

Cesar 1968

By LeRoy Chatfield
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Appendix I – Letter from Delano & the Grower's Response

Good Friday, 1969

Letter to E.L. Barr, Jr. President, California Grape and Tree Fruit League From Cesar E. Chavez.

E.L. Barr, Jr., President
California Grape and Tree Fruit League
717 Market Street
San Francisco, California 94103

Dear Mr. Barr:

I am sad to hear about your accusations in the Press that our union movement and table grape boycott have been successful because we have used violence and terror tactics. If what you say is true, I have been a failure and should withdraw from the struggle; but you are left with the awesome moral responsibility, before God and man, to come forward with whatever information you have so that corrective action can begin at once. If for any reason you fail to come forth to substantiate your charges then you must be held responsible for committing violence against us, albeit violence of the tongue. I am convinced that you as a human being did not mean what you said but rather acted hastily under pressure from the public relations firm that has been hired to try to counteract the tremendous moral force of our movement. How many times we ourselves have felt the need to lash out in anger and bitterness.

Today on Good Friday 1969, we remember the life and the sacrifice of Martin Luther King, Jr., who gave himself totally to the non-violent struggle for peace and justice. In his Letter from Birmingham Jail, Dr. King describes better than I could our hopes for the strike and boycott: "injustice must be exposed, with all the tension its exposure creates, to the light of human conscience and the air of national opinion before it can be cured." For our part I admit that we have seized upon every tactic and strategy consistent with the morality of our cause to expose that injustice and thus to heighten the sensitivity of the American conscience so that farm workers will have without bloodshed their own union and the dignity of bargaining with their agribusiness employers. By lying about the nature of our movement, Mr. Barr, you are working against non-violent social change. Unwittingly perhaps, you may unleash that other force that our union by discipline and

deed, censure and education has sought to avoid; that panacean short cut: that senseless violence that honors no color, class or neighborhood.

You must understand - I must make you understand - that our membership and the hopes and aspirations of the hundreds of thousands of the poor and the dispossessed that have been raised on our account are above all human beings, no better no worse than any other cross section of human society; we are not saints because we are poor but by the same measure neither are we immoral. We are men and women who have suffered and endured much and not only because of our abject poverty but because we have been kept poor. The colors of our skins, the languages of our cultural and native origins, the lack of formal education, the exclusion from the democratic process, the numbers of our slain in recent wars - all these burdens generation after generation have sought to demoralize us, to break our human spirit. But God knows that we are not beasts of burden, we are not agricultural implements or rented slaves, we are men. And mark this well, Mr. Barr, we are men locked in a death struggle against man's inhumanity to man in the industry that you represent. And this struggle itself gives meaning to our life and ennobles our dying.

As your industry has experienced, our strikers here in Delano and those who represent us throughout the world are well trained for this struggle. They have been under the gun, they have been kicked and beaten and herded by dogs, they have been cursed and ridiculed, they have been stripped and chained and jailed, they have been sprayed with the poisons used in the vineyards; but they have been taught not to lie down and die or to flee in shame, but to resist with every ounce of human endurance and spirit. To resist not with retaliation in kind but to overcome with love and compassion, with ingenuity and creativity, with hard work and longer hours, with stamina and patient tenacity, with politics and law, and with prayer and fasting. They were not trained in a month or even a year; after all, this new harvest season will mark our fourth full year of strike and even now we continue to plan and prepare for the years to come. Time accomplishes for the poor what money does for the rich.

This is not to pretend that we have everywhere been successful or that we have not made mistakes. And while we do not belittle or underestimate our adversaries, for they are the rich and the powerful and possess the land, we are not afraid or cringe from the confrontation. We welcome it! We have planned for it. We know that our cause is just, that history is a story of social revolution, and that the poor shall inherit the land.

Once again, I appeal to you as the representative of your industry and as a man. I ask you to recognize and bargain with our union before the economic pressure of the boycott and strike takes an irrevocable toll; but if not, I ask you to at least sit down with us to discuss the safeguards necessary to keep our historical struggle free of violence. I make this appeal because as one of the leaders of our non-violent movement, I know and accept my responsibility of preventing, if possible, the destruction of human life and property. For these reasons and knowing of Ghandi's admonition that fasting is the last resort in place of the sword, during a most critical time in our movement last February 1968 I undertook a

twenty-five day fast. I repeat to you the principle enunciated to the membership at the start of the fast: if to build our union required the deliberate taking of life, either the life of a grower or his child, or the life of a farm worker or his child, then I choose not to see the union built.

Mr. Barr, let me be painfully honest with you. You must understand these things. We advocate militant non-violence as our means for social revolution and to achieve justice for our people, be we are not blind or deaf to desperate and moody winds of human frustration, impatience and rage that blow among us. Ghandi himself admitted that if his only choice were cowardice or violence, he would choose violence. Men are not angels and the time and tides wait for no man. Precisely because of these powerful human emotions, we have tried to involve masses of people in their own struggle. Participation and self-determination remain the best experience of freedom; and free men instinctively prefer democratic change and even protect the rights guaranteed to seek it. Only the enslaved in despair have need of violent overthrow.

This letter does not express all that is in my heart, Mr. Barr. But if it says nothing else it says that we do not hate you or rejoice to see your industry destroyed; we hate the agribusiness system that seeks to keep us enslaved and we shall overcome and change it not by retaliation or bloodshed but by a determined non-violent struggle carried on by those masses of farm workers who intend to be free and human.

Sincerely yours,

Cesar E. Chavez

In Reply To Cesar Chavez

TO THE EDITORS:

The April, 1969 issues of Christian Century and National Catholic Reporter (April 23), carried an open letter from Cesar Chavez to the president of the California Grape and Tree Fruit league, captioned "Manifesto from a friend."

