

GUSTAVO ROMERO aka COMPIS
Delano, California
February 19, 2007
Recorded and transcribed by Abby F. Rivera

Discovery - No rights in prison and no rights in the fields of Salinas, California

In 1970, I was living at the Inter-Harvest labor camp. I didn't know anything about the union. I didn't even know about Cesar even though I read the newspaper everyday- something I've done since I was little.

Then, we started getting robbed, *stolen*. Then we went on strike, the hourly workers. Inter-Harvest was pretty big, they had hourly workers, machines, lechugeros {lettuce pickers}. We all went out on strike. They were fearing, at least that's what I heard, that the UFW had just gone through five years of boycotting grapes and had gotten 17 million people to stop buying grapes. They brought the growers to their knees. That really hurt them. The cantaloupes were from down south, Argentina, South America, somewhere. We were on strike 27 days and we began talking about boycotting. The growers feared a cantaloupe boycott. They were afraid they would lose the cantaloupe customers forever. You know, some of those people who boycotted grapes never bought them again.

Dolores Huerta was there, Cesar was there during the strike. They took us out on strike and Cesar appeared there one day. They had a big meeting at the Field Office. There were so many companies on strike during that time that we all didn't fit in the office. Cesar started having the meetings at Harnell Stadium. They brought us all down there. They started talking about having victory because the company, Inter-Harvest, wanted to sign a contract. So they (the workers) elected, I think there in Salinas, a Negotiating Committee.

All this was new to me, I didn't know nothing. You see, I came there to Salinas because I was at Soledad Prison. I used to be a heroin addict and that's why I ended-up there. I was there three years and I thought I can't go back to LA because all my friends are still back there, man. I'm gonna do the thing again because all my friends are doing it. . So I thought I better not go back there, man.

I was playing tenor sax in prison. We had a good Rock n Roll band there. One of the guys was from Hollister and the other was from San Jose. I was out in Salinas; I stood out here and thought I'd get together with Max and Steve. We had plans of getting together to start a band out here but they never materialized.

Once you get outside things change because you can't associate when you're on parole. That put some water on the fire and I forgot about it.

We were having problems (in the fields). They were stealing from us-the boxes. One day, (we had good, good lettuce that year-real nice), in four hours we had 6,000 already. There were only ten lines with three guys on each line and we were able to do the 6000. Then I heard the foreman say, "Llena el papel; cortaron 3,500." Even if you can't read or write every last guy could count. So you know what's up there when you first get there. You know how many cartons you have; then throughout the work hours they bring more cartons as needed. You're always counting; everybody knows the count. Even the water boy knows the count.

"¿Eh, que es la cuenta?" {What's the count?}

"Yo, llevo 4,000. {"I have 4,000."}

Ay va!" Alright, everybody knows. Then this guy comes out with, "Fill out the papers; you picked 3,500."

"Wait a minute. We did 6,000. There was the 1,000 when we first got here when we started running our line..."

"No, no, no! If you don't like it, get a job somewhere else!"

So we all got together and went down to the Labor Commissioner. Same thing. The guy there says, "You don't have to work there. Go work somewhere else. You can get a job anywhere!"

Man, big-time problem. So that thing occurred that everybody started going out on strike. Every *rancho* there in Salinas went on strike. The fields were full of people on strike. We were only on strike for 27 days then they brought us down there to the meeting-told us we had a contract. We were the first ones. We had a medical plan, a pension plan, y todo ese jale, you know.

Meeting Cesar for the first time and other essentials

I didn't know who he was. Everybody was riveted on him. It was Dolores first though that I saw. Dolores gets into everything, you know. At first I was, because I never worked with a woman, so at first I was prejudice. "What the hell is this lady coming here trying to interfere in our business?" Then, no, everybody started gravitating to her. People that never wanted to join the strike back then started coming. Then Cesar came along and I thought, "Who this vato?" "Maybe he's one of those winitos from Chinatown." I didn't know who he was, you know. But then he starts speaking. He had little, little hands. He always used his little hands. He was always saying, "We have to do this. This is essential." He uses these big words. I'd say, "Este pinche chicanito using words like *essential*. I wonder if the guys {at the meetings} even know what the word

means? “It is essential that we do it!” Everything “essential”! Then I met Manuel {Cesar’s cousin, Manuel Chavez} and Manuel talked like that, too. “It’s essential, of the utmost importance!” Ha! Ha!

