

Jerry Brown

TAPE 66, CR 85, SR 40, TC 10:00:00

10:00:18 We're here to talk about your experiences and your thoughts about Cesar and the farmworkers... Farm Labor Law...significance?

10:00:38 The significance of the Farm Labor Law is that for the first time, I believe almost anywhere, maybe there's a country somewhere, but I don't know it, and nobody's brought it to my attention, in the last 20 years, that actually is interested in giving power to farmworkers. It just turns out that, like garment workers and maids and people who do the grunt work, the back-breaking, but essential labor so we can eat food, have never really been represented. And I suppose the reason is because it's so easy to get people to do that kind of work, that it's very difficult to organize them. And because they don't speak the language, generally, of the country, ah, it's just very hard to do that. So the significance is that people at the bottom of what is now an increasingly stratified class structure, there emerged a militant, a well-conceived and well-articulated labor union. So that, far and away, that's the key point, at a time of course when organized labor was losing power on every front other than the public sector where of course there are some unusual advantages that don't exist in the private sector.

10:01:57 Well let's back up from there. When did you recognize farm labor as an important issue?

10:02:07 Sometime in the late sixties, I, well I first came across Chavez when my father was running against Ronald Reagan for re-election in 1966. I met him

very briefly just when he walked through the house for a meeting with my father. And then, later on, a couple years later, I went on, I joined the march to Calexico, where the farmworkers had a 13 mile march, and then a meeting at the border, that had a number of senators and Cesar speaking to the issue of the farmworkers. That's when it started for me.

10:02:43 Talk about ARLB... how did the idea for the law emerge?

10:03:02 The, well, the idea had been around because there was a National Labor Relations Act, there had been discussions about including the farmworkers under it. And then, the idea, because there was the grape boycott, and that was a very polarizing issue, the, different people, even the growers I think said put this under the farm, the national law, Cesar didn't want that because he thought he was going to get caught up in the beaurocracy, and what has turned out to be a very impotent set of rules at the federal level. So he had his own ideas for a state law and there had been a bill, there was the Al Torre bill introduced in California, I believe in '74, and maybe there had been some earlier efforts to get some kind of a labor law. Actually went back as far as the late 30's when the other Democratic governor, Governor Olson proposed, I believe, some kind of farm labor legislation, maybe my father had presented something...

10:04:03 By '75...what was different then?

10:04:07 What was different then was that, you know there's lots of stories on this. And I'm not a, a percipient witness to all these things, but I believe that in return for financial assistance and whatever political moral support, the national AFL-CIO gave to Chavez and the farmworkers, these, the leadership, there,

extracted a pledge, that he would support some kind of legislation. That was one point. And then the second with the Teamsters entrenched with the sweetheart agreements with the growers, there was, I believe Cesar himself had the idea that a law might help. But it isn't clear, and I don't know if anybody can tell you precisely what the real thinking was. There's no doubt that Chavez came at some point to support a farm labor law. Whether he had serious misgivings about that, or just mild misgivings, I don't know. But, there was a reluctance going in, there was a period when he supported it, there was lawyers that worked for him that, that were certainly pushing that idea, and then the idea came to fruition in the context of 1975.

10:05:22 Now let's talk about the dynamic of how you pulled the law together.

10:05:43 Well in sync, and also at some arm's length. They, they liked pressure. They were from a battle. They were from the fields, they were from the boycott all over the country. And they were from the perspective that no one was going to give the farmworkers anything, they have to create the environment by which it comes to them, because other people have been pressured, intimidated, or in some other way pushed to do what Cesar and the farmworkers wanted. O.K., that's where they were coming from, so they were pushing me, and obviously, the powerful interests of the farmworkers, the grape people, the Gallo's, these were all significant players in the political process. Not just because they have money, which they have, but also because there's a culture of solidarity in the media, among other businesses, the boosterism of the Central Valley, it's a whole class of people who identify with a certain stability. Cesar's coming along and upsetting the old order, the old order of stability based on the idea that Mexican's are in a subservient position to pick the food, stay out of sight, not put a drain on public

