

Meeting Cesar Chavez 1963

Forty-one years ago, I traveled from Bakersfield to Boston to attend the National Catholic Social Action Convention, and there at one of the sessions, I heard a panel speaker, Father Phil Berrigan, if I am not mistaken, mention that a man by the name of Cesar Chavez was organizing farmworkers in Delano, California. I sat there dumbfounded! I had traveled 3000 miles to learn that something as important as organizing farmworkers was taking place just 30 miles from where I lived and worked.

When I returned to Bakersfield in September, I tried to get in touch with Cesar Chavez, but he was not listed in the phone book and none of my circle: fellow high-school teachers and Bakersfield activists, had ever heard of him. I finally tracked down the convention panelist and asked him how to get in touch with this Cesar Chavez. All he could tell me was he had a brother by the name of Richard who he thought lived in Delano, and maybe that would assist me. But he reassured me that Cesar Chavez was organizing farmworkers in the fields around the Delano area. There was a Richard Chavez listed in the Delano telephone directory. I called him and he said he would get a message to Cesar. Several weeks passed, and Cesar Chavez finally called back. I introduced myself, told him I was interested in his work, that I would like to learn more, and could I come and meet him?

Cesar was very soft-spoken and sounded a little cautious. He asked me some questions about my interest, and how I knew about him, but he did finally invite me to come and gave me directions. That is how I found my way to 102 Albany Street, the headquarters of the National Farm Workers Association (NFWA) in Delano, California.

The building was located on the last southwest corner of Delano. There were open lands to the west and to the south. They were desolate-looking fields, as I remember them, with little agricultural value because of the lack of irrigation water on the west side of Highway 99.

The association headquarters was a converted church building which Cesar had painted and remodeled on the inside, so that when you walked in the front door, his office was behind a counter on the left, and straight ahead was another counter made to look like a bank teller's window. Behind that counter was an all-purpose work area and a small closet-like office that in a few years would become the offices of *El Malcriado*, Cesar's organizing newspaper—his pride and joy! There was a toilet at the rear of the building, and another storeroom, as I recall. Aside from the building on this very small lot, not a piece of landscaping could be seen. It was quite barren. I had never realized how desolate the Central Valley could be until I found the west side of Highway 99.

Cesar was very friendly and greeted me. We talked for a long time, and he told me about his organizing work. He had moved to Delano because he had a brother living there, a carpenter, and his wife, Helen, had a sister and many relatives and friends. This would give them and their eight children the support base they needed. And besides, it was all he could afford. He knew that if he was to do this kind of work, he would earn almost nothing, so with many relatives in the area, he figured his family would not starve to death. He was building what he called the National Farm Workers Association. He did not dare call it a union because the powerful agricultural interests with their control of the surrounding towns, McFarland, Richgrove, Earlimart, Shafter, Wasco, and Corcoran, would run him out of the area. His cover was that he was a well-meaning, Mexican-

American do-gooder who was helping his own people. (I'm pretty sure that my memory is correct about this: in 1963 we were Mexican-American. It wasn't until a few years later that we became Chicanos, and then later still, we became Hispanics, and now some of us might be Latinos. Although it is possible that at that point in 1963, we were still just Mexicans.)

Who was eligible to join the National Farm Workers Association? The basic requirement was you had to be a farmworker. This was later amended to include such fellow travelers as myself. And what benefits did farmworkers receive as a result of their membership? There were four, I think: first, you received a wallet-sized card, which certified that you were a member in good standing. This card had a red band at the top with a thunderbird eagle reversed in white and was signed by Cesar E. Chavez, General Director, and Anthony Orendain, Secretary-Treasurer. Second, you paid monthly dues, which I believe were \$3.50 a month. Third, you received a small death benefit when you died, perhaps as much as \$500. This would ensure that your burial expenses would not be a burden to your family. And fourth, the most important of all, you were invested in the dream that someday—perhaps not in your lifetime, but in the lifetime of your children—you would belong to a union strong enough to negotiate with the growers for better wages, access to bathrooms in the fields, drinking water available on the job, rest breaks, an end to stoop labor with the short-handled hoe, and medical, pension and unemployment benefits. (You must remember that since the 1930s, farmworkers were specifically excluded from all labor legislation, including coverage under the National Labor Relations Act, the labor law that protected all other workers in the United States.)

I told Cesar I was a teacher and I thought education was the answer to improving the lives of farmworkers. He disagreed. He said that he himself had attended 28 elementary schools because he had to work in the fields and follow the harvest of the crops to help support the family. Farmworker families, he said, had to have some stability before their children could take advantage of education. He maintained that a farmworkers' union was the first step in this process. In truth, this corresponded with my own teaching experience in San Francisco where for many years, I had taught in a Catholic high school. Most of my students did come from families whose fathers were members of unions: longshoremen, building trades, teamsters, retail clerks, and firefighters.

I asked him why he didn't have a telephone in his office. First of all, he said, he couldn't afford it, and second, who would call him? Farmworkers didn't have telephones either. If someone wanted to speak to him, they would find him. After all, hadn't I found him, and wasn't I here in his office talking with him?

Thus began my 10-year friendship with Cesar Chavez and his farmworker movement.

(written in 2004)