You know, I spoke a lot of English but then a lot of Spanish, too. After my mother passed away in 1948, six months later my grandmother passed away. Then we didn’t speak too much Spanish at home. My parents didn’t work in the fields. My father was a truck driver. My mother stayed home and cared for my grandmother and my uncles. I had no trade. I had played sax.

From Inter-Harvest Field Work to UFW Volunteer Work

I only worked two years under contract until 1972 when the Teamsters came. Every weekend and days that we didn’t work, I used to go help the union. Cesar and Manuel would send me to Arizona, but I would help over here in Salinas. We did the same thing in Arizona. Inter-Harvest had lettuce, broccoli, celery-they had crops in an Indian reservation. I used to spend a couple of months there during the winter.

In 1972, the Teamsters came out and said, “We’re going to get rid of you. We’re going to start with the captains!” I was a {strike} captain. A lot of people left. The gabachos, a bunch of goons, started saying, “You’re going to have to take a hike from here!” A lot of the farm workers especially the captains left but a lot of people took their place. It was during that time that Manuel came and said, “Come help us two weeks.” Manuel said, “Get a permit and come help us. But don’t bring everything, just a little bit of changes of clothes.” That’s how I came in. There was violence all over the place.

Teamster Goons vs. the Green Hornets

I went to Mendota. Manuel wanted to form teams of sixty or more people. I told him he only needed three or four guys-Calacas (Eduardo Garcia), Gilbert Rodriguez, Ruben Martinez and me. In 1972-1975 the Teamster goons were coming in and talking their garbage. They talked their garbage to the captains and then to the ladies, all of them. They were all over the place. We came in and jumped from town to town to confront the goons-the goons and the labor contractors. We never hurt anyone but we slowed them down. We were constant, we never let up on them until they could take no more. They called our attorneys, Cesar and Dolores. They wanted to talk and that’s when we got those contracts-a bunch of contracts in lettuce, celery, in everything.

I was never aware that people called us “las avispas verdes” {The Green Hornets} but, yeah, I guess we were like that.

Cesar and the ALRA

But the only thing is that Cesar les puso mucha fe {Cesar placed too much faith) because he didn't pay attention to what the grower's were doing. We always used to tell him, "It's not your fault; it's not your fault, Cesar. This is all new to us! Nobody knows what the heck to do."

With the law, the ALRA, he thought that was the end of our troubles. So he sort of quit looking at the growers. In the meantime, what the growers were doing, because they were 2, 3, 4, 5, year union contracts, while the years were passing, the first ALRA agents left. The growers were able to bring in their people, their agents {under Deukmajian}. They were prejudice and they were working for the growers. Cesar used to get so mad at himself for that because he should have been aware of this. He should have had an idea. It was just a basic thing that we have to go through. "God dog it, God dog it," he never cussed but he'd say, "God dog it. I could kick myself on the butt!" And we'd tell him, "Cesar, it's not your fault." They turned everything around on us and we started losing a lot of companies. We started losing a lot of friends; it was horrible.

The Tag That Never Dies-Cesar is a Communist

Some day it will be done, maybe in little piece like this where everyone will have a chance to know it's not true... Even those who still hold Cesar as one now {a communist}, but I don't know why.

There were a lot of people back then, too, who talked about Cesar being a communist. I never found that to be anywhere near the truth. I worked with Manuel. You know how Manuel is.

"Esa gente-tan locos."

"But, Manuel, they say you guys are communist, ese."