resources, other than to give their labor, and in effect, subsidize low cost food for the American consumer. I mean that has been their historic role and it's one of docility and manipulation. Cesar comes along and says, "wait a minute, this is America, everyone is equal, and we want our power." That was as revolutionary as any group in the world that has been in a suppressed situation, and it is experienced that way. But it was a revolution not just against some grower in Madera County, but against what I might call the oligarchy, the power establishment elite, the governing class, and as a politician, that's the class you have to please, because if you don't you are then stigmatized as an oddball, a radical, a weird, not playing by the rules, out of step or out of sync, or something's wrong with you. And, that's what happens when, and that's why by the way nobody supported the grape boycott in Fresno, and only people in San Francisco, that don't have any farmers, or the little Los Angeles, Beverly Hills, they got a lot of support for the grape boycott, but we're in the marginal areas where the powers that be can have their will effectuated, then Cesar was up against it, so that's why he, he had to pressure me, and had to pressure the legislature, and had to create an environment, wherein a law seemed preferable to disruption and chaos in the fields. That was the whole theory. And then of course was economic pressure from picketing in the supermarkets, and economic resistance on the part of labor unions in Canada, Scandinavia, Australia, and other places that could refuse to handle the farmers produce. It took a, this was not done, the farmers didn't want to do this, because they had to yield power. And Chavez was basically saying "I want a docile group of semi-serfs to rise to the level of equal American citizens under the law and economically speaking. And now that hasn't happened to this day, but that's where he was coming from, and that was why his struggle was so difficult.

10:09:17 When you try to set an Ernest Gallo and a Cesar Chavez down are you dragging them to the table, or were you there, and they were ready to talk?

10:09:26 No, they were ready to talk. They're ready to talk because they, because of the trouble that basically Cesar and his allies could make for the farmers. Absent that trouble they would have never been there. It was just a matter of relieving them of unpredictability, work stoppages, or barriers to the distribution of their produce, and therefore their livelihoods, and their profits.

10:10:26 Once the law was set up...how do you rationalize trying to be impartial and objective...Leroy Chatfield and Roger Mahoney on the board...

10:10:45 Well I don't think, certainly Leroy was, but Johnson was, who also I put on, was connected to farmers, directly, that's that was his occupation, he was a lobbyist for farmers, and a farmer himself at one time. So...And Leroy had an existence prior to being a farmworker, he was a Christian brother, he had worked for me, so that was a balance, those two. Then we had a lawyer, Joe Grodin, who was a, I think a, certainly he was sympathetic to workers. He was a labor lawyer. He was an expert. Joe Ortega had nothing to do with the farmworkers. He was someone I met when I was running for the Junior College Board. He was Hispanic, so I thought that would be something, there would be somebody with a Spanish surname who spoke Spanish on that board, given who the workers are, and he was a lawyer, and I believe he was somebody who was sympathetic, but he was certainly had no real history of involvement. And then Roger Mahoney, ah, I don't see how you can call him a partisan. He's a bishop, he's working with some of the most conservative people in Los Angeles today. He had to, he knew Gallo, he knew Giamarra, he knew the growers, many of whom are Catholics, as well as

Cesar and the farmworkers. So I think that was just a canard, and they set rules, and the law was to give workers the power to choose for themselves. That's why they needed the access rule, why they needed to have that, um, thrust of the law to enable organization, to give workers some power. And these are workers that never had power. Many of them couldn't even vote, because they weren't citizens...So I don't think the board was biased, I think that was a pure propaganda move, now Cesar did put a lot of pressure on the board and a lot of pressure on the general council, to try to get rulings that he thought were favorable to himself. Now you might wonder whether that was proper or not, and you have to look into how that played itself out, but the board itself, I don't believe, was in any sense biased, it's far less biased than the supreme court appointed by the Republican governor that followed me, or the Farm Labor Board that was put in after me....

10:12:52 ...These were people who cared about the law, who cared about the principal of trade union democracy, that means you get to vote for, or against, or for this union, if not another union. Those were the principals. The people that were appointed after that were just fronting for the growers, for the, the class structure. And I use that word because there's, there's now no doubt, as there was 20 years ago, even in the mainstream, that there is an increasingly class-stratified society. And here, I really saw that between mostly Spanish-speaking, there were Filipinos, there were some Arab workers, but it was principally Mexican, nationals, who came over to pick our food. And they were treated as the stranger, as the alien by these second and third generation Americans, many of whom were immigrants themselves, and because of that reason, felt, hey, they had done it, and they were pretty tough on these people. And we needed a law, and that board, uh, not in any sense biased, but I believe, committed to the principal of equality, and giving power to the powerless, and, for that I don't apologize one bit.

10:14:04 Do you think just the very fact that here was a Board that was going to stick up for workers' rights, which had never happened before, that made people think it was pro-worker?

10:14:13 Right, of course, there was no consensus among the, or within the effecting, effective governing structure of California. The effective governing structure of California, if you take it as the large concentrations of capital, the trade associations, the lobbyists, but they're really employees.

SR41

10:14:45 Over the years you developed a pretty good friendship, personal relationship with Cesar, and as a politician you also recognized the political impact...'76...bid for presidential nomination, you asked Cesar to speak?

10:15:04 Because I felt he represented labor...

10:15:10 I asked Cesar to second my nomination in 1976 for the Democratic nomination for President because I felt he was a very important historical figure, he represented a constituency that I worked with, that I wanted to support me, and I wanted to promote myself. I also had Yvonne Brathwaite Burke and the Governor of Louisiana, so it was quite a rainbow there, but Cesar certainly exemplified values that I believed in, and therefore I wanted to be associated with.

