

PRESBYTERIAN LIFE

October 1, 1968

CESAR CHAVEZ

Nonviolent leadership in the struggle
For change has passed to a former migrant
who is now organizing farm workers

by Lincoln Richardson

In Coachella, the pickets gather in the dark at three-thirty in the morning. By four o'clock they are on their way to the fields, their long rows of headlights bouncing over the desert roads towards half-a-dozen different vineyards. By dawn they will be strung out along the sandy roadsides, in front of huge square patches of irrigated green in the sagebrush, and they will shout into the fields: '*Huelga!*'

Strike. Harvest and strike have come together in the far south of California. They will go on together through the summer heat, moving north together through the great chessboard grape valleys of California.

Already grapes and enormous investments, are rotting. Even so, composure is the rule. Occasionally, it gives way to the frantic: a foreman in a pickup truck pinwheels off the road into a knot of pickets idling in the five o'clock heat, he scatters several who scramble to safety, and knocks two more painfully aside, then accelerates in the loose sand toward the field. Pickets swarm over the truck, pounding on the windshield, pulling open the doors, throwing sand into the cockpit, bringing it to a stop.

Sudden silence. The fierce foreman, quickly transformed, peers around from behind the wheel, blinking like a man who has lost his glasses; there is a trickle of blood across the bridge of his nose. The creator of silence is a short, erect man, who has just pulled the fiery captain of the pickets off the running board, and now looks easily around a circle of uneasy faces. The anger in the eyes of Cesar Chavez is well-contained in the steady gazes that has looked carefully at conflict and indignity, and is now confident hopeful, and always calculating.

Addressing the ranking grower in the group, who has just driven in from San Francisco headquarters in a sports car, Chavez delivers a short purposeful speech. "This has got to stop. It's happening here. It's happening up north. The San Joaquin Valley is about to blow. We've got to have peace this summer. This has got to stop." In the face of a

vigorous round of secondary speeches from the pickets, the grower also keeps his cool: “The foreman was wrong. I *said* he was wrong. What do you want me to do?”

Later, in the calm, the grower, who has shipping interests as well as land up and down the state, mentions that he has heard from an official in the longshoreman’s union. The longshoremen have been supporting the pickers’ strike; Cesar and the grower retire across the road for a talk. Cesar considers him a good guy with only one serious flaw; he won’t sign a contract. “He says he would, but he can’t sign without the others. A lot of them say that.”

Cesar climbs back into his car, beside the Reverend James Drake of the California Migrant Ministry, his administrative assistant and closest associate. They will make one more quick tour of the area. They have been cruising rapidly about since four o’clock; at almost six, work is underway. Striking a grape valley is a complex and difficult art, with no successful models. It is like striking a factory thirty miles across with thousands of entrances. Every row is an entrance. The chances of facing workers as they enter the fields are dim; pickets rely on loudspeakers, persuasive rhetoric and a show of numbers to persuade workers to come back out—“Join us, brothers. Leave the fields. Stand up for your rights.”

Standing by the road in the early light, the pickets are mostly young, boys and girls who are already veterans at stoop labor. They have slept a short night on the floor, eaten donated food, and now seem exhilarated to be standing beside a field, and holding a red and black flag, ready to begin shouting into the field. Some are older, gray-headed men, who have also slept on the floor, and to whom austerity has already given dignity. Now, in austerity for a purpose, they have gained pride. Theirs is not the half-enchanted garrulity of the young, laced with laughter, but they too will shout: “*Huelga!*” Strike.

It is impossible to know exactly where the pickets should be, but it is Cesar’s business, as director of the United Farm Workers’ Organizing Committee, to know as much as possible, and he has learned to read the vineyard country well.

Few workers will leave the fields while the pickets are there. Many, however, do not return the next day. When the workers first come into the area—UFWOC openly suspects that many are recruited in Mexico and smuggled across the border—few of them have heard of the strike or have even imagined a strike of farm workers. Striking has always seemed to be the exclusive privilege of industrial workers: when the Wagner Act in 1935 established the legal basis for workers to organize and bargain collectively, it excluded farm workers. Since then, most growers and workers alike have accepted that exclusion as natural. But now, Cesar Chavez is attempting to gain rights won by everyone else thirty years ago. He appears the more radical to his adversaries because of the very anachronism of his struggle. He is seen, not as a conservative who is thirty years late and trying to catch up, but rather as a radical, daring to challenge a tradition so very venerable.