"Na, están locos (they're crazy); don't listen to them or your going to turn crazy like them."

On a Mission for Dolores Huerta

They sent me to Coachella for a meeting. Dolores told me, "Compis, we're having a scheduled meeting in Coachella but the girl got sick but the meeting is set. Go there and don't come back. The workers have been waiting for this-a grievance meeting. Call us tomorrow." So that's where we went. I stayed over there six months sleeping in the office until one day Lori, Dolores daughter, heard me on the speaker phone with Dolores.

"Compis, they have you sleeping on the floor in the office? No, no, don't let them do that to you. Get an apartment, man."

So I told Dolores, "Yeah, I'm getting tired of sleeping in that office. Tengo frio {I'm cold}."

So she said for me to get an apartment. So I moved over there and stood over there for fifteen years. You know how it is, you go there to help her for two weeks and you never come back.

On Being Recalled at Times to Guard Cesar

Periodically, he would bring me back because he felt good with me. He'd bring me back because there were a lot of death threats. One time there was a price on him. They were paying \$20,000 to kill him-the gabacho Teamsters. The threat was about 1974, '75 more or less.

One time Cesar brought me back. I was his bodyguard that he preferred and his nephew, Boogie, because I knew how to play hand ball. But Boogie didn't. Cesar played, (Frank) Corriel, and Marcos Camacho, too. Every Sunday you could get two teams to play.

Taking Fours

Cesar liked jazz. In 1970, when I met Cesar we used to talk a little because I know he was trying to figure me out. We started to talk about music, and I told him, "I liked jazz." He said, "Oh, I like it, too." I didn't question it but he said, "Next time we go out, I'll bring a tape." He had a cassette player in the car. The next time we went out, he brought one with him.

So, he did his work 'cause most people when they get in the car, they're gonna go on a long ride, gonna go to Texas, you're gonna go to New Mexico, you go somewhere, you get comfortable. Then you go to sleep. Not him! It was work, work, work. Work on a speech to give when he gets there, work on a plan. When he finished all that, he said, "I brought a tape, brother."

You know what it was? Dixieland Jazz! I said, "Oh, brother, I thought you were talking about jazz, man. Jazz comes from Dixieland jazz but there is the other kind of jazz!"

"I didn't know that. What other kind of jazz is there?"

"There's modern jazz, progressive jazz. People like John Coltrane, Clifford Brown and those. You never heard of them?"

"Next time we go out, I'll bring the jazz."

We got into that. I changed his whole thing. We used to talk about jazz all the time. I got some tapes there. He made them for me; I have them there {pointing

at them- two cassette tapes with the song titles written in Cesar's hand}. There's Lee Morgan, Art Pepper, Duke Ellington, Dizzy Gillespi, Sonny Smith, Horace Silver, Cooking at the Continental, Strobe, Senior Blues, Preacher, Doodling...

Sometimes he would ask me, "What are they doing now?"

I would tell him, "They're taking fours- four bars." He got real into it.

Taking Doubles

We had that {jazz} in common. That and handball. I used to hate Sundays because Cesar, Corriel, Camacho, Paul Chavez, some other guy whose name I can't remember, and I used to go play handball. The ones that always paired off were Cesar and his son, Paul. Paul could play good back man. You had to hit pretty hard to be able to get up there and come back; to work with it. I play front. I can't play back. I put it down in the little corner to make it hard for you to get it. But Cesar always used to get it. I learned that in the joint, how to play with some of the best.

There are some special gloves for handball. They're leather and they're kind of hard here in the middle. He used a regular contractor glove-esos guantes para pintar. The kind you use to paint y todo ese jale-the kind for working out in the fields. Everybody told him they were the wrong kind of guantes (gloves). Paul used to have a leather glove, but I used to use a handkerchief. I thought I was pretty down with the game but not good enough because we didn't have good people. Cesar, if he had Paul, they were very good. It was hard to get them out.