10:15:41 From '76 on, couple of great years for farmworkers, won elections, then something changed, even before you left office.

10:15:57 Well the law was defunded by the farmers putting pressure, and when I say the farmers, it was the corporate agriculture that has the lobbyists, the lawyers, the strategists, decided to intimidate the legislature into withholding funding. That actually started in '76, and then the, close down, and then with the threat of this popular ballot initiative, the measure was then refunded. I think that took a lot of the wind out of the sails, the original board collapsed, we had to get a whole new board...

10:16:31 ...Just the political climate, changed to make it less favorable for winning elections. And also for getting contracts, because becoming the sort of, the bargaining agent, or even the certified bargaining agent, which could take several years after all the legal objections filed by the growers, there still was a need to get a contract. And that contract was very hard to hammer out with the reluctant grower. And the growers of course were encouraged by the sense, in 1979, in 1980, this is the emergence of this, of Reaganism. It's the emergence of virulent Cold War, anti-Russian rhetoric that was going to mobilize somewhere in the neighborhood of a trillion dollars in military spending, which is really a subsidy to very powerful corporate interests that were promoting it. And the growers are caught up in a part of that whole operation. So, they were involved in, to fight back, and to undermine the law as best they could.

10:17:34 well, people, farmworkers, people who fought for the law still think it's a good law, and yet during the '80's the law didn't work for them at all. What happened?

10:17:44 Well the law is only as good as its enforcement. You have a board that is packed by Deukmajian. Deukmajian got hundreds of thousands of dollars from farmers to change the law. They bought the dismemberment of the Farm

Labor Law. It's a felony. I mean there's no doubt about it. Now the law, they're not going to put Deukmajian in jail because the Attorney General was elected that way. I was elected that way....

10:18:08 ...The system runs on the felonious bribery of receiving money in return for official action. That's what it is. Now the Supreme Court has come down with a decision that says you got to prove an explicit quid pro quo, but it is there. Somewhere, in somebody's mind, if not actually expressed. So, once having bought a board and a general counsel, favorable to the growers, then that certainly weakened Cesar. He also, perhaps, changed his focus, and that's something you have to talk to the Union about.

10:18:41 Given that you can always buy votes.

10:18:55 Certainly I like the law because it got me off the hook. I didn't have to say, "oh, the grape boycott," no, we have a law, we take it to a vote, and we have a secret ballot election, and that gives it off of my plate. And as a politician we don't want controversy that divides the constituency, and as a matter of fact, I lost a lot of votes in the farm labor area, among the farmers. They liked me the first year. Then after that I was Typhoid Mary south of Sacramento. Now that's a very self-interested view, but that is the view of a careerist politician. Because, unless you have that view, you can't run the gauntlet of electoral politics today, and that's kind of a view that I don't share at this point...

10:19:36 ...So, was the law right?

Cesar needed a movement. His movement was drained of its, of its, what's the right word, its charisma, or its enthusiasm, by virtue of the domestication of the

law. In fact that was argument I made to the growers. Once you get this into the structure of laws, and appeals, and transcripts, delays, I mean, this will, you're not going to have a problem. That was how I sold it to the growers, as a matter of fact. Now, Cesar knew that, but at that point, for various reasons, that was where he had to go...

10:20:11 ...Would it have been better if he had been able to build his movement, and sustain it, in some other way? Conceivably, it could have been better. I think he certainly when he came to my house and talked to me, before the law was even, the bill was even introduced, he said, "I don't know about that, this law, I know as soon as it gets in there the same economic powers will take it over, and the farm workers will get screwed." That's what he said to me. And um, those, I don't know the exact words, but that was certainly the import of what he said. And I thought, well, maybe he's just posturing to negotiate the best law he can possibly get out of me. But I also believe that that really spoke from his heart, and he knew that the legal structure favors the status quo, and farmworkers are not the status quo. They are marginal participants in the economy, even though, by their labor, they are major contributors to all of our benefit.

10:21:08 Analogy...voter rights act...civil liberties movement...

10:21:14 Yeah, there could be. There could well be a parallel there, because, you see, basically the goal of, of...

TAPE 67, CR 87, SR 41, TC 10:30:00

10:30:23 The parallel is this, that as the civil rights laws became reality more people are voting, more African-Americans are elected to office, but the economic

discrimination, the separation, the alienation, the separation of society is still there. And as far as the farmworkers are concerned, yeah, they have there law but there's a continuing stream of new workers that are desperate. As a matter of fact now, with the neo-liberal policies in Mexico that are breaking down the old protective structures, there's a pushing of Mexican workers across the border, and the American farmer, particularly in California, requires a steady flow of cheap workers, so that being the case, [TRAIN] you give 'em a law, its not going to make that much difference.