Since this strike is not about fringe benefits, but for the fundamental right to bargain collectively, it has many of the appurtenances of the strikes of the thirties: strikebreakers (witting and unwitting); mudslinging (Cesar is regularly called a Communist, while Farm Workers' publications picture ranchers as potbellied maniacs with bullwhips and overgrown incisors); inflamed passions; arrests (usually of pickets, for minor offenses). And the constant threat of violence. When Cesar leaves the restored calm of the truck incident, he is flagged down frantically by a picket captain, a mile further on. A car has just run over a picket's foot. The young man, grimacing, is in the back seat of a car, ready to be taken to a hospital. Cesar gives directions to the hospital, leaves instructions for gathering legal evidence of the incident, and goes on.

James Drake drives to a small picket line at a remote field near Mecca which is below Thermal, south of Coachella. The pickets, though energetic, are having little success. The workers are stolidly picking close to the road, ignoring the voices clamoring a few yards away. "This is the hardest kind of suffering," Cesar says. "Going hungry, going without sleep isn't so bad. But to stand here in front of people who won't come out, to have them ignore you, this kind of humiliation is the hardest suffering of all."

Just as he is ready to leave, the labor contractor, a Mexican, comes to Cesar's car window and says apologetically that he has promised to work another hour-and-a half, but at eight o'clock he will take his crew out. Cesar tells his pickets to leave and to come back at 7:30.

Drake is happy. "Cesar," he says expansively, "that was a good piece of work. I think you deserve a diet cola." They stop at the store that is Mecca's business district; on the way to Thermal they add the empties to the dozen diet cola bottles already rattling around the back seat.

Back in the center of the valley, the pickets have regrouped in front of a single field. More than fifty cars and a hundred and fifty pickets line the road. Two sound-equipped cars are alternately beaming the message into the field, while creeping sheriff's cars keep vigil. The picket line appears to be an exercise in faith: the field seems as still as a millpond, and the activity in its depths is no more evident. Drake, however, has ways of gauging the situation.

Just the day before, he had been branded, as any pale-faced Anglo eventually is, an outside agitator. "What are you doing here?" a grower asked. "You've never picked grapes." Drake offered a wager on that point, and the grower declined the challenge. Drake would have won: he went through junior high and high school in Thermal. Now he recalls a favorite high school pastime, bouncing along the elevated irrigation canal in a '34 Ford.

From the canal, they can see most of the valley. Crews are working deep in the center of the fields, as far as possible from the loudspeakers. The rows along the roads will almost certainly go untouched during that harvest. Cesar returns to the picket line and spends an hour moving up and down its length, laying plans, chatting, listening to everyone who has something to say.

At ten-thirty, a reporter from the local paper bursts into the United Farm Workers' storefront office on Main Street. For an hour, Cesar has been tactfully evading him on the telephone. Now he tells the journalist bluntly that he will no longer talk to the paper because he has found its coverage biased and inaccurate.

Yesterday's edition had carried a story of a mass celebrated in the town park the night before. In four different places in the paper it had offered the same explanation of the event, summed up in a caption under a picture of Cesar and the celebrant, Father Mark Day standing behind the communion table. "To raise the spirits," the caption said, and, in the body of the story . . . (copy unreadable) . . . City Hall Park last night by the UFW and a movie and rally are scheduled for tonight in the park from 8 to 10. This is apparently an attempt to gather strength for the union in the face of the ending of the grape harvest. It's estimated that the main harvest will be over by Friday." The Farm Workers would dispute this passage both *in toto* and in each of its parts. They could not agree that the harvest will be in by the end of the week (or ever), that spirits are lagging, that celebrating a mass is some sort of organizing technique. For the moment, Cesar disputes the estimate of the crowd at two hundred (there are that many pickets alone). "That hurts us with the people."