Back to the Arizona Strike

I came to the union through a friend. His name was Ruben Martinez. Rueben knew Manuel. He told Manuel about me. Ruben disappeared for a while; his brother got in trouble with the police and he came to Manuel to ask him to loan them a union lawyer. Manuel told him no because the lawyers were only for the union. He stormed out and we never saw him again.

In Arizona, the growers used the same tactics. What the growers used to do was send buses to places like Nebraska. They used to send buses all over the United States. They would give them free food, lodging and bring those workers. But they used to go to Chinatown. That's where they did their recruiting. To recruit someone from Chinatown who has no home, all you need is to have a big jug of wine, give it to them and they'll get on the bus. That's what they did.

In the meantime, they had the press. The press was always on their side – favoring them. "The workers don't want no strike, they don't want the hassle in their life. Look at them; they're working in the fields. But the cameras were way

out here {in the street}. If you go look at the board you can see a wino with half a bag of cantaloupes because they can't carry a full bag. Another guy is up on top giving another guy a hand to get up there. We laugh and the cameras are over here propagandizing, "The workers refuse to come out on strike because Cesar said so and they're all working." But they're all winos from Nebraska somewhere. I don't know where they got them from. A cantaloupe truck has two doors to walk up and to walk down, hanging and following a truck. Usually, the trucks are going like this {snapping fingers}. No sooner did they get it up there (with a bag of cantaloupes) it's full, get another one, take this one, get another one, etc. In two to three hours you clean-up the field, but that wasn't happening. Meanwhile, they had the camera crews {reporting} that everybody was shining Cesar on, that Cesar was fighting a losing battle.

Cat and Mouse but no Rosalee

In every strike you get an influx of police. When we were going to take workers out, for example, in Mendota, all the cop cars are facing in at us. We start marching in the front and come out from the back yelling the whole time, "Huelga, huelga, Chavez si, Teamsters, no!" We're coming into the company building and some are staying behind. We get all that done, we get into the bus and it takes everyone. The rest in cars take off and the cops follow them but some of us are left behind (inside the company building). In fifteen, twenty minutes cars come back to pick us up. We jump in the cars and leave. It was usually twenty, thirty who stayed behind to talk to the workers to tell them to leave.

A whole bus load of people came from Texas. We went into the field to talk to them. We found out that these guys were really homesick. We phoned in to Cesar and he said, "Take them home."

"To Texas?"

"Yes," he said.

He told us to get some money, get some food, get some water and take them home to Texas.

"Not you, Compis. You stay here." He sent Lupe Baustista, and Gilbert Rodriguez with them in the bus. I had wanted to see Texas.

Tent City, Talking to the Border Brothers and Rumors of Beatings

In San Luis, Arizona, Manuel put up three tents in a big area right where someone chopped the fence and made an entrance. You could drive a truck through it. We manned those tents. We had food, we had water, we had everything so when people came across we could talk to them. It wasn't our

place to hurt anyone in that sense. They were coming to work. They didn't necessarily have to come to Yuma and all that area to work. That is what we would tell them. You can work somewhere else, brother, but here we have problems. We're on strike here. The workers from those ranches are here. These are your brothers who are fighting for their jobs so help us. If you're coming to work, go work somewhere else, not here. There's work at other places.

Some said okay while others told us they would work wherever they felt like it. We told them, "It's all right." We warned them that some workers there weren't like us. We weren't using violence but that we couldn't control some of the workers who didn't think like us. Some will become enraged knowing someone else is coming in and taking their jobs. How do you think that worker will be able to feed his children tonight? If you're going to come over here, come, but go work somewhere else. Go, go far away where there is no conflict. We never hurt anyone. Cesar would never have put up with it.

Rumors come out because you are doing a good job –more meat to the taco. People who come across may have been walking a long way to get a job over here. All this about Manuel beating up people, Cesar would never have put up with that or with others using violence. I worked with Manuel. There were four of us in his crew and that style of enforcement, we never used it. The people, we already had them; we just wanted to get the grower to open up his pocket. We were not hurting the workers crossing from Mexico. We were telling them to work somewhere else and we being successful at getting them to go somewhere else to work.