[OFF CAMERA] Yeah, that's what happened, that's the real message, I don't know if you can put that in your documentary for PBS, probably won't allow that...

10:31:21 Talk about the ability of Cesar to attract really brilliant talent...

10:31:31 Yeah, Cesar had very bright people, there was a lot of enthusiasm, after the movie The Harvest of Shame, there was an identity with farmworkers, at least their plight. And yet, capital, just patient capital, tens of billions, if not hundreds of billions, in this country, in Mexico, in other parts of the world, is there, and is growing. That's just more than can be overcome with one charismatic leader.

10:32:01 He was a remarkable person, do you remember what you thought when he died?

10:32:08 I wished that I'd, I'd seen him a couple months before, and I had begun to spend some time with him with a view toward working on some new arrangement, cooperatives. A different kind of popular organization, and so, I was, sad that I wasn't going to have that opportunity, he wouldn't be around. Because I

felt that he did have a sense, uh, of the direction that we needed to go in. I really think that he was on the right track. He didn't get there. Didn't get to the promised land. Neither did Martin Luther King. Nobody ever gets there. But he, I think, had the right values for the time. Frugality. Sharing. Cooperative. Sustainable. Those are his values, and, those are more relevant today than even when he started, by far.

10:33:13 Well, at first, I think a lot of people who were farmworkers, got economic sufficiency, got that leg up and were able to have lives they would have otherwise never had a chance to. Kids go to college. Buy a home. Have a broader experience of life's potential. That happened to tens of thousands of people because of the United Farm Workers. No question about that. And he also set a model. That example is still there. It's going on, for people to look at the history, look at the current farm labor law, the current farm workers' union, and that can be emulated. And that's a living treasury of human endeavor, a heroic effort, and I believe it'll be followed. It'll be taken to another level at some point in the future.

10:34:00 Is that the end of the chapter for some...

10:34:05 Well, everybody's gonna die, so everybody carry the baton, and then drops it and somebody else picks it up. Until, somehow, some catastrophe happens, and we don't do that anymore. But I don't think that's gonna happen. So Cesar is definitely, first of all he's the first Mexican leader, the first Latino personage, that was a worldwide figure, there's no other person, even to this day, who is as well-known as he is. Not a cabinet member in the Clinton Administration. Not a mayor. Not a congressman. Hell, he was the leader coming out of the Mexican-American experience and I don't see that being challenged any time soon.

10:34:45 Bigger burden of him? That he had to represent too much?

10:34:49 Maybe. I mean it's pretty incredible when you come from a humble background and now all of a sudden you are now a global figure. Unless you have a very strong sense of yourself, or some kind of spiritual practice, or some structure that keeps you in line, I mean even the Pope is supposed to have a guy walking behind him when they're coronated, who says, "thus goes the glory of the world," to keep him humble. So, every leader, and certainly he had a lot of power within his union, runs the risk of excess.

10:35:24 Hindsight...the law?

10:35:43 Well I think the law was the right thing to do. There's no mistake, at least as far as I can see now. But if there isn't the power to support the law, then the law becomes ineffective. And the fact of the matter is, whether it's Sacramento, or Fresno, or Modesto, or the Coachella Valley, or the Imperial County, the farmworkers do not have the power that the growers have. The growers have lawyers, they have allies, they belong to golf clubs, they talk to editors of papers, the equipment sellers, the real estate brokers, the housing subdividers, the Sunkist, or, whatever those international companies are that run the agriculture in many places, this is power. And then the banks of course. There is the problem. A mere law, voted in by some legislators in Sacramento, or Washington, will not have the power on the ground. Who has the power on the ground? And that is the people with the bucks. That's where, it's all wrapped up in that power. So you have to have balance between economic equality and legal equality, or otherwise, one gets absorbed by the other.

10:36:57 Popular pressure...

10:37:02 Well the laws right now are, well, sure, the laws are there as a formality. They're a superstructure on top of this vibrant reality, which we, for lack of a better word, call the economy. So, how do you change the economy? It's getting more and more unequal, it's getting more assaultive on the environment, it's driving people crazy. And, what's gonna change it? Not the people in Congress, because they're bought and paid for. Not the laws, because the judges themselves are very conservative, and most of them have been appointed by Reagan or Bush or Pete Wilson, or one of those characters. So, it's going to require a peoples' movement from the ground up, based on a response to intolerable conditions, combined with the wisdom of leadership and the social justice philosophy. Which is always there. There's the American tradition of equality, Jeffersonian democracy, yeoman farmer individualism, and then there is the morality of thousands of years of developing sense that every person is intitled to a definite measure of dignity. And that's not happening. Not in the city. Not on the farms. And not even in the middle class, in the ways our lives have been trivialized and, and marginalized by the corporate structures that have become so inhuman.