Park. And the city and county of Los Angeles are just beginning to get into the "street-naming" act. All of this is in addition to a bill introduced in the California legislature by Senator Art Torres and Assemblyman Richard Polanco to declare March 31, Cesar's birthday, a state holiday. This is only the beginning.

The pilgrimages to La Paz to visit Cesar's grave have already begun. It won't be long before the union bureaucracy will have to relocate, leaving others behind to give the tours, to tell Cesar's story and sell the books, videos and other mementos associated with these kinds of activities. But this outpouring of homage and respect will not, in my judgment, advance any particular boycott or strike activity on the present union's agenda. But if packaged thoughtfully, it will create, over a period of time, an historical mystique about Cesar's life and work which will lay the groundwork that will prompt a wave of agricultural strikes and farmworker union activities throughout the country that will resonate well with national public opinion.

Even the growers, true to form, are doing their best to throw gasoline on the flickering fire. The San Francisco Chronicle (May 25, 1993) quotes one Bruce Burkdoll, president of the Central California Farmers Association, "I'm not at all in favor of renaming schools and streets, and a holiday is completely ridiculous. He (Cesar) was a labor organizer and a poor one. I don't see anything heroic about it..." Deja vu! This is the same off-the-wall anti-Mexican rhetoric that enabled us in the early days of the Delano grape strike to ratchet up the national debate over the rights of farmworkers. We could always count on the growers and their public relations firms to make our best case.

Do you think students care about the niceties raised by the school board over the renaming of a school for Cesar? That it will cost money to have new stationery printed and to have

new listings in the telephone directory? Do you think thousands of Oakland residents, Hispanic and Blacks, care that it will cost the city money to replace street signs that say Cesar Chavez instead of East 14th St.? And a March 31 California holiday honoring Cesar's birthday is already a foregone conclusion. Not this year or the next but you can bet it will be an issue in the next California governor's election – or the one after that.

Cesar confided to me many times that he thought it would take 20 years before the first union contracts were won. They actually came in less than two. (In retrospect, a case could be made that it might have been better for the union if it had taken longer, because a hundred-fold growth was not possible to digest. But since there are no choices in these matters, the point is academic.)

Cesar Chavez was completely resigned to the fact that it would take a lifetime to build a national farm worker's union - and now he gets a fresh start!