Advice {Consejos} on the Long and Winding Road

A lot of people say a lot of things {about the union, Manuel and Cesar} but I don't pay no mind. When people start throwing rocks you can gage the amount of success you are having. You can measure by that. Cesar always talked like that. He'd say that there are bad things and there are good things. People sometimes confuse the two. I tell you, when people are talking about your capabilities and your past record, and they confuse both and say, "He's not right, he's not doing right", when they start saying those kind of words, that's good. Don't confuse it because it means they're mad because you're doing a good job. It made a lot of sense. He was always talking like that. He gave me a lot of ***consejos*** that way.

He knew what kind of vato I was when I first met him. I was a heroin addict, you know, but that little stay I had at the prison there, and I used to tell him that, that little stay I did there gave me the idea that I could do something with my life.

Cesar would tell me, “You know, Compis, you’d be surprised what kind of reaction you get from giving somebody something for nothing especially if they desire it”.

I do that sometimes, you know, too. “I like your jacket,” I give it to them and they say, “Wow, man, thanks!” You’d be surprised. I never obligate nobody because that is what Cesar said, too. If you do something like that never do it on the pretenses that tomorrow or the next day you’re going to borrow their car or you’re going to borrow their suit or something. He would say, “That’s not giving. All you’re doing is helping yourself. I’m not talking about that. Just do it to have a fresh feeling.”

Cesar’s Fast for Life and My Own Obstacles

The last fast Cesar did was there in Delano in 1988. He left La Paz. He took the car. He hardly ever drove. It struck me funny when somebody said, “Cesar left La Paz.”

“What do you mean he left La Paz?”

“Yeah, he took the car.”

“What are talking about? Why did you let him go? Why didn’t you go with him?”

Then they called us from over here {Delano} at the Forty Acres and told us that Cesar was there. He got one of the rooms. I forget the number, 25 or something like that, at the Agbayani Village. I came down and he was fasting. He began his fast that day. I got a room and went back to La Paz. I was living at La Paz and went to get some clothes.

Mike Ybarra was the nighttime guard and I was the daytime guard from about seven to nine at night. In the first ten days, or less, we were going to the Salón (old Hiring Hall) where they were having a mass. I’d take him from the Agbayani to the hall to the mass for ten days. In the morning I’d be out there about 7 o’clock in the morning for about a week. He would come out and we’d walk all the way around {40 Acres} and look at the roses. We’d walk {from the street in front of Agbayani} down to Garces and then to the entrance the Forty Acres. It was a long walk.

He was fasting to reinforce his commitment, that’s what I remember. It was a spiritual thing to cleanse you. He said that anybody can visualize obstacles and learn to overcome them. Cesar would talk to me about fasting and how you could visualize yourself eating a big hamburger. I told him he was a vegetarian but he said it was the idea of visualizing and enjoying something in your mind-

not really eating but what you could do with your mind. You could picture yourself eating and that was a good thing.

We had many talks during our walks. Cesar was thinking ahead. "People are going to get old," he would say. He would say that our people are going to get old, and we're going to have to get some housing for them. Some low rent housing. We'll get some funding from the federals. That there's some money floating around, and we needed to take advantage of it. We need to make housing because the people are going to need it. This senior apartment, Julio and Josefina Hernandez Senior Apartments where I live, is something he would have loved to have seen-the housing he talked about.

Then one morning he just didn't go. He quit coming out.

After he finished that fast we took him up to the mountains for two weeks. After we came back all of La Paz was fasting in front of a store in Mojave. I even fasted. I visualized but it was me eating a sandwich. I used to stay with Mario Vargas and I would say, "He's asleep. I could just go to the icebox and take something. I could use a sandwich. I don't care if it is Devil Food, and I hate Devil Food {potted} meat, something just to kill this hunger." Ha!