How can he explain religion's dominance in his movement, the penchant for hearing mass in the city parks and in fields and beside picket lines, this strange willingness to fast for nonviolence and to pray in public? How can all of that be fitted in with prevailing notions of trade unions, and what they are like, and of churches and what they are about? How can it be explained in a society where religion *is* used, where it is brought out of the churches to be used at fund-raising dinners and political conventions? Cesar doesn't explain. Challenged on the point, asked to justify to the skeptical the presence of religion in his movement, he only says, "They don't understand our people. Religion is a part of our people."

Drake, an Anglo and a Protestant minister, can offer further explanation: "Mexicans have a unique understanding of suffering; Mexico is a poor land with a great deal of suffering. A great deal of the natural suffering has been ritualized, institutionalized, especially in the work of the Franciscans. Mexicans didn't respond much to the missionaries who came with the conquistadors, but when Junipero Serra, the first Franciscan, landed at Acapulco and walked barefoot to Mexico City, this was something they could understand. Mexicans believe that from suffering you get strength rather than death. This is expressed in penitential acts and, especially in the Eucharist. When we celebrate the Eucharist in a field or beside a picket line, with real grapes and real bread, it has the kind of earthy meaning that it had in the Indian villages, before all the cathedrals were built. Of the strike, people are saying, 'We've always suffered. Now we can suffer for a purpose.'"

Cesar recalls a time when the strike was in a legal tangle. "A group of teenagers had just joined the strike, and we had to tell them that if they went on the picket lines they might get arrested. We said, 'Have you thought about what this would do to your reputation?'

They thought about that, and came back and said, 'If we lose the strike, what good will our reputations be?' This is really something, because these kids don't have the orientation of middle-class students in a peace demonstration."

Cesar refused to justify his religious practice to skeptics. But to some seven thousand farm workers who gathered in Delano for the end of his twenty-five-day fast last spring, he gave this explanation of his long penitential act: "I undertook this fast because my heart was filled with grief and pain for the sufferings of farm workers. The fast was first for me and then for all of us in this union. It was a fast for nonviolence and a call to sacrifice. . . . When we are really honest with ourselves, we must admit that our lives are all that really belong to us. So, it is how we use our lives that determines what kind of men we are. It is my deepest belief that only by giving our lives do we find life. I am convinced that the truest act of courage, the strongest act of manliness, is to sacrifice ourselves for others in a totally nonviolent struggle for justice. *To be a man is to suffer for others.* God help us to be men."

Delano is famous (or notorious) because it is the home of Cesar Chavez. It was there that Cesar went in 1962 to begin the lonely job of organizing farm workers, where he fasted last spring, and where strike activity has been strongest. Today, about noon, he and Drake leave for an overnight trip to Delano; Cesar will address a rally thirty miles south, in Bakersfield tonight. As their trip takes them across a corner of the Mojave Desert and into the mountains, Cesar chats awhile and then sleeps. When they come out of the mountains into the perfect geometry of the San Joaquin Valley, the interest of both men quickens. They look carefully at the grapes and estimate the harvest. They look carefully at the fields and estimate the care they need. They look carefully at the fields and estimate the care they need. They look carefully at the various holdings and estimate the relative economic strength of the growers. It is relaxed, cheerful talk, like the conversation of two highly knowledgeable fishermen who are passing familiar lakes and streams. "Now *those*," Cesar finally says expansively, "those are union grapes. Don't they look *distinctly* superior? Each grape has a little eagle inside."

Several hundred little eagles, roughhewn thunderbirds that announce the presence of the United Farm Workers wherever they go, have been pasted to the wall in the parish bingo hall in Bakersfield where the rally will be held. A young man in a sport shirt is setting up sound equipment; he is Father Mark Day, who said mass in Coachella. College volunteers and farm workers are putting up banners. All want news of the strike in the South. After a brief stop here, Cesar and Drake go on to Delano.

Cesar has been in and out of Delano since he was an adolescent, when his family joined the migrants following the crops in California. He was born near Yuma, Arizona, on a farm begun by his grandfather, who came across the border from Mexico as a homesteader. The family lost the farm during the depression, when Cesar was ten. From the difficult but free life on a poor family farm, the Chavez' were plunged unprepared into the horrors of migrant life in the thirties. After a couple of seasons, the family had learned how to get

work and how to avoid being cheated. They settled down to winter in Brawley and followed the crops in a reasonably ordered routine. Later, they began to winter in Delano. Cesar entered the Navy in 1944, at the age of nineteen. After serving two years in the Pacific, he returned to Delano to marry Helen Fabela. They both did farm work for several years, until Cesar joined the staff of the Community Service Organization as a part-time organizer. During his early months with CSO, Cesar worked to improve his reading and writing, skills he had gained as far as the seventh grade in an untold number of schools. A decade later when he left CSO, he was its national director. He returned to Delano to begin organizing farm workers.