We would appreciate it if Christian Century and National Catholic Reporter would publish our reply, which follows:

RESPONSE TO AN 'OPEN LETTER' ON 'THE GRAPE BOYCOTT'

How are mere mortals to attempt to reply to the charismatic leader of the United Farm Workers Organizing committee, who writes in flawless prose of his devotion to non-

violence, calls attention to his miraculous and marvelously publicized 25-day fast, and draws a comparison of himself to Ghandi.

How does on cope with an adversary so determinedly bucking for sainthood? With some trepidation, we try.

First, we must dispute Cesar's contention, explicit throughout his open letter, that UFWOC versus California grape growers is a struggle of the "poor" against the "rich".

The California Grape and Tree Fruit league represents growers large and small, many of whom employ no labor other than the members of their own families.

Writing on the grape boycott in the Washington Post, Congressman B.F. Fisk, an organizer of the liberal House Democratic Study Group, pointed out that "small growers as well as large are being attacked in an indiscriminate campaign that is the very antithesis of the justice which the Farm Workers union purports to seek."

Poor Cesar has few followers among farm workers, but he is blessed with many rich and powerful friends. The AFL-CIO by its own report, has contributed \$2,000,000 to Chavez's UFWOC and predecessor organizational groups. Chavez is a member of the board of California Rural Legal Assistance, established by a \$1,276,000 grant of federal taxpayers funds. The Roger Baldwin Memorial foundation of the American Civil Liberties union has contributed \$85,000 in tax free funds to the Chavez cause.

Recently, the New York Times featured a picture of a fashionably dressed Dolores Huerta, Chavez' chief lieutenant, conversing with her host George Plimpton of the best-seller Paper Tiger fame, at a party in Plimpton's spectacular East River Drive duplex described by the Times as "The Place To Be."

"The Plimpton reception," the Times reported "was the last part of a \$25-a person benefit" for "Cesar Chavez' striking grape pickers, a favorite cause of the New Left branch of New York society."

As to "non-violence".

Despite its name, the Students Non-Violent Coordinating committee - one of the many New Left groups with which Chavez actively cooperates - is not noted for its non-violent approach. And despite Chavez's pious disclaimers, the UFWOC sponsored strikes and boycott are violent operations.

Farm workers who have been subjected to obscenities from Chavez' pickets and threats upon the lives of their children because they choose to stay on their jobs find Chavez' non-violent philosophy hard to understand.

Housewives who have been intimidated as they attempted to get out of their cars to enter supermarkets picketed by boycotters do not understand it either. Nor do store owners and managers who have been persuaded to remove grapes from their shelves because of fear for the safety of their employees and customers.

It would be hard to explain the non-violent philosophy to the two New York grocery clerks who were seriously burned when fire bombs were tossed into the store in which they were working. New York's fire marshal reported that the one fact that linked five stores subjected to firebombing was "that they all sold California grapes, they all have been picketed, and they all have been asked to join the boycott."

Chavez may disclaim responsibility for these violent actions, but the fact remains that the boycott is sponsored by UFWOC, not the Campfire Girls, and the head of UFWOC is Cesar Chavez, not Mary Margaret McBride.

Non-violence is hard to define, but a valiant attempt was made recently by the Reverend James Drake of the California Migrant Ministry and an active member of the UFWOC staff, in an affidavit seeking revocation of a restraining order against picketing activities by the United Farm Workers Organizing committee in the Coachella Valley.

In his affidavit, the Reverend Drake declares:

"That I am a devoted believer in the philosophy of non-violence and that it is the credo of our UFWOC. That human life and safety is held by the organizers of UFWOC to be of more importance than all other values except our rights which give us meaning in our society: the rights to organize, work, and exercise free speech to communicate our beliefs."

By this definition, the rights of Cesar Chavez' UFWOC to organize, work and communicate come first - before secondary considerations as human .. and the safety of others.

A recent issue of El Malcriado, a UFWOC publication, features a cartoon of a giant hand labeled "Big City Mayors, Labor Unions, Political Organizations, Religious Leaders" and others grasping a giant screw labeled "Boycott" plunged squarely through a dying farmers middle. Hardly a sterling example of non-violent Christian charity.

With the pronouncements of concern for the workers welfare, we wonder why Mr. Chavez devotes his efforts toward table grape growers' employees who, according to Department of Labor figures are among the best paid in continental United States, and who are not on strike and who have not seen fit to join Chavez' union and who are covered by more protective legislation than farm workers in any other state. Could it be that the real prize in this effort is the union dues that could be collected from the workers? This would account for an emphasis on organizing the Delano farm workers - among the most stable of the

California farm worker groups. If the real concern is for the workers welfare why not try to help the poorest paid workers rather than the highest paid workers?

From the standpoint of comparative wages and working conditions there is less justification for a boycott of California table grapes than for a boycott of any crop grown anywhere in the United States. Contrary to Chavez' propaganda, the easily verifiable facts are that farm wage rates in California are the highest in the continental United States; rates for vineyard workers are higher than the California average; and farm workers are covered by more protective legislation in California than any other state.

The California Grape & Tree Fruit league supports national collective bargaining legislation for farm workers that guarantees secret balloting in union recognition elections, and insures that the free flow of food to the American public will not be impeded.

Chavez does not. His goal, as his open letter states, is "social revolution" - the same goal as that of his early mentor the professional radical Saul Alinsky.

E.L. Barr, Jr.
Past President
California Grape & Tree Fruit League

R.K. Sanderson
President
California Grape & Tree Fruit League