

THE POWER OF A PEOPLE'S MOVEMENT

(Reflections on contacts with United Farm Workers)
by--The Rev. J. Benton Rhoades

I am the son of a landless farm family. I am a member, minister, and former missinary of the Church of the Brethren. I am Executive Secretary of Agricultural Missions of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A. I speak the Spanish language. I have lived all my life close to the struggles of the rural poor for justice, food, and human dignity.

After having lived for 12 years in close contact with the Indians of rural Ecuador and after having seen rural poverty in many other countries of the world during the past thirteen years and having had some contact with the Mexican American farm worker movement in this country, I have become convinced that the United Farm Workers ("Chavez" movement) is an authentic people's movement.

The purpose of this article is not to argue for or against the rightness or wrongness of "la causa", though I would be willing to do that. My own purpose now is to reflect on the characteristics of UFWA as a people's movement. In the highly institutionalized life of our country, it is hard to conceive of such a category of human endeavor. The thought of poor people organized is frightening to many people and threatening to the system which has been good to some of us in our country.

Some criticize the Church for its involvement with farm workers as a union. Yet the same critics would favor preaching to the poor or ministering on a one-to-one basis through child care and Christmas baskets. Organization brings power and independence. This is precisely why, as I see it, the Church must learn now to deal with the poor in groups and with their leaders. The farm workers recognize this. They gain strength from the involvement of sympathetic church people. I have heard them in the picket line announcing: "Pastors, priests, nuns, and lay leaders are here with us today. The Church is here to support our struggle."

One characteristic of a poor people's movement is that it changes the way the poor see themselves and the world. A kind of conversion or transformation of life takes place. The barrier of generations of silent desperation is broken and the poor begin to speak. Along with this comes a fierce commitment and a willingness to sacrifice for what people believe to be right and possible. "Si, Se Puede" is the shout of people who have hope. This new hope changes people's lives and that is what I see happening. I will illustrate.

On a certain morning several months ago, I entered the Inter-Church Center from my car-pool somewhat tired and sat down for coffee with

a young man in working clothes. He is Marco Munoz, coordinator for the lettuce boycott on the East Coast. He spoke to me of his decision to leave his job in the fields, work for five dollars a week plus room and board, to live in New York and suffer whatever indignities come with picketing large city and suburban supermarkets for the UFWA. Though illiterate, he also speaks to many church groups and coordinates the work of many volunteers. His face glowed when he told me of the personal rewards that have come into his own life since his decision to dedicate full-time to "la causa". I went away refreshed. On one recent trip to California, I found myself on the plane beside an elderly Mexican American working with UFWA and was again impressed by the deep commitment and quiet self-confidence of one who, a few years ago, would not have dreamed of riding on a super-jet much less of representing his people in an important meeting in Washington.

Three women come to mind who I have met in the past year. One is a 70-year old worker whom I saw arriving in New York by bus with a group of farm workers from California. She spoke briefly in a church. Later I asked her name and why she was doing what she was doing. She told me of her own religious faith, quoted freely from the Bible, and said, in effect and in Spanish, "God wills it." A teenage girl having taken a week from school in Northern California to join the strikers in the Coachella Valley told me: "I felt I should do it. I wanted to do it. So, my mother got permission from my teachers for me to be here." Later, I was walking on the picket line. Chavez was walking on the same line. Obscenities and threats were being shouted at him. It seemed that any moment the Teamster "guards" might break through the cordon of county deputies and commit violence. A middle-aged woman spoke to me saying, "They think that if they kill Cesar this will all stop. But they do not understand the movement. There are many leaders among us and we will go on."

An old man spoke to me of his own commitment to non-violence. He said, "You know we are Mexicans. Non-violence is not our nature. But we have learned that is the only way in this struggle. Violence only causes more violence--here or in Vietnam. This is why we practice non-violence."

In the park of Coachella, while resting from the hot sun, I overheard a group of strikers, young and old, discussing their idea of justice and human dignity and planning strategy for contacting certain friends that night to persuade them not to go to the fields the next day, but to join the strike. The conversation went like this: "Maria was with us once, but she passed the picket line with her family and went back to work. Has she lost hope? Are they hungry? Have they been bribed or threatened? Let's visit the family tonight. Then we will know why Maria has left us and she will know we still want her with us." That night the Teamsters attempted to prevent this visit and violence resulted, despite the fact that there were police at the gate of the labor camp.

I have heard pleading (in Spanish over the bull-horns of strikers) that recalls the zeal of early American revivals when people preached for a verdict: "Mercedes, I beg you bring your crew and come out. We love you and we need you in the struggle. Don't betray your own people. We know

that you and your children must eat today and tomorrow. Even though the strike benefits are small--think of the future. We must suffer now. But generations of our children will reap the benefits of justice. Come out of the fields, please, or do not return tomorrow. Please think it over and join us.

I have seen youth in the movement showing respect for elders and vice versa, as the Mexican Americans become bound together in common struggle. A people's movement usually depends heavily on the moral leadership of its women. This I have observed in the midst of the strike action. A young and beautiful Mexican American woman emerged from the end of a row in the vineyard. She was picked up bodily, handled, and kissed by a supervisor. Immediately she was rebuked by a Chicano woman with: "Don't let him use you like that. Where is your honor? You are a person of worth. Don't forget it and don't let the bosses forget it--ever!"

The Church of the Brethren, as a part of the pietist movement, migrated en masse from Germany in 1708 in protest against the militarization of that country. As a member, I am thankful for the opportunity I have had in recent months to see a people's movement first-hand. Whether the United Farm Workers win or lose in the present round of struggle remains to be seen. But, people's movements do not go away.