Feeling against Cesar is intense among Delano Anglos. Even those who are resigned to the idea of workers' organizations would prefer not to deal with the man who organized the workers. One firm, DiGiorgio, when it decided that a union was inevitable, tried to make the Teamsters the bargaining agent. Predictably, the common charge against Chavez is that he is not really interested in the workers, but is in the struggle for what he can get out of it. It is difficult, however, to point to anything Cesar has sought or gained, except national prominence, vilification, and a certain amount of physical danger. When he left the prestige and security of the CSO to organize farm workers, he undertook to accomplish by himself a task that had frustrated everyone who had tried it from the days of the Wobblies, with their depth of fervor, to the AFL-CIO and the Teamsters, with their depths of funding and professional expertise. Now, when Cesar goes home to Delano, he does not, admittedly, sleep under a bridge or live in his car. He goes home to a yellow frame bungalow that is better than the shacks or shanties of the most hapless of migrants. His dwelling in no way sets him apart from farm workers in Delano.

At the edge of town, beside a grape field, three small houses serve as union offices. "Will Helen and Jean still be at the credit union?" Drake asks, checking his watch. Jean Drake is still there. Helen Chavez has just gone home. Before he goes home, Cesar tours the offices, answering questions about Coachella, and stopping for a long talk with the Union's lawyer.

That evening, Cesar talks to five hundred cheerful, gently perspiring people packed into a hot hall on a hot night for a long program. It is a spirited, entertaining evening, with speeches interspersed, at just the right time, with songs, presentations (such as Scab of the Week, offered in absentia), and the important, skillful, satiric and historical dramatizations of the *Teatro de Campesinos*. (Since the early days of the strike, the *Teatro* has been an important means of expressing, clarifying, and dramatizing the issues at stake in the strike.) After the rally, Cesar and Helen go to dinner with a Teamster official. The competition between the slick, rich, traditional, and tough Teamsters and the new, indigenous United Farm Workers had been a bitter struggle. Neither side has forgotten it, but each is able to see advantage in cooperation. Cesar and Helen arrive home at two o'clock, twenty-three hours after Cesar got up in Coachella.

Cesar Chavez was the keynote speaker at the World Plenary Assembly of the International Catholic Movement for Intellectual and Cultural Affairs—commonly called

Pax Romana—at St. Joseph's College in Philadelphia this summer. The three hundred Catholic scholars from forty-six nations gave Chavez a standing ovation. Referring to the assembly's theme, "Four Faces of Poverty," Chavez gave an account of the UFWOC and of its problems, emphasizing the importance of nonviolence: "Violence is the most perfect way of exploiting the poor, and has been for centuries."

The assembly was also addressed by Eugene Carson Blake, Robert Theobald, Archbishop Angelo Fernandez of New Delhi, and received a special message from the Pope. In picture, Chavez is greeted by John Cardinal Krol of Philadelphia.

Next morning, departure for Coachella is delayed by half-a-dozen pieces of business. There has been a personnel problem at the cooperative which, because the automobile is basic to the farm workers' economy, began as a gas station and a parts shop. The co-op is run by the Reverend Fred Dresser, a successful grocer, who, after a late seminary education, joined the staff of the California Migrant Ministry. From the co-op, Cesar goes to the large new headquarters the union is building at the edge of town. The union had set up a large cross at the edge of the property; someone has set fire to it during the night. Then, after a second stop at the present office to pick up documents, they are off for Coachella.