No, but I couldn't do that. At every turn, I was confronted with everything he said would happen when you fast-my obstacles.

Then people started telling me I was cheating. "Nicotine is food," they would tell me because I used to smoke back then. Who ever heard of nicotine being food for the stomach? Maybe the lungs.

Cesar's Death in Arizona

I had been in Hanford doing work. We were having a big law suit and I was the Director in Coachella; but I was sent to Hanford to look for some old workers. It was 8:00 in the morning. I called to give my report and the girl who answered sounded real weird.

I asked her, "What's the matter? Did somebody hurt you or something?"

She said, "No, he died."

"Who died?"

"You know who, Cesar."

Nobody knows. A lot of people talked and said it was food poisoning. We were good at being careful about that stuff and Cesar, too.

They were suing us for seven million dollars. They were all there in the living room. They had made a pamphlet for the medical plan. They gave him that, they gave it to him. They were going to go to court the next day. He must have fallen asleep because the light was on. They saw the light under the door, around 9:00, and they thought he was getting up. It was getting later. They knocked on the door and he had the leaflet in his hands on his chest-asleep.

Cesar: Un Chicano with a Vision

He's un chicano. He only went to the eighth grade but he could express himself so well using some twenty-five dollar words. It amazes me, and his planning. He had a plan for everything. He had a plan to plan to plan to plan. Ha! He never wavered from it.

There will never be another guy like him. I hate to listen to people say what they say sometimes. I know it's bad even when the guy is gone; but I doubt it they did that when the guy was alive.

It is beyond my comprehension {that someone} having an eighth grade education, coming from a poor side of town, has that kind of skills-skills where it doesn't make no difference if he's addressing five or five thousand or fifty thousand people. He was the same. He's going to make a point, and his little hands {extending them} he makes the statement where you grasped it, and you like the idea and you listened.

His idea of forming a union for farm workers was well thought-out and on time. It wouldn't have happened if we didn't have those conditions out there in the late '60's {Salinas}. It took so long but no sooner did they get the last contract {in Delano} and they were opening-up an office there in Salinas. That was amazing to me.

At that time everybody was having problems because of the labor contractors, the supervisors, the Teamsters, the goons-they wanted us to work for free. We had taken the steps to do something. Cesar had the vision to be able to help and to take the people where they had to be. When it started in Salinas, I went to all the meetings. I met Dolores and Cesar. It wasn't like they came to visit us and then they left. They came in with the idea of understanding the problem areas and then selecting the people because that was the intent-to select the people for negotiations and to form and administer the union. So many people capable of doing the work; farm workers have to do the job. People started stepping-up to the plate.

Cesar always said, "You can't open the window and expect people not to look in. When you talk, you're opening up a window. When you go to the public, you're opening up a window." In other words, make people better than they were the day before. Do something for people and make them a little better than

they were yesterday. Then you've done your job. You're not going to 100% transform people, but in due time you will change them.

Cesar used to get mad because I used to help a lot of people in Coachella. "Look, he would say, "If you're going to teach people, teach them." He would say don't do it for them. They're going to do it. You can teach people whatever you're going to teach them. Show them how to put it there, put it there, it's done. Don't do it for them and have them standing there. They're not going to learn anything. You're whole intent is to make them better than what they were yesterday. Don't try to change it all at once. Treat everybody the same. That's what you do to make them better.

Aiming for a Little Justice

When Cesar and Dolores started the union in 1962, it was for the farm workers not for themselves. Sometimes, I read; that is in books and everywhere, that it was their aim, the aim of the union was so that farm workers could air their grievances and get a little justice. That always stuck in my head that that was what we were doing. That way I was never in doubt. Are we doing it right? Are we hurting anyone? There was no doubt. We were the ones who were being hurt.

The growers wanted us to work, work faster, pick more but pay us less. Always, always but that is totally wrong. All they're looking for is some Black people they can push around; that's what they're doing with the Latinos, you know. They've found themselves another black crowd they can push around.