

How Did Cesar Do It?

Cesar Chavez successfully created the first farm labor union in the history of the United States, the United Farm Workers, AFL-CIO. In addition to a long and bloody history of failed attempts to organize farmworkers that had been mounted by labor unions, the Communist Party, and others for more than 40 years, Cesar faced two insurmountable obstacles.

The first obstacle was the undying opposition of California agribusiness. Agribusiness is California's largest industry, and it was virulently opposed to unionization. It has a long history of successfully crushing attempts to organize farmworkers by using law enforcement violence, arrests and jail sentences, anti-communist smear campaigns, wholesale importation of strikebreakers, and by flooding the labor market with bracero-type foreign worker programs.

In 1962 Delano, the area where Cesar began his movement, the Central Valley agribusiness growers controlled local law enforcement agencies, county courts, local politicians, local media, school boards, the chambers of commerce, and mainline churches. The Valley's largest employers were growers and agriculture-related businesses.

The second obstacle was the instability and powerlessness of farmworkers themselves. The California agribusiness workforce consists of immigrants and foreign nationals who migrate long distances throughout the state to follow the harvests and the seasons of the crops. One of the practical consequences of such migrant status is that farmworkers are unable to establish roots in the communities in which they work.

Farmworkers are especially resistant to unionization because: (1) they are completely dependent upon jobs made available to them, and the growers control these jobs, not the union; (2) workers earn substandard wages and see no tangible benefit in paying union dues, especially when there are no union contracts in place; (3) there is no historically demonstrated reason for farmworkers to believe that a union will prevail over the growers; e.g., strikes at harvest time have never been effective to achieve union recognition; (4) workers who sign union authorization cards or who campaign for a union are routinely fired; (5) workers are not covered by the protections of any federal

or state labor law legislation; and (6) the racial separation of farmworkers by various types of harvest and non-harvest work breeds distrust, jealousy, and enmity among the workers.

How is it possible, then, that one person without the benefit of even a high school education and without financial resources of any kind was able to fly in the historical face of failure and overcome these insurmountable obstacles?

I would suggest that history's timing played a significant role in Cesar's eventual success; but of course, he had no control over this except whether he used this timing to his benefit, or not. The civil rights movement, the beatnik era, the free speech movement, the anti-war movement, Vatican Council II, the Catholic Worker Movement, and the rapid spread of community-based organizing fostered by churches all contributed to the context in which Cesar created his own farmworker movement. But how did he do it?

The most compelling, and the most overlooked, aspect of Cesar's leadership was his decision to live in voluntary poverty. When I met him in 1963, he did not own a house, a washing machine, a car, a telephone, a suit of clothes, or a checking account. This voluntary deprivation of basic material goods for the sake of identifying with the enforced poverty of farmworkers provided him with the moral authority needed to command the respect not only of farmworkers, but men and women of goodwill everywhere. It was because of his commitment to voluntary poverty that he attracted people to volunteer with him. They wanted to be part of something selfless, authentic, and dedicated to the well-being of others. Religious history is replete with saints who lived in voluntary poverty in order to serve others, and they are revered even to this day. Cesar stands in the history of that religious tradition. In my view, it is impossible to overstate the importance of Cesar's commitment to voluntary poverty and its impact on his movement to organize farmworkers.

Cesar was called to serve others. Before his decision to found the NFWA, Cesar had developed a successful career as one of the Community Service Organization's most effective organizers. For the times, and considering his status in life as a Mexican-American with limited formal education, he was well paid and enjoyed job security, but he was not satisfied. Because of his own history, he identified with the suffering and powerlessness of farmworkers. In short, he felt called to service.

Traditionally, a call to service is a religious concept. It is not what I want to do, but what God wants me to do. I believe Cesar stands in this religious tradition. At first, he tried to persuade the CSO leadership to sponsor his work with farmworkers. They refused. At this point in his life he had to respond – or not respond – to his calling. He responded.

Finally, the commitment of Cesar Chavez to the principles of nonviolence became the cornerstone of the success of his movement. California agribusiness had a long and brutal history of crushing any effort to organize farmworkers, and it stood ready to do so in 1965, but the union's public adoption of nonviolence altered ever so slightly the historical grower-worker equation. The natural propensity of strikers and organizers to retaliate in kind was held in check, and the consumer-minded table grape growers were wary of using brute force to crush the strike. Farmworkers felt it was safe to join the union without fearing for their lives, and volunteers, especially university students, flocked to Delano with a sense of personal safety. Because of Cesar's highly publicized commitment to nonviolence, church bodies and religious organizations were predisposed to respond positively to his movement, and many did so.

Nonviolence forced the leadership of the farmworker movement to create new methods of developing pressure on the growers to recognize the union. Ultimately, the practice of nonviolence resulted in the creation of an international table grape boycott, which forced the growers to fight on turf they could not control. It was the boycott which forced union recognition and brought about signed contracts and the passage of the California Agricultural Labor Relations Act (ALRA).

How did Cesar do it? By responding to the call to service, living in voluntary poverty, and practicing nonviolence, which led him to create an international consumer boycott that agribusiness could not control.