The documents are contracts, and Drake reads the terms aloud as they drive south. Cesar does not negotiate contracts. "I can fight with them during a strike," he says, "but once they are beat, I haven't got the heart to negotiate." Drake has also picked up a Communist periodical with an article severely criticizing the union, both for its lack of revolutionary fervor and for its involvement in religion. Cesar is not deeply troubled by this criticism from the far left nor by that from the far right that accuses him, paradoxically, of being a Communist. (Like those who instruct American Negroes to be content because their standard of living is superior to that of blacks in Africa, rightwing critics of the strike point out that California farm workers are better paid than those in other parts of the country. Though they earn more than South Carolina farm workers, who averaged 89 cents an hour in 1967, and are above the national farm workers average of \$1.33 an hour, California farm workers take little comfort in such statistics, especially those workers who know that industrial workers averaged \$2.83 an hour, and construction workers \$4.09, last year.)

Cesar and Drake are more concerned about the criticism implicit in the churches' general failure to take a stand. The commitment of the Franciscans and the California Migrant Ministry is real, and leaves the movement with no lack of pastoral and religious leadership. Individual congregations have also shown their sympathy with the strike, by contributing generously to collections for food and clothes. But such concrete help from churchmen is not the point at issue. Nor are Cesar and Drake disturbed by the presence of grower-dominated churches, Protestant and Catholic, that are vehemently opposed to the strike; growers, like strikers, need churches.

What does bother Cesar and Drake is the general neutrality of California churches as official bodies, a neutrality that is *ipso facto* support of the reigning system. The churches have always been identified to a degree with the growers. Their failure now to identify also

with the poor is beginning to cause a remoteness, a mutual isolation between the poor and the church structures. The strike does not and will not want for religious observances or for Christian friends. What it may well lack in years ahead, however, is any close relationship to the organized church. California Presbyterians have reacted variously to the strike. Local congregations have both supported and opposed it. The Presbytery of San Francisco has voted to support it. The Presbytery of Los Angeles defeated a resolution of support, remaining neutral.

Allen Grant is a Presbyterian elder and the president of the California Farm Bureau Federation. As a spokesman for growers, Grant is strongly opposed to both the grape strike and the boycott of table grapes that has accompanied it. The boycott, he says, is "nothing more than a blackmail effort to force compulsory unionism on agriculture." When the Northern California Council of Churches endorsed the boycott last summer, Grant said, "There are indications in California as well as elsewhere across the country that many church groups and clergymen are not supporting the boycott tactics, or at least are seeking further facts before taking action." He pointed to the San Joaquin Presbytery as an example of a church body that has declined to endorse the boycott. The presbytery has also said, "Labor has the right and the freedom to organize or to work separate from union organization."

At the last moment, Cesar decides to return to Coachella by way of Los Angeles and to look in on the new boycott office there. To find the address of the office, Drake and Cesar stop by the Community Service Organization in East Los Angeles. This is an opportunity to visit old friends and acquaintances of CSO days. The CSO played an important part in Cesar's life; it was CSO organizer Fred Ross who first recognized Cesar's talent and ability when Chavez was still a farm worker in San Jose. Ross hired Cesar part-time, and Cesar rose quickly in the organization to become national director. Because Saul Alinsky's Industrial Areas Foundation established CSO, Cesar is often referred to as "Alinsky-trained." Although elements of community organization are one of the things that distinguish the UFW from other labor movements, Cesar denies this direct link. He rarely saw Alinsky, he says, and "our relationship was strictly one of employer-employee." It is an effective organization in the large, urban, Spanish-speaking *barrios*. Asked why he left, Cesar has a very simple answer: "They wouldn't organize farm workers." Chavez examines with care the new meat freezer acquired by the CSO co-op, and asks detailed questions about the operation of the food co-op. The demands of the strike have overshadowed the services the union can offer to farm workers; still, spare moments can be given to envisioning the clinics and co-ops and credit unions that will fill up the forty-acre site in Delano, and to calculating for them.

At the apartment just established as boycott headquarters, Cesar checks into the details of the boycott. But it is evident that the primary reason he has come to Los Angeles is to see a young woman who has recently become seriously ill. He learned of her illness just this morning in Delano. They chat quietly in a corner. Then, after a few more words, the two men leave for Coachella.

When they arrive at Coachella in the late afternoon, the pickets are back from the fields. As he pulls up, Cesar is greeted by the picket captain who jumped the foreman's truck yesterday. The captain is furious: "I told them that if *they* couldn't stop it, *we* would." Cesar nods and looks away. His gaze is troubled and angry: it is also calculating and visionary.